

Cloud of Witnesses
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
August 18, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

We're popping into Hebrews in the middle of an extremely long section. The author starts of chapter 11 by defining what faith means. If you have a very good memory, you might recall that we used those verses last week as the call to worship, which Mia led. She might remember it, too. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen." (11:1). And then the author (no one knows who wrote Hebrews—there are lots of speculations but no conclusions, so that's why I'm rather awkwardly saying "the author of Hebrews" so many times). And then the author realizes that defining the idea of faith with a bunch of complicated words is insufficient. So the author begins give examples. All of the very long chapter 11 is a list of ancestors and how they were faithful. There are big names you've heard of, like Abraham and Moses. A few lesser known heroes, like Rahab, whose story we'll get to some other day. And then it refers to some faithful acts, but we're not sure who they refer to. Their stories don't seem to be told in the Bible as we have it, but whoever is writing Hebrews seems to know their stories and expect the readers to know their stories.

It almost doesn't matter, because the author of Hebrews is getting to his main point of the section. The image the author of Hebrews is setting up is that of a footrace. I picture this something like a marathon. A friend in Buda is a runner, and she enters several marathons each year. She never expects to win the marathon—that is reserved for what they call elite runners who concentrate on intense training all the time. She is, however, pretty focused on improving her time each time she runs one. She wants to do better than she did the time before.

The marathon, or footrace that Hebrews is talking about the footrace of faith, and you're not necessarily trying to finish first—that was Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who finished first, kind of the elite marathoner of the race of faith. You're just trying to follow in Jesus' path and make it to the finish line, maybe a little better, a little more faithfully, than you've done before. Marathons in the ancient world, and I'm pretty sure the way the marathon is run in the Summer Olympics, is that it finishes the last mile or so inside a stadium, full of fans cheering the runners on for the last steps. And the Hebrews image draws on that tradition—"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and

the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (12:2)

And the cloud of witnesses, all those people just described in that long list of examples of faithfulness are hollering in the stadium, cheering you on as you seek to be faithful and run the race that Jesus has shown us how to do, and that those same witnesses have showed us too. We have lots of people to admire, lots of people to emulate, and Hebrews has just listed them out for us.

It’s well and good to have a stadium full of Bible heroes and heroines who have showed us how to be faithful disciples, but when I imagine a cloud of witnesses in a stadium, cheering me on as I struggle to be faithful, I like to imagine that some people I actually know are there, too. I know plenty of people who have been good examples to me of faithfulness. And so I thought that today would be a good day to share some stories with you of a few people who are in my own cloud of witnesses.

I’m going to start with someone from the church I grew up in. Millee. Millee was a little old lady, in the best use of that term. I can’t actually tell you how old she was when I was growing up, because when you’re little, everyone seems old. She was retired though, retired from what I’m not sure. What mattered to me was that Millee loved everyone in our church. Millee loved love and was full of joy. Much like people described Marianna Brown, Millee always had a smile on her face. She sang in the choir, and one of my best discoveries when I finally got glasses and could see the choir’s faces, was that Millee sang with gusto and joy. She enjoyed what she was doing, and it showed on her face. But the absolute best part about Millee was that she sent everybody in the congregation a letter for their birthday. Never a store bought card. This was before email and texts and pagers and cell phones, and Millee was a letter writer. She would include a poem or verse she thought was appropriate for you. I still have some of her letters, and she would always include two things. She started off with “I pray that this day is the beginning of a perfectly wonderful year for you.” And she ended with “with the affection of Christ Jesus, Millee.” Every person’s birthday letter got the same care and love. I like to imagine that Millee is in that crowd, cheering me on, encouraging me to treat everyone with the same care and respect and love and joy that she did.

Jim was a member of the first church I served as associate pastor. He was a wonderful writer and a faithful church member. He also had AIDS, and he died from it while I was still at that church. He was a real people person who always was interested to listen to others’ stories, but he got so ill and weak that he

couldn't even have visitors—he just didn't have enough energy or strength to carry on a conversation for any length of time. But he didn't allow that to stop him. He sent word to the church office that it would be really nice if we could invite church members to write him letters. I now see that writing letters seem to be a common thread so far, but I think it's a coincidence. Anyway, he yearned for that connection with people he knew and people who loved him, and so we wrote him letters, because he was part of who we were as a congregation. I like to imagine that Jim is in that crowd too, cheering me on, reminding me to reach out to people who need a connection, encouraging me to make and maintain relationships, because I need them, because we all need them.

Jo was part of the first church I served as a solo pastor, Good Shepherd Presbyterian in San Antonio. She was German by birth, had lived in the Netherlands as a child, in the aftermath of World War II, and had immigrated to the United States as an adult. She came faithfully every week with her husband, who was not the world's most pleasant person. I ended up visiting with them a lot in their home. She was full of questions about the Bible, about sermons, about Presbyterians, about the church, about God. She was hungry to learn. But she had never joined the congregation as a member, and I couldn't figure it out. I finally asked, and she was under the impression that you had to pay a certain amount of money to maintain membership, and she didn't have any money to spare, and so she thought she wasn't worthy of church membership. She tried to explain where she had gotten this idea, and I gathered that it came from her childhood in Europe. I'm not sure I ever convinced her that she would owe absolutely nothing if she wanted to be a church member. Well, nothing or everything, depending on how you looked at it. Nothing that she had to pay, but it did mean dedicating her life and everything in her life to God. I like to imagine that Jo is in that cloud of witnesses, encouraging me to ask questions to help me understand faith and God and church and other peoples' ideas and feelings.

And now I feel like the author of Hebrews: Time is failing me to tell you of all the people that I like to imagine are in that cloud of witnesses, filling up the stadium of the footrace of faith, cheering me on and showing me how to do it. Sunday school teachers and family members and youth leaders and children and friends and other pastors and on and on and on. Time is failing me.

Friday and Saturday, I went to an event in Dallas that was supposed to be training for Presbytery leaders. I'm not sure that I feel trained, but the presenter used a similar image, and since I was already thinking of this passage, it intrigued me. She was talking about a church having a particular project—let's pick on the

Methodists and use their summer reading program as an example. She was saying that each project needs to be evaluated when it's over and was giving us various ideas for how to do that. But she cautioned us several times that it's important who you ask to evaluate something. That the people who really need to evaluate are the people running the race, who are in the arena itself, making the project work. People way up in the bleachers who aren't directly involved shouldn't get to have all the say-so in evaluation. So people who are actually listening to kids read—those are the people to ask how they think it went. Or the children who come—they need a voice. The person who attended a meeting, said it was a good idea, and then disappeared—they don't get to be an evaluator. That all made sense to me, as a way to evaluate a project.

But I was already imagining this giant stadium full of faithful examples showing me how to run the race of faith. And then I realized that the people who are actually in the arena with me are just as important as examples of faith. I realized that you all are examples of faith to me. That my family is, that all these people running alongside of me are all part of the cloud of witnesses too. That the cloud is full of current companions as well as ancestors in the faith. And it isn't really a race that we're running to win, because Jesus has already come in first. It's a race that we're all just trying to run the best we can, and finish the best we can, and that we'll all do better if we help one another along the way.

I know that you have a cloud of witnesses, too. I would love to hear some stories of who is out there in your stadium, cheering you on. I would love to hear who is running alongside you, keeping you encouraged. Someday soon, let's make time to share those stories, to expand the cloud of witnesses so that we may run the race with perseverance.