

Surrounded

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

August 14, 2016

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hebrews 11:29-12:2



This is our last Sunday service in this hall. The sanctuary is almost complete. Next week we will enter behind the bagpipes, bring in the Bible and other signs of our faith, and see that space again, renewed. The outward signs of renewal will be obvious – fresh paint from floor to ceiling, new tile, new pew coverings, new lighting, new sound, many places where persons in wheelchairs or using walkers can sit unimpeded, a hearing loop that will make the space much friendlier to the hearing impaired, automatic doors. All good. Excellent even.

Those are the things that will greet the eye and ear when we return. But I've been thinking lately about a more invisible but just as real gathering that will surround us as we run the race back into the sanctuary.

Time won't permit me to name them all. Gideon Blackburn will be there. Could he have imagined when he and his small congregation on the American frontier walked into that small sanctuary in 1811 that here we would be, in 2016, maintaining a Reformed witness in a very different-looking Franklin?

Lena Reynolds, that brave and faith-filled and, most of all, compassionate follower of Christ, will be there. She dedicated her life to ministering to the sick in Africa and gave a sizable endowment to this congregation for global mission. She will be cheering as we enter, maybe not as much for the building renovation as the budget renovation that preceded it, a renovation that doubled our mission resources and resulted in an explosion of new opportunities near and far, enabling things like yesterday's 2nd Saturday for mission to distribute food to those in need from all over our region.

Bill Barr will be there. We have the large conference room where most of our big educational events happen named for him for good reason. He was a top-notch thinker and teacher, challenging everyone in his classes to go deeper, to ask more questions, to never stop learning because we can go a lifetime and barely scratch the surface of the richness of God in Christ. And his sister, Ann Weems, the poet laureate of the

Presbyterian Church (USA), who stood in that room named after her brother eleven years ago and read words that caused our souls to take flight. She'll be there too.

Time will not permit me. There's not enough time to speak of all the others who will be there, who taught Sunday school classes; accompanied youth through the storm and stress of adolescence; held the hands of the grieving; stood in the pulpit and proclaimed the Word through wars and a Great Depression and the Civil Rights struggle, proclaiming a Christ who loved the world, and loved each person who sat in the pew – *all* - with a grace that was unearned and yet brought life; cooked in the kitchen; extended hospitality to strangers; baptized babies, married couples, and stood at gravesites proclaiming the ancient promises of life; fed the hungry, lifted up the poor, built houses, traveled to places of pain; lived lives of faithfulness in good times and bad. Time will not permit me to name them all. They will all be there.

Now I'm going to ask you to do something I think I can only get away with because we are here, in this space. I want you to, in the silence, name them. Who? The ones who will be there for you as you enter that sanctuary, cheering you on. If you need to name them silently, that will be fine, but I want you to also feel the freedom to let their names ring out in this space here and now, surrounding us as a cloud of witnesses.

(silence)

Tom Long says the writer of Hebrews is really a preacher, and imagines him working up this point in the sermon in a crescendo of names of all the ancient ones. And then the preacher just runs out of time. So he starts naming their deeds, his arms sweeping behind him as he tells of their great faith, even in suffering. Long says it is like a chain is running through the sanctuary. "This chain is part of an unbroken cord of faith that stretches from the beginning of human history all the way into the heavenly sanctuary of the City of God. It is a chain of faithful people holding onto the cord and to each other, links formed by generation after generation after generation." And then there is this silence that you can almost feel in the text itself.

"Therefore..." Now that we have all these people in our minds, we are tempted to elevate them, venerate them, place them on pedestals and bemoan our own time. If only we could get back to the days of Gideon or Lena, we are tempted to say. Now *those* were the good old days.

But the preacher will not let us settle into nostalgia and sentimentalism. That great chain of faith runs right through this space. Can you see it? Can you feel it? Then take

hold of it, proclaims the preacher. It is your turn to run. “Therefore...since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run the race.”

For a couple of years, a group of friends and I ran the Ragnar Race here in Tennessee. It is a relay-style race. Twelve people divide into two vans, and for two days run relay style from Chattanooga to Nashville. By the time it is over, all twelve people will run three legs, ranging from three to nine miles.

When it was my turn to run one of the legs, it was freezing cold, cold enough that icicles were forming on my eyebrows. It was dark, about two o'clock in the morning. We were in a small town. I saw the headlamp of my teammate approaching from the dark, holding out the bright orange snap bracelet that served as the baton. I held out my wrist and she popped the bracelet on. I turned and faced the night, my little headlamp no match for the gathering darkness as I headed out of town and into the heart of rural Tennessee. It was my turn to run. It was a five-mile leg. There were no other runners around me, except for a guy dressed like Elvis who raced by me and disappeared into the night with a “Thank you, thank you very much.”

It was there, when the only thing keeping me company was the sound of my feet hitting the asphalt and various forms of wildlife; it was there, gripping my pepper spray canister a little more tightly, only able to see as far as my meager light could shine; it was there I realized, that, had I known where this leg was taking me, had I known how cold and lonely it would be, I might not have taken the baton.

That's faith though. Grasping a baton in the dark, putting one foot in front of the other, grabbing hold of that ancient chain, and running your leg.

Somewhere in the dark up ahead, I heard a sound. It was a cowbell, clanging. One of our teammates had brought a Mississippi State cowbell, so I knew what that sound meant. The van was up ahead. And as I approached the bell got louder, and I could hear the cheers. 2:30 in the morning and they were all out in the cold. “You've got this! Great time! We'll see you at the next hand-off!” I went by, my pace quickening, knowing I was not alone.

They will be there next Sunday. They are here now. Surrounding us, worshiping with us the One who runs ahead of us, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Let us take our place in line. Let us run the race for our time. We are not alone. Amen.