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Waterford Mennonite Church
“Faith for a Lifetime” - Hebrews 11-12:4
All Saints Day Service

Purpose: To inspire the congregation to continue running the race with perseverance, holding on to and clinging to faith for their lifetime, even while naming the places of pain, loss, and grief.

The year was 1965, and she was only forty-one years old when the doctor told her the devastating news: she had breast cancer. She and her husband had four daughters under the age of 16. Her youngest was only four years old. She had a mastectomy and underwent an aggressive treatment of chemotherapy and radiation.

The year was 1968, she was only forty-four years old, and was diagnosed for a second time with breast cancer. She had her second mastectomy, and again went through chemotherapy and radiation.

The year was 1981 and her husband, her beloved husband Ralph, was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, a disease that slowly attacks your memory and thought process. With this disease you slowly forget things, until you eventually forget who your loved ones are, and even who you are. It is a painful process for the individual and an excruciating process for their family. They had been married for only thirty-five years.

The year was 1986 and she is diagnosed with cancer for the third time. She was only sixty-two years old. This time the cancer was in an advanced stage, and she was only given a 10% chance of surviving; however, no one could tell her about her status of living. This time the cancer was lodged between her lung and her pancreas. The doctors did not have much hope that she will be able to win this battle against cancer. She underwent the most rigorous treatment yet. She went through chemotherapy for four straight years. She recalled that when she began the chemotherapy she asked the doctor how long she would have to go through it, and she was told for the rest of her life because they did not foresee her living much longer. Four years of not

having hair. Four years of battling being nauseated. Four years of living with exhaustion. Four years of not knowing if the chemotherapy would be successful. Four years of being the sole caregiver for your beloved husband, whose health is rapidly declining to the point that he is bed ridden. Four years of walking with your beloved spouse who most days cannot even remember your name. But yet, even in the midst of this suffering and pain, she was firmly rooted in her faith in Jesus Christ. When her foundation was shaken, her world turned upside down, she kept her eyes solely on Jesus.

This woman, my grandmother, continues to live a life of faith. The year is 2014 and this December my grandmother will turn 91 years old, and she is still running the race with endurance, with her eyes on Jesus. Growing up my grandmother lived only a mile north of my parents in Ohio, and therefore while I was growing up I spent a lot of time at her house. I can vividly remember spending the night with her on countless occasions and coming out to the kitchen in the morning to see her in the brown swivel chair in the kitchen doing her morning devotions - with no hair. Or her feeding my grandfather oatmeal for breakfast from the brown bowl, and my childlike questions to her of why Grandpa never gets out of bed, or why he never calls grandma by name. Or right after a chemotherapy treatment she would ask me to bring her bible to her when she herself was too sick to get out of bed. And I would climb into bed with her and she would read the scripture to me and tell me that this is the bread of life, her sustenance. Throughout the difficult times my grandmother was keenly aware of the presence of God, and was open to being formed and transformed by God. By faith, my grandmother runs the race of faith with endurance and hope.

Hebrews chapter twelve verses one through three come directly after the familiar faith chapter, Hebrews chapter 11, which Sheldon shared with us earlier in the service. In chapter 11

we hear the various accounts of individuals who throughout the history of God's people lived lives of faith. They are stories of normal day people, who lived through a wide range of experiences; individuals who are held together because of the faith they exhibited throughout their lives. Recall their accounts. The list is **not** made up of individuals who had perfect lives, who never experienced hard times, or significant losses, or times of suffering, or times of pain. But instead it is a list of individuals who in fact experienced very difficult times, times when their world was turned upside down, but yet they were able to persevere in their faith. And now, our author highlights them because of their faith. Individuals like Enoch, Abraham, Jacob, Rahab, and the prophets.

As we come the beginning of chapter twelve we must note that this chapter begins with the simple word that is translated "therefore." This word signifies two very important things. First it serves to connect chapter twelve to the preceding chapter, chapter 11 which is filled with the heroes and heroines of our faith tradition. The author is making a shift, but is stating that what comes next is directly connected to the recounting of these stories of faith. And secondly this word 'therefore' also marks a shift within the book of Hebrews from doctrinal to practical. Here the author moves from discussing theology and what to believe, to moving to the practical side of things, and discussing what we are to do.

There is also a change from focusing on the great men and women from the past, to focusing on the faith of the audience, and the faith of you and me. Suddenly we are no longer gazing upon those great individuals from the past, for now the scene has been moved to an athletic competition, and they, the men and women from the past, have become the great cloud of witnesses that are gazing upon **us**. However, it is important to note that in the New Testament

a witness is never simply a passive spectator, but instead is an active participant who is present to encourage, and to testify to the truth that you **can** run the race with endurance.

As our author continues to talk about this race it is essential to recognize several things. First there are various types of races, but early on we can grasp that our author is not talking about the 50 yard dash, but instead it is a more like a marathon. Our author does not stress the need for speed, but instead the need for stamina and endurance. This is not a short sprint, but a long distance run. The author would have been familiar with the practices of the day, in which the starting line for the race was made up of stone slabs laid on the ground. Then there would be upright pillars spaced about every four feet to signify where the runners should stand. Before the runners would stretch a sea of sand for the course, and then at the other end of the arena there would be a second set of pillars. For you see each runner was to focus on their pillar at the other end of the arena. When the signal was sounded they were to focus on their pillar and run towards it. If they allowed their eyes to drift to the right or the left there was danger of colliding with the next runner.

Now that the author has established this race metaphor, the author moves on to discussing things that we as runners in the race need to throw off and things we need to throw on. In verse one we are told to throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. The New Revised Standard Version says to lay aside every weight. Picture for just a minute an athlete who is coming up to the starting line to run a race. We are accustomed to the runner stripping down to a uniform that will aid in their speed. The runner would have the correct type of shoes on, and would look prepared to run. Well, what if the runner would approach the starting line still in their warm ups? But furthermore they had on a winter coat and had on a backpack and were pulling luggage on wheels? Picture for a moment that athlete approaching

the starting line, trying to get into position to run the race, all the while carrying so much extra weight and baggage. Of course we would laugh and say well that is ludicrous. But yet the author of Hebrews is telling us that that is exactly what we are doing as we are trying to run the race of faith.

Now removing the weight could be taken literally, meaning that author is saying get in shape, take care of your body which is a temple for God. Or remove your long heavy cloak which you are wearing. Or perhaps more clearly understood as metaphorically speaking. The author is saying throw off everything that distracts you from running, everything that takes your attention and energy away from the race, everything that is hindering you. This is a personal decision. What hinders me might not hinder you. But know that we all have things in our lives that **are** hindering us. It may be people, attitudes, situations, priorities, goals and dreams we have for our lives, our fears, our doubts, and our desire and drive to succeed. But we are challenged to have faith for a lifetime. Remember, this is not a sprint, but one of endurance and stamina over a long time, your entire lifetime. And there is a lot that happens within one lifetime. There will be a lot of joy, and celebration, and there will also be times of pain, suffering, or grief.

Difficult times will come, and we are to throw off those things that are hindering us so that we can be better prepared to sustain the difficult times. And so we are to throw off everything that hinders, and the sin that so easily entangles. What an eloquent way of saying sin has the power to suck you in and then drain you of the life and energy that is needed to run the race. Sin is a prime example of what can encourage us to stop running. And so when we have thrown off what hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles, then we are to **throw on** endurance for the race. It is not hard to look around and see that our society that does not value

endurance. The message is that when things get hard just quit. The author is telling us to put on endurance so that we can run with perseverance expecting and anticipating that there will be difficult times. **But the key to the entire race is where we keep our focus.**

In verse two we read that we are to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. Although it sounds like something easy to do, what becomes hard is maintaining Jesus as our **sole** focus throughout the race. I believe it is sometimes easy to see Jesus when everything is going well, at least at the beginning. But then we can have this crazy notion that we can become self-sufficient and suddenly we are no longer following Jesus, the pacesetter, but instead we have become our own trainer and pacesetter. But then the difficult times come, and we desperately search towards the end of the track to just catch a glimpse of Jesus, to catch a glimpse of our goal.

The Greek word translated ‘to fix’ is a participle that expresses duration. The author understood that fixing your eyes on Jesus is not something you do once and are done with, but instead it is something that needs to be done throughout the entire race, something you must continually be aware of and strive for. Remember how the athletes were to focus on their end pillar to know where they were headed? Likewise, we are to focus on Jesus.

But the author does not stop there. Not only are we to focus on Jesus, but Jesus is to be our example, our model, our source, our inspiration. The author briefly reminds us in verse two that Jesus, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. The author is highlighting that Jesus was fully God **and** he was also fully human. Not only did Jesus come and live upon this earth, but he endured difficult times, he experienced pain, he suffered through hostility, he endured the cross. Jesus is the source of our faith because the message about him evokes and enables us to have faith. But

furthermore Jesus is the model of our faith. In verse three we read that we are to consider Jesus who endured such opposition from sinful men, why? So that we will not grow weary and lose heart.

As Anabaptists we proclaim that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, and that we strive to live out the teachings of Jesus, but furthermore that Jesus' life is an example that we strive to emulate. Here in this passage is one of the few places in the New Testament that explicitly states that we are to look to Jesus as a model of how we should live. And not only does this text state that Jesus should be our model, but for that to happen we must consider what Jesus endured. To consider something one must pause and contemplate, reflect, and compare. To move to Jesus as our model you must be familiar with the life Jesus led, be familiar with what Jesus endured, and therefore what Jesus overcame. He who knew no sin, experienced pain, he suffered, but yet his life is a testimony that you can run the race with endurance, with your eyes on the goal alone. I found the way Eugene Peterson states this in the Message to be quite powerful. Peterson says:

Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

The key to the entire race is where you keep the focus. Our focus should be on Jesus, the author, the perfecter, the pace setter, the finisher, the model of our faith.

Today on All Saints Day it is very appropriate to be reminded and to name that there will be and there have been times of loss, times of pain, and times of grief along the journey of life. This was true in the stories of the great cloud of witnesses in Hebrews chapter 11, it was true in the lives of the ten remarkable individuals we remembered this morning, and it is true in each of our lives. It is important that we find time and find ways to name those losses, those pains, and

those times of grief. The naming of those things takes courage, time for reflection, and deep and abiding faith for the journey. There will be times along this marathon race when we are sure that we are running in the dark, with no flicker of light to guide our way, and clearly no way to be able to see our pillar of Jesus at the end of the race. There might be times that we find ourselves grasping out in the darkness, seeking for some direction, some touch of comfort, some tangible reality of hope, only to recognize that our hands remain empty, our vision blurry, and our legs extremely weary.

This morning we have named and remembered the ten individuals from our congregation who have joined the great cloud of witnesses and we did so by lighting a candle for each. In some ways as they have joined the great cloud of witnesses their lives continue to provide light to our own paths, and their stories of faith and endurance provide inspiration and encouragement to us all. We also want to allow for time and space for others to name others dear to you who have died, or to name some other loss or grief you have experienced or carrying with you.

In just a moment I invite you all to do something to symbolize the losses you're grieving, as well as an action to remind you of the hope and faith we carry as followers of Jesus. You are invited to come forward and light a candle and put in the basin of sand and I suggest filling the basin from the back to the front. May the light of the candle help you remember someone dear to you who has died, or simply represent some other loss or grief you've experienced. With adult help with a candle, children are also welcome to participate. Come, recognizing and naming the pain, the loss, the grief. Come, light the candle and allow the flicker of the Christ light to shed some light on the darkness of your journey. Come, and continue on in your race with your brothers and sisters who are too striving to have faith for a lifetime.