

Enduring Faith

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Whitefish UMC

August 15, 2010

- † “Stolen Summer”—it’s a title that could describe how many of us feel as the season hurtles towards its conclusion. Instead it’s the name of an independent film made from a contest, called Project Greenlight and chronicled on television a few years ago. The winning screenplay and film tells the story of Pete, an eight-year-old Catholic boy growing up in the suburbs of Chicago in the mid-1970s.
- † Pete attends Catholic school, where as classes let out for the summer, he's admonished by a nun to follow the path of the Lord, and not that of the Devil. Perhaps taking this message a bit too seriously, Pete decides it's his goal for the summer to help someone get into heaven; having been told that Catholicism is the only sure path to the heavenly kingdom, Pete decides to convert a Jew to Catholicism in order to improve his standing in the afterlife. Hoping to find a likely candidate, Pete begins visiting a nearby synagogue, where he gets to know Rabbi Jacobson, who responds to Pete's barrage of questions with good humor and gracious tolerance.
- † Pete also makes friends with the Rabbi's son, Danny, who is about the same age. When he learns that Danny is seriously ill, he decides Danny would be an excellent choice for conversion. When the priest at Pete's church informs Pete that all will be tested before they pass the Pearly Gates, Pete sets up a mini-decathlon—complete with running, jumping, swimming, and other athletic

events--and puts Danny in training as he attempts to reshape his spiritual thinking.

- † Pete's parents aren't sure just what to make of Pete's new summer project, and as they become acquainted with Rabbi Jacobson, they share their perspectives on the unexpected trials of parenting. Both sets of parents face life and death situations, both literal and metaphorical, in keeping their respective faiths as they struggle pay the bills, live with integrity, and provide a future for their children.
- † For Danny, the race becomes more urgent when his family learns that his leukemia has returned. His Jewish parents aren't happy with Danny's determination to complete his quest for the Catholic heaven, but they will do anything to help their son, and their acceptance and tolerance prevail.
- † Now most of us aren't literally running a race, as Danny was, to work out our salvation and make it through the obstacle course that is our life. But the words from the writer of the book of Hebrews still apply to us. There are days when the words "rat race" ring more true than not, too.
- † Let's face it, most of us are pretty good at starting something, but we are not so good at completing it. That was true of the little church that was struggling to keep its nascent faith in the face of persecution and hardship. Its enthusiasm and faithfulness are in question, and we can understand. The people were tempted to go backward instead of forward, so the writer, the preacher of this text, is encouraging them to keep on the path of salvation.
- † To inspire them, he reminds them of the heroes of their faith—that great genealogy of biblical ancestors who endured mightily and lived faithfully despite all their trials and tribulations. For some of us, these biblical characters are familiar, for others of us, not. Nevertheless, most of us have someone—

either that we know personally—or that we know from history or their writings to inspire us when our enthusiasm flags.

† In the NRSV translation of the scriptures, the writer of Hebrews refers to these saints, these inspiring ancestors as “a cloud of witnesses” that cheers us on, reminding us of who we are and are meant to be.

† One of my secrets is that I love murder mysteries, especially the British variety. And the books I love best are those by Dorothy L. Sayers. When I, a new mother, discovered Dorothy Sayers, I voraciously devoured every book she wrote. Among them was a book entitled Clouds of Witness, a book I found delightful and intriguing. It was only when I continued to search the library for anything Dorothy Sayers had written that I discovered that my beloved mystery writer was also a theologian—a widely known and published one at that.

† Writing in the 1920’s until her death in 1957, Sayers combined detective fiction with her understanding of the gospel. Although she gave up writing fiction as WWII approached so that she might be explicit about her theology and its relevance to the evils of Nazism and war, the gospel was never far from her witty, urbane, and sophisticated characterizations.

† Building on the suffering in her own life, (as a young woman, Sayers suffered the stigma of unwed motherhood and later the grief of caring for her chronically mentally ill husband) Dorothy Sayers wrote with compassion about the role of women in society, the necessity of meaningful work for each person, and justice for the oppressed. As I read more about her and immersed myself in her writings, she became one of my heroes—In my heart of hearts, I thought: If Dorothy Sayers can love murder mysteries and theology, maybe I can too!

- † Yet the biblical reference to the title of one of her early books—*Clouds of Witness*--was lost on me. It was only as I began to pursue my interest in theology that I came across the scripture from today's epistle reading: "For we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..." that I understood that for me at least, Dorothy Sayers, without even knowing it, was a significant part of that cloud in the forming and shaping of my faith experience.
- † But have you ever wondered just for what purpose it is that you're running this proverbial race? For Pete and Danny, in the fictional "Stolen Summer," it was the assurance that they would end up in heaven. For some of us, a heavenly home is our ultimate motivation as well.
- † Yet the greatest criticism of Christianity by those in other religions, particularly Judaism, is its focus on the afterlife rather than *this life*. And for many generations, that criticism was validated by the church's excessive fear-mongering about the terrors of hell in order to gain converts and money for indulgences and other "tickets to heaven."
- † Yes, we all long for the knowledge that we will dwell with God in the promise of eternal life, but what about THIS life? What is it that we are running toward, racing, enduring for? If you listen to the voices in the media these days, in these uncertain times, security would probably top the list. "Melt your old jewelry into gold!" "Protect yourself from the evils that threaten us!"
- † Several years ago, cartoonist Charles Schultz drew a Peanuts comic strip that reminds us how swiftly a sense of security passes away. Picture this: Charlie Brown is sitting under a tree talking to Peppermint Patty, who asks him, "What do you think security is, Chuck?" His answer: "Security is sleeping on the back seat of the car when you're a little kid, and you've been

somewhere with your mom and dad, and it's night, and you're riding home in the car, asleep. You don't have to worry about anything—your mom and dad are in the front seat and they do all the worrying. . . . they take care of everything.” To which Peppermint Patty responds, “That's real neat!” And Charlie Brown comments, “But it doesn't last! Suddenly, you're grown up, and it can never be that way again! Suddenly, it's over, and you'll never get to sleep in the back seat again! Never!” Peppermint Patty asks: “Never?” and Charlie Brown says, “Absolutely never.” To which she replies, “Hold my hand, Chuck!”

- † Charlie Brown knows what we know in our heart of hearts: that there is no real security in this world. That doesn't mean that we ought to be irresponsible with our resources or our talents—on the contrary. Because we can't ever hoard enough wealth or land or time, our founder John Wesley advised to earn and work hard for all you can—and then give all you can away!
- † For what purpose? For God's kingdom, which begins within each one of us, according to Jesus' teachings. When we pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray for the strength and courage and faith to be a part of making the kingdom of God a reality in our families and in our communities and in our world.
- † We live for one purpose, those of us who profess to follow Jesus—to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves—to give our selves away in love. That's an awesome prospect, isn't it? And it isn't always easy—in fact it rarely is. Jesus did it perfectly, but not easily.
- † Our ancestors in the faith—those biblical characters listed by the writer of Hebrews—were anything but perfect. In fact they were deeply flawed

human beings, just like us. I don't know about you, but I take some comfort in that.

- † As we long for God's kingdom in our time, for God's shalom—for peace and healing in the world—in our homes and families and neighborhoods—and in places far away, like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq—we know that the race we run is long and hard, that wholeness is a far away place.
- † As Kate Huey says, “So much of the time, peace and justice are ‘things unseen,’ and yet faith, according to the author of this same letter [to the Hebrews], faith is the assurance of things unseen. We may stumble, we may even fall, on our way, just like those heroes and saints long ago. But we know we're not alone, that our eyes are fixed on Jesus and, if we listen closely, we can hear and feel the encouragement of those who have gone before, those who are still watching the race that isn't over yet.”
- † At camp last week, I was asked to offer communion to the campers around a table in the chapel. They came in small groups, holding hands, as they moved from one prayer station to another. As I explained our Methodist heritage with the sacrament of Holy Communion to them, I reminded them of all the people who had gathered before them around the Lord's table and who were surrounding them now as a great “cloud of witness.”
- † In the silence, in the mystery of that time, we were each encouraged and strengthened by that knowledge of those who were cheering us on in the faith, who had gone before. Through Jesus, God hands on the baton to each succeeding believer and generation to run the race, to keep the faith in a changing world.

† There is a hand to hold. It is the hand of our neighbors and strangers as we strive together to become a community that offers healing, acceptance, forgiveness, and wholeness to the world.

† Let us close with this wonderful poem from Mary Oliver, writing in her newest book, Evidence:

Mysteries, Yes

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.

How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity

while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,
and bow their heads.

† Let us pray: Amen.

Sources:

Mary Oliver, "Mysteries, Yes," in Evidence, 2009.

Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds," <http://www.ucc.org>

Carol Allen, "Keeping Faith in a Changing World," <http://fourthchurch.org>