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Pentecost X & Proper 15
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Text: Hebrews 11:17 – 12:3
Title: Keep Your Eyes On The Prize

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Take a moment this morning and think about people that you might call a hero. Who are they? What do they do? Are they a famous person that all of us know, or is it someone that has only been an influence on you personally? What makes that person deserve the title of “hero?” Do you have the same heroes today that you had as a kid? Probably not. As we get older and wiser, and our naïveté and innocence gets replaced with a healthy dose of reality, heroes such as Superman, the Lone Ranger and Luke Skywalker just don’t seem to cut it anymore. They are the heroes of our imagination, and they’re not real. We come to realize that perpetually good characters that always make the right decisions no matter what just don’t exist in this world. They are fantasies.

There are real people in our world that are called heroes though. They don’t necessarily have to be figments of our imagination. Many people, old and young, look at certain star athletes as heroes, and they might even make efforts to be like them in different ways. Some find heroes in people that just do their jobs in the everyday, mundane world around us, like firefighters and police officers. And most of us can come up with at least a couple of people in history that we would consider to be heroic.

Identifying heroes is something that we human beings seem to have an innate desire to do. We want to pick out the best among us, honor their accomplishments and hold them up as examples for us to emulate. Most of us have probably heard the old story of George Washington cutting down the cherry tree. We’re usually told that story as kids to encourage us not to lie and to be just as honest as he was.

Today's epistle reading in Hebrews 11 is doing something similar. This week it continues to list the heroes of the faith from the Old Testament who are part of "The Hall of Fame of Faith." Throughout this chapter – as we saw last week – the writer mentions at least 18 different individuals or groups that are all commended for doing extraordinary things or at least living in extraordinary ways. As we heard about last week, the list started with Abel, and then the author moved through the historic details of God's people right up to their entrance into the Promised Land, and he even remembered to include the foreign prostitute, Rahab in his list. Then the author of Hebrews points out that there were many more that he could have written about whose deeds were just as memorable, but he just didn't have the time or space to do it. But no matter how long this list might have gone on, and no matter how great the deeds of the members of this "hall of fame" might have been, and no matter how much time and even space separated the people that are being mentioned, there are certain things that each of them had in common with each other and with us here today.

The first thing that all of them had in common with us and with each other is the reality of sin. It cannot be ignored or denied, ever. It is a part of every human being ever since the Garden of Eden, and it will be a part of every human being until the end of time. We are infected by it. It is a part of who and what we are, there's no getting past it while we draw breath in this world. Every person mentioned in this chapter of Hebrews finished their race of life having been tainted by sin, probably even Enoch who didn't have to experience death because his faith was so extraordinary.

King David, a man whom God Himself describes as being a man "after my own heart," committed terrible sins throughout his life including the public and heinous sins of adultery and murder. Abraham showed his sin by passing his wife, Sarah, off as his sister because he didn't

trust enough in God's protection to tell the truth about her. Jacob – who would later be renamed Israel – was a con-man and a thief, and Moses took the credit of God's miracles as his own. I won't even get into all of the sins that were committed by the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness, but they had to stay out there an extra forty years because of them.

And no matter how much we might look at the sinful examples of these Old Testament celebrities we know that our sins make us no better or worse. We lie and cheat to get what we want when we want it, and we justify ourselves by calling that want a need. We grumble about taking too much time to worship or we simply find any excuse to justify not doing it. We live life failing to trust in God for our needs and protection, and then we blame Him when something goes wrong in our little corner of the world. Or we take the credit for His blessings as being the product of our own hard work and skill. How many of us look at a paycheck that we have earned, and fail to thank God for providing us with the abilities that we needed in order to do that job? That way of looking at things was what barred Moses from entering into Canaan, and yet we live that way almost constantly because we work hard to get what we have. And the worst part of all of this is that sin is so ingrained in us that we don't even realize we've done it until the race we are running is confronted with the solid brick wall of God's Law which stops us cold.

But the writer of Hebrews is pointing us past the sins of these Old Testament heroes with the constant refrain of those sweet words, "By faith..." Every great deed, every noble action, every act of obedience to God that the writer holds up for us is preceded with those words, "By faith." Without that, nothing that any of them did or said would have mattered to the writer of Hebrews, and it certainly wouldn't have mattered to God. The faith that God gave to each one of these heroes enabled them to do the tasks that He needed them to do, and it also provided them with the ability to stand before Him without fear of condemnation for the sins that they

committed along the way. The faith that He gave to each one of them led to their obedience in the face of bizarre requests and in the face of mortal danger. Just look at the list that we are given of what these people endured: they were tortured, mocked and flogged; they lived lives of extreme poverty and discomfort; and they were imprisoned and killed in vicious and brutal ways – including being sawed in two – all because of their faith. That certainly sounds like a life that I want to lead, how about you?

But God did so much more through their faith than that. He used them to conquer kingdoms and to enforce His justice. He stopped the mouths of lions and as Hebrews puts it, “quenched the power of fire.” He used their faith to have them escape the edge of the sword, and to make them strong in their weakness. And through their faith, the Lord made common, untrained people mighty in war and able to defeat battle hardened armies who marched against Him and His people.

But all of this pales in comparison to the greatest act that God accomplished through their faith and that He still accomplishes through your faith even on this very morning. And that is the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation in Jesus Christ. As I pointed out last week, each one of the heroes of the Old Testament lived their life based on the mere promise of the Savior to come, but we have seen that promise fulfilled by the cross of Christ which He endured for our sake.

And what endurance it took! Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* gives us just a glimpse of the physical pain and suffering that Jesus endured, but no movie can ever begin to show us the depths of the spiritual anguish that He suffered for us. On the cross He suffered for the sins of the *entire* world for *all* time, everyone who lived in faith before His death and everyone who has lived in faith since. Every sin was paid for in full by His sacrifice for you. He never faltered from His ultimate goal for you, and He endured until the very end so that He could

rise again to win the victory over the grave that we could never win. He never took His eyes off of His prize, and that prize is you and your salvation.

And there is one final thing that we have in common with the members of this “Hall of Fame.” We have still not seen the final fulfillment of God’s promises. You and I still live in a world that is full of sin and suffering as we run our race through to its end. By faith, we bypass the obstacles that are all around us, and by faith we keep our eyes fixed on the ultimate prize, eternal life with Him in a new heaven and a new earth. The race will continue until Christ comes again to declare its end, and to resurrect the bodies of those who have already finished.

When that will be, only God the Father knows, but until we reach the end of the race we are called to endure in faith just as the great cloud of witnesses throughout history has endured. God has set the course to run, and He continues to give you the ability to endure. His Word spells out the course and gives each of us strength each day, and with His Sacraments He continually strengthens us until the day that we fully and completely join together with angels, with archangels and with all the company of heaven to praise Him forevermore. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.