

Can I Get a Witness?
Hebrews 11:29-12:3
All Saints Sunday, (Nov. 1) 2020
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The community of faith is “a great unbroken cord of faith that stretches all the way from the beginning of human history all the way to the heavenly sanctuary in the City of God, where the cord has been securely fastened and anchored by Jesus. The links are formed by faithful people, hand in hand, generation after generation, holding fast to each other and to ‘our confession.’”

- Thomas G. Long

One of the books Dr. Martin Luther King carried with him wherever he went was Howard Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited*, considered a modern-day classic. Dr. Thurman was dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University when King was a student there. And while King became an activist, Thurman was a person of deep prayer and scholarship. He was a mystic. And it was from Howard Thurman that King first learned about nonviolence and the power of suffering love. In the book, Thurman kept emphasizing that the life and teachings of Jesus must speak, “to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall” (p. 1).

Howard Thurman could have been writing with the small congregation in Hebrews in mind.

This congregation is exhausted. They have their backs against a wall. New Testament scholar Tom Long says, “They are tired—tired of serving the world,

tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, and tired even of Jesus.”

My old teacher, New Testament scholar Fred Craddock, points out that the author of Hebrews himself uses words like “persecution” (10:33), “hostility” (12:3), and even “torture” (13:3) as some of the very real circumstances in the lives of some in this faith community. This is what they were dealing with day after day, week after week, month after month, and it was wearing them down.

In short, there was a lot to be discouraged about. This small congregation is worn out and worn down, and if I was with them, I’d likely be tired too... and I would certainly be discouraged. And like those Hebrew Christians, I would be wondering if I could keep this up. I’d be wondering if it was time to quit.

Here was a congregation with their backs against the wall.

Now, if you read through Hebrews, you’ll notice that the congregation was struggling with all sorts of things. Some of it had to do with what they believed or didn’t believe. From what we can tell, some of them felt that being Christian was a way to be successful and happy, healthy, and heaven bound. But instead of a kind of prosperity gospel, they found themselves facing persecution and struggling with opposition and hostility and even at times physical violence. Some of them thought the Christian life was a sprint, perhaps intense spiritual experiences of short duration, then a week of work, followed by another Sunday high spiritual experience. Instead, they discovered that the Christian life was more like running a marathon, in which endurance counted a lot.

And when you're simply enduring a long, long race, it is natural to ask if you can hold on or not... if you can keep on or not.

Tom Long says, Hebrews is a sermon more than a letter to encourage these worn-out Hebrew Christians. Sometimes the preacher of Hebrews gives correct teaching, and sometimes practical advice, but here in chapter 11, we get what has been called the "roll-call of the faithful." The preacher reminds the congregation of the names and sacrifices of those witnesses), who made the journey before them, who ran this endurance race before them.

In the black church tradition, from time to time during the sermon the preacher might ask, "Can I get a witness?" In other words, "Will someone testify, will someone say 'amen!' that what I'm saying is right? Will someone shout out, 'Yes, preacher, what you're saying is the good news of Christ?'" Sometimes the preacher asks, "Can I get a witness?" because he or she feels like they're faltering in the sermon. They feel tired, they're running out of steam, so they ask the congregation to help them, encourage them by being a witness. The preacher is not alone, there are others who can help point the way. The whole congregation helps each other out during the sermon, because everyone is running this endurance race together and we do not leave anyone behind. We run together.

So, the preacher of Hebrews is looking for witnesses – those who not only say it, but who have shown by the character of their lives that trusting God and living in the Christ-like way shows all of us what to do and who we are to be. The preacher starts "low and slow" talking about "faith is assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). In other words, living the Christian life is not about certitude. Faith includes doubt and that means that we keep on

even when we do not know for sure what we believe and where to go. Then the writer of Hebrews starts naming witnesses, those ancestors of ours who lived by faith, acted by faith, journeyed by faith, and kept on keeping on by faith.

By faith Abel. By faith Enoch. By faith Noah. By faith Abraham. By faith Sarah. And the writer pauses, “All of these died in faith without having received the promises”, but they kept on. They kept on believing, they kept on praying, they kept on serving, they kept on forgiving and being forgiven. They endured. They did not give up (11:13-16).

Then the preacher starts picking up steam – by faith Jacob, by faith Moses, by faith Rahab, by faith Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel, and the prophets. I could go on but I’m running out of time, the preacher says (11:32). These witnesses, these ancestors of ours were tortured yet did not give in, made justice work, braved abuse and whips, and even chains and dungeons, stoned, sawed in two, murdered, homeless, friendless, powerless, and every one of them lived by faith. And none of them gave up” (11:33-40).

By this time, the preacher is shouting “So we do not give up, either! These witnesses I’ve just named, plus a whole host of others, are in the grandstands, alongside the pathway, yelling encouragement to us! Don’t give up! Don’t give in to hatred! Don’t give into violence! Don’t let evil and darkness get the best of you! Look to Jesus who both started this race and finished it. Don’t grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).

What the preacher is doing is telling us to keep our eyes on the prize, look to Jesus. Jesus is the prize, the goal, but Jesus also shows us how to do it, how to get

there. Furthermore, we look and remember those witnesses – those whose very life mirrored the character of Christ for how to live this Christ-shaped life and how to keep on and not give into despair.

Today, this All Saints Sunday, is a day the church remembers those who have gone before us - ordinary people God has used in extraordinary ways to live out the Way of Christ. We remember those who we have known and loved as well as those we have heard about and read about. Women and men; Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox, white, Latinx, Native American, black, Asian, African, clergy and laity, gay and straight, from all over the world and from across time, what Bonhoeffer called a “polyphony of voices.”

All of these are part of that cloud of witnesses on the horizon. When I was a boy in West Texas, when we saw a cloud, or bank of thunderheads on the horizon, it usually meant, “Get ready! A storm is coming.” But today we look out front of us at a cloud of encouragement, not of foreboding. It is a cloud that beckons us forward. Don’t give up! God is at work in ways and places and among people you don’t know about.

This is the church across time, the community of faith that Tom Long says is “a great unbroken cord of faith that stretches all the way from the beginning of human history all the way to the heavenly sanctuary in the City of God, where the cord has been securely fastened and anchored by Jesus. The links are formed by faithful people, hand in hand, generation after generation, holding fast to each other and to ‘our confession.’”

Do you hear this? “The links are formed by faithful people, hand in hand, generation after generation, holding fast to each other...”

Every Sunday morning, including this one in a few minutes, we have the final blessing, the benediction, at the conclusion to the service. It is a benediction I originally learned from Vincent Harding, an African American historian, who before, had been one of Dr. Martin Luther King’s associates. Vincent Harding learned this benediction from his father, who learned it from his father, and on and on across time.

So, during the benediction we are invited “take each other’s hands. Look at who we’re holding hands with and hold on tight. Because we’re going to need each other this week...” we are holding hands with each other, but also linking hands with faithful people, generation after generation, stretching from the beginning of time all the way to the heavenly sanctuary. It is one great, unbroken cord of faith, anchored securely by Christ himself.

Now, I don’t know about you, but linking hands in faith with so many witnesses... I think I can make it. Do you think you can make it?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.