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Squamish United Church

August 15, 2010

Scripture Reading
Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Family Tree

In Family Systems theory as a counsellor the first place you are to start is with the family tree. This first stage can be a bit frustrating for some clients because they want to remind the counsellor they have come here with a crisis they want you to help fix. And yet if a person is willing to 'give in' to the process and start to look back at the history and heritage of their lives they quickly begin to discover who they are.

It's much the same with our passage from Hebrews this morning. At first one might wonder "Why are we going through this list of people?"

We look because in looking at this family tree of our faith we learn who we are. We learn that we are a part of a family with particular traits and characteristics.

Our family history includes people of courage who escaped slavery and people of faith who brought down oppressors. Then we recall that we also have prostitutes and spies, adulterers and murderers on our tree. We have saints, prophets, justice seekers, and those who found strength in the darkest hours. We have those who suffered, were mocked, killed and persecuted and who hid in caves out of fear for their lives. And yet most of all in this mixed up 'great cloud of witnesses' we have people of faith. Whether they reached the promise land or not they lived in faith.

Bryan Whitfield states "Faith trusts God's promises even when the present calls those promises into question. In the face of suffering faith holds on and holds out because of the certainty of a future in which God has something better in store."¹ When we remember who we are we remember we are not alone. We are not alone in our strengths or in our struggles.

I think that is what I appreciate the most about the scriptures and why I constantly go back to the family tree of my faith. I figure as Kate Huey states "If these great ancestors of ours could be deeply flawed yet deeply faithful, I find that very, very encouraging when I have to run such a long, long race! Maybe you do, too. Maybe we need some great coaches, coaches who understand that it's not by our own power – let alone any super-powers – that we endure or accomplish or even live – no, we do all these things only and always by the power of God within us that is able, as the letter to the Ephesians says, to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine!"²

¹ Whitfield, Bryan www.workingpreacher.org August 15,2010

² Huey, Kate

*We live in a world and culture that loves super heroes. "From comic books to movies and all sorts of paraphernalia, we find many ways to express our enthusiasm for "persons" (imaginary, of course) who can perform great deeds of courage and strength, always for the sake of others and with a sense of high calling. Our culture also loves great athletes, those who run the race and compete for the prize, and win. The very best, the gold medal winners if you will, are those who seem to have something extra, something mysteriously powerful that lifts them above the rest. Our popular culture holds these models up for us to emulate and admire."*³

The difficulty with a culture that holds up 'super human' or artificial heroes is that sometimes we get dismayed at our imperfections. But perfection is not the goal, perseverance in faith is.

*In his address to BC Conference (UCC) last year Peter Short said "My deepest gratitude is the center is NOT dependent on us! That is also our hope. That the center, wherever it is, is still free/undomesticated/wild..." Faith and finding who we are and what our centre is "it's all about holding on to what we cannot properly grasp, until what we can't grasp, grasps us!"*⁴

It's discovering that success and faith might look entirely different than what we ever imagined or dreamed it would.

Have you ever thought about what it would have been like to be Moses? We hold him up as a hero of our faith and yet a large portion of Moses' life was spent in the 'geography of nowhere.' He wandered in the wilderness straining towards the promise land. And then when he got to Mt. Nebo where could look and see the promise stretched out before him he died. Moses never even entered the promise land.

Now what do we make of that? Did Moses reach God's goal? Did he make it? Did he succeed in life?

How about a modern day example. What about Terry Fox. Did he make it despite not completing a run across Canada? Do we view him as a failure?

The call of our faith is not to be super hero's it is to be liver's, encouragers. We are to learn from others and follow the lead of the faithful and courageous. Short continues Our faith is a Paradox "It helps us to live with long-term ambiguity. By resolving it the faith-component disappears. Sanity requires a certain ambiguity. The only absolute certainty belongs to the madman!"

Peter went on to read *Langston Hughes poem*

Mother to Son

³ Huey, Kate sample sermon on Hebrews 11:29-12:2 www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/august-15-2010

⁴ Short, Peter - notes from BC Conference 2009

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps.
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Our family tree of faith is full of those who have 'run the race.' Kept the faith. Walked the broken staircase. Our faith has opportunity and hope because of theirs. Eugene Peterson translates verse 40 "God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours."

Just as we heard last week "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Hebrews 11:1 Our story of faith is still being told. The living of it, the building of it is how we participate in it's unfolding. Think about the history in this place - the stories of our individual lives and faith, the stories of how this church community came to be, and how the United Church of Canada came to be. Are we telling our story, are we living into the history of the faithful who have gone before us? Are we living it in the present and for the future? Are we connecting our own story with that of the saints who went before us, as well as those who will come after us? In the next months I think those are the questions we will have to ask ourselves as we discover and vision, dream and grow together.

It's our turn to live the faith - run the race. Have we put down the things that hold us back, keep us and others from experiencing fullness of life?

Kate Huey reminds us "As we prepare to take our turn at running the race, we're told to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely." ...Are we carrying guilt, illusions, addictions, selfishness and greed? Are we carrying ambition and self-centeredness? Are we

carrying heartaches and grudges that we could put down, and in so doing, lighten our load?"⁵ so that we and others might become more alive in who we are created to be.

Faith requires some centering, some focus, some endurance. But all of our history tells us we don't do it alone. We are to rest in The Holy, trust in God. And as Christians we center on Jesus the pioneer (or otherwise translated from the Greek *archegos* - the author, beginner, the instigator, the impetus, the trailblazer, the one who goes before us). In Greek the word *archegon* also translates as captain. The one who sets the pace, trains us up, guides our way. Jesus ran the same race, on the same earth. Only scripture tells us he perfected our faith. Jesus took hold of life and faith and made it whole.

The most important thing, the author says, is to keep your eyes on Jesus – after all, he already traveled this road ahead of us. And yet along the way, there's going to be some difficult times, and we're going to be challenged, and we're going to face hardship, just as Jesus' own path to God was by way of a cross. Don't give up!

This letter to the Hebrews is written to people in the early church when faith was risky and dangerous. Essentially the letter says the rest is up to you. You are the ones living the faith for the present and the future. And although that might sound hard and overwhelming that is why we are in a community of faith. That is why we listen to the stories of our family tree. That is why we as Christians look to Jesus. So that when we are exhausted on our faith journey. We remember our family of faith, we remember our captain who has run the race who calls us forward in faith and life. We remember we are not alone as we remember who we are. According to this letter we can take courage, strength and inspiration from the 'great cloud of witnesses' that surround us - who are watching us and who are cheering us on.

May we always remember who we are as we live into the hope and courage of our faith.

Amen.

⁵ Huey