

WE ARE ALL WITNESSES IN PERSEVERANCE

Hebrews 12:1

Isaiah 40:28-31

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5 October 2014

Doug and I spent last weekend in Washington DC. His oldest son is doing an internship there this semester, so we spent the weekend visiting him, sightseeing, and relaxing. On Monday morning, I watched the worship service on our website and said to Doug, "I think we should be gone one Sunday during Stewardship season every year!" I want to express my gratitude to my friend and colleague Rob Patton for the beautiful and inspirational sermon, to Don Marken for his powerful Faith Witness, and to Tom and Jill Eston for sharing their story so personally and with great conviction. I was very moved, and, as always, I'm happy to be back. I tried to find some time this week to practice throwing a football so that I compete with Rob, but I'm sorry to say that you probably won't see this preacher do that any time soon.

Hebrews 12:1 says, "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Why that word? What is perseverance? One definition is this: "steadfastness in doing something despite difficulty or delay in achieving success." Synonyms are persistence, tenacity, determination, staying power.

The message is pretty clear. We understand the sports metaphor. Athletes need perseverance. If you've ever tried any sort of physical challenge, you know that motivation is essential, both internal and external. You won't always feel like continuing, like trying hard. There will be times when you'll feel like giving up. Even if you're not an

athlete yourself, you can imagine this would be the case. Football players don't enjoy every minute of practice in the heat, with pads on, when their bodies are aching. Yet they persevere. They stick to it.

The life of faith requires perseverance because we won't always FEEL like practicing our faith. When it seems as if our prayers are not being answered, we'll feel like giving up. When it feels as if the problems of the world or the problems of our own lives are overwhelming, we'll feel like throwing in the towel. When bad things happen to good people, and when the wicked seem to be rewarded, we'll wonder why.

If you look at an athlete, the one with perseverance is the one who keeps going, even on days when the practice is rough, when the team isn't winning, when another player gets chosen to play more often. The athlete with perseverance is the one who gets up after a fall and finishes the race, even with no chance of winning.

What does a life of perseverance look like?

First of all, it's a life with teammates, a life with a support system. The life of faith is not meant to be solitary. If you're trying to make any significant change in your life, one of the first pieces of advice you'll receive is this: "Don't do it alone." Last weekend, my daughter ran a half-marathon with one of her good friends. They signed up for the race together several months ago. They each began training, my daughter when she was in Wisconsin, her friend here in Ohio. They sent each other messages of encouragement and kept each other on track. They both were well-prepared for the race because they had helped each other. The race itself was more fun because, though they didn't run step by step with each other, they knew there was someone else in the race cheering the other on.

When you first make decision to be a part of AA or another twelve step group, you're matched up with a sponsor. Because making a major change, like stopping drinking, is almost impossible to do on your own. You'll need someone to talk to when you're tempted, or when you've made a mistake and want to get back to the program. You'll need someone checking up on you, urging you on, someone who's run that particular race before and is doing well; you'll need someone who knows exactly what it's like.

I've attended many seminars for clergy in my life, and now I'm leading a clergy support group. What I've been told, and what I now advise others, is, "Surround yourself with colleagues you trust." I meet several times a month with different groups of ministers. I have colleagues I can call when I want to talk about personnel matters, different colleagues I call when I have questions about pastoral care and counseling, still others I talk to about preaching. And I have some I talk to about more personal issues. I'm a better minister because of these relationships, because I'm not trying to fly solo.

If we're going to persevere, we need to realize that the race of faith is not a solitary race.

That's why I'm so passionate about encouraging people in this congregation to find friends in the church. At least once a week I'm in a conversation with someone saying, "Join the choir, join one of our adult education classes, show up on Wednesdays and try quilting, show up on Saturday mornings and be a part of our work crew, volunteer for the St. Paul's Thanksgiving dinner or for Family Promise. " It's not just that the activity itself will be rewarding, it's that you'll make friends. Over the course

of time, those relationships may make all of the difference to you as to whether you persevere or whether you give up.

When you sit in here on a Sunday morning, it's easy to assume that the people around you don't have any trouble persevering, keeping going. We all look pretty good on Sunday morning. So you sit here and you think, "Nobody else here cheated on a test like I did this week." "Nobody else's kid did anything as boneheaded as mine this week." "No one else's marriage is going through such a rough patch." "No one else faces as many temptations as I do, or gives into them the way I sometimes do."

But when you get to know people, when you develop trust, you'll realize some of your assumptions were wrong. In a women's group, sitting around a table praying, you'll hear a woman admit to troubles very similar to your own. At the men's retreat, as men are sharing their faith stories, you'll see that yours isn't the only imperfect past. At youth group, you'll find out that the person who looks put together on the outside has some significant struggles on the inside.

If we're going to persevere, we need one another. Life is hard. Whether we're facing crises or just the stress of multitasking or the struggle to keep our spirits up day after day, we need one another.

What does a life of perseverance look like? It looks like teamwork. And it looks like patience. Our Old Testament passage from Isaiah is one of my favorites. "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint." Who doesn't want a life like that? Renewed strength for each day. It comes to those who are patient. Perseverance means knowing that not everything happens when we want it.

We live in such a hurried world that we have forgotten the art of patience. We become angry when a website doesn't load in 30 seconds. We rage when the person in the car in front of us doesn't accelerate the very instant the light turns green. We expect everything to be solved and fixed the moment we identify the problem. Perseverance is developed over time. Perseverance is knowing that real life is not about quick fixes. Perseverance is waiting for God to act in God's own time.

And finally, perseverance requires that we give up the expectation that life is fair and that life is perfect. Neither of those things are promised. What is promised is that God will be with us every step of the way, picking us up when we fall, dusting us off when we've made mistakes, crying with us when we're grieving.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."