

KEEP THE FAITH

Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

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We have seen some tremendous examples of athletic accomplishment this past week, haven't we? Swimming, cycling, gymnastics, volleyball...sometimes the people who were expected to win have won and sometimes there's an underdog. One of my favorite moments was watching Simone Manuel win the 100 meter freestyle.

And this week we'll get to cheer on Avon Lake's own Nate Brannen, whose wife and children are here in worship every week.

Every time I watch the Olympics, I think about what it must take to excel in a sport at that level. I have the same thoughts when I go to see the Cleveland orchestra. I look at those athletes, those musicians, and imagine how hard they have worked. I think of the sacrifices their parents made - paying for lessons, driving to practices. How much of what we would call a normal lifestyle did those children and their relatives have to give up?

I hope that no one reaches the pinnacle of performance without truly loving what they are doing. I don't mean loving every single day, every single moment of practice - that would be impossible - but I hope they're motivated by joy and passion, not pushed by someone else.

Don't you think that such an intense focus on one pursuit develops qualities like endurance, perseverance, and patience?

I wonder if it isn't true for many people who excel in their profession that along the way they have developed faith? There are many definitions of faith, but let me try out this one on you. **"Faith is a determination to pursue a lifestyle for its intrinsic value, not because you're guaranteed a certain outcome."** Somewhere along the way, a piano prodigy or a kid

with an amazing golf swing thinks about quitting. It just doesn't seem worth it, all they have to give up. Or the parents have a quiet conversation, after one particular difficult competition, or when they look at the price they're paying for lessons. But then parent and child decide to stick with it. They know that the child may not ever get to Carnegie Hall or to the PGA, and they decide the lifestyle they're pursuing is worth it anyway. It has its own rewards. The character that will be formed, the people they'll meet along the way, the desire to live without regrets - all of these factors lead to a decision. It's a decision made on faith, for faith always involves risk, it always involves the unknown, and it comes with just one guarantee: that no matter where your life takes you, you will never be alone.

There are some fundamentalist Christian churches that preach that if you're saved, if you profess Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior, you'll go to heaven. If you're not saved, if you're not a professing Christian, you'll go to hell. Preachers sometimes use that piece of theology as motivation. It keeps people in the pews. It gets them to tithe. Fear is a powerful motivator. But it's also negative.

Our church, along with many others, has a more progressive understanding of what it means to live the Christian life. We don't see the gates to heaven being guarded by someone with a checklist. If we personify God, it's more as the father in the parable of the prodigal son, who is thrilled beyond belief to welcome wayward children home. We are motivated to live the life of discipleship, not so we'll win a heavenly reward, but because this life awards us joy, meaning and purpose in the present. This life draws us closer to God and to one another. This is the life Jesus was talking about when he described the Kingdom of God, which can be glimpsed all around us whenever people are at their best.

The Christian life is a life of service. I came across this quote this week and it really spoke to me: "If serving is below you, leadership is beyond you." All true leadership is servant leadership, leadership that sees all people as equal and valuable.

Once you have tasted the life of service, you want more. You feel more connected to the rest of humanity, you feel more hopeful about the future, you discover a depth to your own life as if you have connected to new waters, to the source of life itself.

Living the life of faith is living the life of service. It will reward you, not with ease or comfort or the promise of the hereafter but with a very real sense of the nearness of the presence of God in the here and now.

The author of the book of Hebrews wanted to encourage new Christians to keep the faith. So he reminds them of the faith of their Jewish ancestors. You may have thought the passage Ty read was long, but really the entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews is one long recitation of examples. Remember Abraham? He left home because God told him to; he stepped out in faith. Moses led the people out of Egypt and towards the Promised Land; he kept the faith for 40 years, despite the people grumbling and complaining. And he led the people all the way to the border but didn't even get to step foot into Israel himself. His was a life of faithfulness, going where God led him trusting that the journey itself was a worthwhile way of life. On and on the author of Hebrews continues. Samson, David, Samuel even Rahab the prostitute is lifted up as an example of faithfulness because she once protected some of God's people from attack. None of them are perfect people. The list highlights that point. Moral perfection is not a prerequisite in order to be used by God. God looks for willing people, not perfect people.

We're told to remember the stories of these biblical figures who showed strength, who kept the faith despite adversity. Remember them. Tell their stories again and again. Cut out their pictures and hang them on your bulletin board, tape them to the inside of your locker, keep them around so that their stories provide encouragement. Can't you imagine that those American gymnasts might be inspired by watching video of the gold-medal winning gymnast teams before them? It helps to have mentors, people who have walked a similar path, examples to follow - and it especially helps if those people we look up to are just as flawed as we are.

Here's what all of the biblical heroines and heroes have in common. Hebrews puts it this way: **"Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better."** The external reward, even if promised or expected, never came to fruition, but the real reward was God's presence throughout the journey.

And then what happens to our hall of fame members? What happens to all of the people we have looked up to? Those people whose faith inspires us? People we've known and people we've known about? Well, they're now in the stands, in the bleachers, they've become cheerleaders - OUR cheerleaders - and they're on their feet, cheering us on. They have become the great cloud of witnesses. For we don't live this life alone. We were never expected to be self-sufficient. You can't have faith by yourself. The life of discipleship is the life of community. We are surrounded by one another in the present, and we are connected to men and women throughout history and throughout the world who have also attempted to live according to the values of Jesus.

And there the passage ends but the implication points to the future. To the time when we will pass the baton to the next generation and take our seat among the cheering crowd. "Keep the faith," so that you can pass it on. So that those who come after us will know the joy that comes from living the life of service, the incomparable joy that money cannot buy, that fame cannot bring, that prestige and power cannot confer.

On this day, as we begin to think about the fall season, the return to school, the beginning of a new program year in our church, I encourage you to think of this question, "In what way am I being called to serve this year?" For our service changes as we are in different phases of our lives. I took a walk with a friend on Friday who told me that she has begun spending more time with her in-laws. She's acutely aware of the passage of time and of how much they enjoy each other's company, so she will be setting aside time each week for that relationship.

There are seasons in our lives when our primary service is to our family members. And there are other times when we see that we have more room in our schedule for service to others. If you want ideas on ways that you can use your gifts to serve others in our community, I would be happy to talk with you about that. For this is how we live our faith. By running the race, living the life of service, expending our energies for the good of one another and our community at large, and reaping the rewards that are truly beyond anything we have imagined.