

## **Running the Race with Perseverance**

Raisin and I have returned from vacation, and I am glad to be back among you. Over the course of two weeks we saw about a dozen relatives, including her aunt in Chicago, all of my living siblings, their spouses and some of their children, and of course Noah and his family. The final event was a “significant” birthday for my oldest sister in western New York. It was a lot of driving, but it was worth it.

My sister lives in an area where my mother grew up, not far from where we spent summer vacations. She has lived in the same house for fifty years, so there is a sense of stability there. At the party for her it was fun to watch all of the generations interacting with one another.

That sense of connectedness through time, from generations of ancestors through those present to those yet to come, is a common human experience. We often talk about our connections to other people, related or not. In this morning’s readings we heard a biblical perspective on that connectedness. The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews is a long recitation of heroes of the faith, starting from Cain and Abel at the beginning of Genesis. The first verses of the chapter are so detailed one gets the impression that by the time the author got to today’s verses, he had run out of steam. So he just listed names and the trials they underwent.

The point was to show how that all of these people had faith. Earlier, faith had been defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” What had not been seen was what would come after them – God coming into the world in human form as Jesus Christ. We, too, are witnesses to that faith and that promise. We are to remember the vast cloud of witnesses that came before us and now surround us. Don’t be weary, the author said, but run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

Last month I was part of the Trinity group handing out water at the Bix 7 race. I could see perseverance in the many hot, weary faces that passed by that day. Races are not easy. I could tell who had been training, and who hadn’t. Fortunately, the course was well-marked and there was plenty of help along the way.

Other races are not so well-marked, and people can wander off the beaten path. Again, there are biblical parallels. We heard from Isaiah just how far off course one can get. His love-song started out well, and his hearers cruised right along with him, assuming he was talking about God’s love for Israel. But then Isaiah showed how far the people of Israel had strayed. God expected good fruit to come from his beautiful vineyard. Instead he found bloodshed and wailing, not justice and righteousness. There’s a message here for us and for our culture. I see a lot more bloodshed and crying than I do justice and righteousness. There’s plant of self-righteousness, but very little of the righteousness of God. Isaiah’s words are not comforting.

The words of Jesus are even more troubling. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” he asked. “No, I tell you, but rather division!” The divisions within families that are described likely reflected the actual situation during the first few centuries of Christianity. During persecution, family members betrayed one another. That still happens today in countries where Christians are persecuted.

These readings are difficult for us because both Isaiah and Jesus imply that God is wrathful, which makes many people uncomfortable, especially in mainline churches. The situation isn't helped when some Christians attempt to call down the wrath of God upon people with whom they disagree. I firmly believe that the essence of God is love. Jesus has revealed to us the extraordinary depth and breadth of God's love. But I also believe that God's wrath is a necessary part of God's love. Again and again in the Bible we hear that God is angry at injustice, at those who cheat and oppress the weak, the dispossessed, and the marginalized, those who do not welcome the stranger and the alien. “God is angry with the wicked every day,” Jeremiah said. After condemning empty worship, Amos wrote “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” In Matthew 25 Jesus condemns those who do not feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick or those in prison. If God did not become angry at injustice, there would be no justice. At the same time, we do well to remember that it is God who judges, not us. We have no business judging others lest we be judged ourselves.

Staying the course, persevering, and seeking justice are the messages that God gives us in the readings today. The generations before us did not do their work of faith so that we can rest comfortably. They expect that we, too, will run with perseverance the race that is set before us. To stay in place is to fall behind. If we are not continually growing in the knowledge and love of God, seeking to serve God and others, then we are not taking up the mantle of faith that has been given to us. So lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees. Do not grow weary or lose heart. Look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who will give us the strength to persevere. The work is now ours. Let's go out and do it!

[Pentecost 10: Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56.]