

“Doing It In Public” – Heb 11:29-12:2 – Aug 19/07

If you were here last week – and if you were paying attention – you may remember that the reading from Hebrews talked about Abraham and Sarah as examples of faithful people who, although they never saw the promises of God fulfilled, kept their faith. They continued to believe in the promises they heard from God, and continued to live their faith in response. They were the first of a long line of faithful who did so, and we find an enumeration of some of the many who followed them, also living in faithful expectation that the promises would be fulfilled.

Mind you, the lectionary – the list of suggested readings for each Sunday – skips the section that highlights Moses and we pick up from the point where the Israelites pour out of Egypt, and experience the promise of deliverance. Our reading today offers us a long list of other examples and as is often the case with such lists begins in great detail, tapers off into collections and groups, and winds down with a general “and everybody else” kind of conclusion. That tapering from detail to summary to etcetera also often matches the degrees to which our eyes glaze over as we’re hearing the list being read – and that says something about the way we hear, not about Laure’s reading! Some people are exceptions, but most of us have a limit to how many items we can remember from a list that’s read to us – usually four or five is the limit, although the number in any given case depends on a range of factors including age, experience, training, and even the items in the list. Without looking at either your bible or your copies of the readings, can you remember the second example in the list?

I think it’s important to note the examples given in our reading from Hebrews, and so I’m going to use a bit of repetition – which helps in remembering – and slow down a lot, which also helps. I noticed something about the list that I would like you to also notice, or at least consider.

The first example of faithful people from Israel’s past were the people who streamed through the Reed Sea – yes, that’s the correct translation from the Old Testament, not the Red Sea – safely, while the Egyptians perished. They came as close as anyone to seeing the promise of deliverance from God being actually delivered – especially in being saved in this narrow escape – but we do remember that they did not get to actually enter the Promised Land, but their descendants did.

That second example? “By faith the walls of Jericho fell ...” after Joshua and his army had marched around them for seven days, we are told. Apart from these two incidents being examples of people living out their faith in God, is there something in common? I think so, but we’ll wait to see if it shows up in the other examples.

How about the third example, that of Rahab the prostitute? She actually did see the promise from the Lord come to pass, as she did not perish. It’s a fascinating story, and related to the walls of Jericho because Rahab lived in Jericho. She hid the two spies that Joshua sent in and helped them to escape when the king came looking for them. Indeed, after the walls came down and the city was captured, it was Joshua himself who ordered Rahab – and all her household – spared, but it’s not the connection with Joshua that struck me as the common element here.

The same is true of the “list of seven” that follows. Gideon, who with ten servants pulled down the altar of Baal and built an altar to God in its place; Barak, who with the help of Jael – she’s the one who drove the tent peg through the temple of the sleeping Sisera – and an army of ten thousand, not to mention Deborah, conquered the Canaanite army who had been led by Sisera; Jephthah with his band of outlaws and then the armies of Gilead, likewise successful in battle as promised; David, living to see the promise of a united Israel come true under his command; Samuel and the prophets, all speaking the promises of God and seeing at least some fulfilled.

So, what is it that all of these notables have in common, apart from their faithfulness? What struck me was that all of them lived out and practiced their faith in the company of others. Not one of them acted alone – even David in his one-on-one contest with Goliath was in the company of the army. All of them lived and demonstrated their faith in public, in the presence of friends, slaves, strangers – sometimes a few, sometimes a few thousand, but never alone. (Well, I suppose technically Jael with the tent peg and the hammer was acting alone at that moment, but she was quick to invite Barak in to see the

results!) All of them, and the grab-bag of examples that end the list, lived and acted out their faith in community.

And lest you think that I'm grabbing this thread out of thin air, I think the anonymous author of Hebrews not only recognized the importance of community in these acts of faith, but highlighted it. Recall that the text turns from these examples in the history of Israelite faith to our great example of faith in Jesus, and does so with the well-known "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ..." Witnesses who themselves have run the great race of life in faith, and who now celebrate in unbroken heavenly community. Witnesses who surround us like a cloud, cheering us on like the throngs lining our route in the great race of life. Witnesses who have lived their faith – and many who have died demonstrating that faith; it is interesting to note that the Greek word for 'witness' is 'martyr', which has now in English taken on the meaning of one who dies for their view. Witnesses urging us to faithfully follow Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter", starter and finisher, alpha and omega of our faith.

This image of a race was a common one in the days when Hebrews was written, and given the resurgence of marathons, half-marathons, biathlons, triathlons, and the other innumerable race events that close our streets on Sundays the image of a race is still very current. The concept of community is also popular today, perhaps because we have in many way lost it in the great rush to independence that blossomed in the Age of Reason.

One of the prize examples of how we have lost our sense of community especially in the larger urban areas is provided by my next-door neighbour immediately adjacent on the south. The neighbours across the lane are good friends, and we watch each other's place while the other is away. The neighbour to the north is also a long-time friend. We're not so close with the neighbours across the street – it's a busy street – but we do smile and wave when we see each other. However, I wouldn't recognize the neighbours to the south if they came to the door – and they've lived there for a number of years now. I think they're renters, from somewhere "back East", but I really have no solid idea. Immediately after they moved in they erected a portable gazebo on the back deck. Shortly after the one time we exchanged brief 'hellos' the remaining gap was quickly closed with a fiberglass panel. They certainly have gained their independence from the rest of the neighbourhood, but the cost of that independence – especially if they should need help some day – seems pretty high to me.

We humans are foundationally social creatures – we operate best (and sadly sometimes worst) in the company of others. This is profoundly true also of our spiritual life. We are called in our faith into community – into relationship with God, and into relationship with each other. Both of those relations are necessary – we cannot live healthy, holistic lives if either of those relationships – with God, with each other – are missing, or even if they are significantly out of balance. Without a relationship with the Holy, the Divine, with God we are adrift, aimless, ungrounded. The author of Hebrews recognizes this, and calls us to try to emulate the perfect relationship between Jesus and God.

But it is the relationship with others, the sense of faith in community, that speaks to me in this text. Nowhere are we called to be loners with God, in sharp contrast to the pervasive "Jesus and me" that is so emphasized in today's independent world, and even underscored in some popular old hymns. Recall the opening lines of that classic, "I come to the garden alone ..." which ends with the declaration that the love between Jesus and me "none other can compare." That theme is also often echoed in contemporary worship music. Consider how that theme contrasts with the promise from Jesus that "wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there also will I be." We are not called to the life of a monk in a silent, solitary cell. We are called to live out and exercise our faith in public, in the company of others – strangers and friends alike.

We acknowledge that call to "do" our faith in public every time we attend church. Rejoicing together, praying together, hearing the word together are the very actions that give life both to our faith community and to us. At no time is this more true than when we join in the sacrament of Holy Communion, an event during which we affirm our being in community not only with each other but with our triune God.

But we need to understand also that for God, and Jesus, and all those in the great cloud of witnesses the concept of community doesn't stop at the walls of the church. We are part of the communities in which we live, work, play, and worship. Our acts of faithfulness, our witness to the work of God in Christ, are not reserved for a specific time on a specific day in a specific building. We are called, like the countless who have gone before us – and with whom we affirm our communion today – to live our faith robustly and generously in the community of life in which we are immersed. We have the perfect example of Jesus; we have the pretty good example of the witnesses who have gone before, we have the company and communion of them all, and now it is our turn – with God's help – to run the race set before us. Sisters and brothers, friends, companions in faith – we can do this, together, and in public!