

August 14, 2016
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Hebrews 11:29-12:2/Luke 12:49-56
The Rev. Carenda Baker

It was a beautiful mid-September day. The air was cool, and we had gotten to Harrisburg's City Island in plenty of time to check in and get our official race numbers, take a few pictures, and suck down our final pre-race swigs of Gatorade. Most of us roamed about, chatting with those gathered – runners, family, supportive friends - trying to keep at bay the pre-race jitters, the butterflies in the stomach. This was my first time at the annual Harrisburg Half-Marathon. And I was not there to be a spectator on the sidelines. I had signed-up for the race with my running buddies from Gold's Gym in Camp Hill. This was the first half-marathon I had ever entered (and would be the ONLY half-marathon I would ever run). 13.2 miles doesn't sound like all that much at first. Until you start training for it, and the long runs start getting longer – 7, 8, 9, 10 miles. The longest distance I had run before race day was 11 miles. I know some members of my family thought I was crazy. Why *WAS* I doing this? Partly because I had been working very hard and very diligently to make major changes in my health and overall physical conditioning in the previous year. Over a period of seven months I had, by the grace of God, lost fifty pounds. I needed a challenging goal to stay motivated in maintaining these life changes, and this was what the personal trainer with whom I was working suggested, after she learned that I had begun running in college – twenty-five years earlier, and had run off and on in the ensuing years – but never more than three to five miles at a time. The particular half-marathon race that I entered took place ten years ago in 2006. I was forty-six years old. Truth be told, I wanted to see if I had what it took to complete the race and not quit before I reached the end. I didn't care about speed. I was not a fast runner to begin with. My goal was to finish the race within the officially allowed time – and to cross the finish line in an upright position. This promised to be a mother of an endurance test!

Today's epistle reading from Hebrews offers us a snapshot of some of our spiritual foremothers and forefathers, people who persevered in the faith and are considered to be members of the *"Hall of Fame" of faith*. Some of these "hall of famers" are named outright: Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel – well-known figures whose stories we read in the Old Testament. None of them were perfect. All made mistakes. All had both strengths and weaknesses. Each was a unique character. And all were used by God. Many are not even directly named, but they are described through the victories they achieved, the hardships they endured, and for some - the suffering, persecution, torture and martyrdom which they faced and by which their lives ended.

In this recounting of REAL HUMAN LIVES – plain accounts of the good, the bad, and the ugly parts that can comprise a life of faith, there comes this marvelous transition point, where the baton is passed from all those previous generations to us, the readers:

"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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

We have been considering for the past several weeks the question –“Who is Jesus?” The author of this letter to the Hebrews writes that “Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”. So, first a word about what that might mean – that Jesus is “the pioneer” of our faith. And then a word about the implications for our lives as 21st century disciples of Jesus.

That word “pioneer” is a rich word. What does a pioneer do? A pioneer originates or helps open up a new way of thinking, or of doing something. A pioneer goes into unknown, uncharted and sometimes unclaimed territory to settle. A pioneer is a seeker of something better, fuller, more rich and life-giving.

And without a doubt, there is a cost to being a pioneer. It means letting go of what is comfortable and familiar and taking risks that something richer and fuller and more life-giving *will be discovered* in the letting go and striking out on an unknown path.

We get a glimpse in today’s gospel reading of what it meant for Jesus to be a pioneer. Luke’s account of Jesus’ words is pretty hard to hear and take in. Really - *Jesus come to bring fire and to be a cause of division?* These are not comforting words from a humble and docile Jesus. Remember, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. It is where he intends to go. The conflict is growing and the tension continues to mount the closer he gets to Jerusalem. And remember, too, he is a man passionate about God and God’s kingdom coming. Listen to these words of Jesus from Luke as paraphrased in “The Message”: “I’ve come to start a fire on this earth – how I wish it were blazing right now! I’ve come to change everything, turn everything right-side up – how I long for it to be finished! Do you think I came to smooth things over and make everything nice? Not so. I’ve come to disrupt and confront.”

Jesus has come with holy and committed truth-telling. He has come to demonstrate love that reaches beyond what is deemed socially acceptable – and these acts will disrupt life as it has been. Truth-telling and unboundaried love will always disturb the status quo - socially, politically, economically, religiously, and relationally. We would rather hear calming and peaceful words from Jesus. This is not welcome news - that Jesus has NOT come to make us comfortable. Jesus has come to fully release God’s transformative power to restore all things to right relationship.

Jesus is being brutally honest about the effects for those who will choose to continue following him. Opposition and resistance can be expected. “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” Jesus is STRESSED. Things are getting harder and that will only intensify in the days to come.

A pioneer knows there is a cost for breaking new ground, for venturing into unknown territory. There will be uncertainties, and hardship and failure. Without exception there will be opposition and resistance. That's something we human beings are very good at – resisting change, even change that promises to be life-giving.

Those spiritual hall of famers we read about throughout Scripture knew firsthand the uncertainties, the hardships, the successes and failures, the misunderstandings, the conflict and division, the opposition, and the threats of death that can come when we choose to follow the holy God. There will always, always, always be something that threatens to disrupt, distract, and derail our efforts to continue walking the way of faith. That way for Jesus and for us is the way of the cross and resurrection.

If Jesus is the pioneer of our faith, this suggests two questions we need to ponder. First, what is that area of our life where we need to allow the Spirit to pioneer in us a new way of seeing, a new way of being? Is there a resentment or disappointment we insist on holding on to that is weighing us down? Is there some sin – some habit or pattern or attitude that clings to us and holds us back from living fully dedicated lives of faith? If we are to live out the rest of our lives following Jesus – and that is a decision we have to make each day - what do we need to strip off so that we will be able to endure when the going gets tougher, when the path gets steeper and rougher?

The second question to ponder is equally important: Who makes up your personal cloud of witnesses? Who are the people that have nurtured, encouraged and supported you on your faith journey? Who have been role models of faithfulness for you? We all need them, because the way of Jesus cannot be lived in isolation. There will be dear ones who have gone on ahead of us to live in that larger life with God. And there are living witnesses who walk the road of faith with us NOW.

During that half-marathon I was running ten years ago, around mile 11 something seemed to go wrong with my body, but I didn't know at the time what it was. I didn't feel all that tired, but I had a pain in my right leg that prevented me from running for more than a few hundred yards at a time. I had to walk long stretches of the route which remained. I knew I was falling farther and farther behind. People whom I had run past earlier in the race, were now passing me – and they had been moving quite slowly when I passed them initially. It was a very lonely place to be, and I felt all alone. I knew I should be able to run that distance fairly easily with all the training I had done. But it got to the point that I couldn't run at all. I had to stop and was in tears at several points, after repeatedly trying to run for just short distances. I thought seriously about abandoning the race, just walking away and quitting. I limped along as best I could. After what seemed to me like hours, I finally started across the Walnut Street bridge, still walking - to cover the last quarter mile leading back to City Island and the finish line. Half way across the bridge I heard my brother Ted call out, "Come on, Carenda – you can do it!" I had not seen him in the crowd before the race began. I started to cry again, but managed to pick up my pace to a VERY slow shuffle. And by the grace of God – I crossed that finish line standing upright and then fell into my brother's waiting embrace. Several days later I learned that at some point during the

race, I had badly torn the hamstring muscle in my right leg. So of course, I could not have run the rest of the race without severe pain. But what a gift and a lift to hear my brother call out encouragement to hang in and hang on.

For all of us, life will bring its highs and lows, its thrills of victory and agonies of defeat, its disappointments and delights, its doubts, discouragements, and deep joys. And though we can never know for certain how long we may have to live, for many of us, life will indeed be more of a marathon than a sprint to the end of the race. Thanks be to God that we follow a Lord who taught and modeled for us perseverance, endurance, and sacrifice for the sake of love. We claim a Lord who has first claimed us, breaking the ground, pioneering the way for us to experience new and abundant, unending life, a life full of grace and love and mercy. And thanks be to God that we are not left to run this marathon of life alone! We have a great cloud of witnesses who journey with us always - those living now who surround us, and those we remember who are among the triumphant faithful departed. Recently in a funeral sermon I said that our faithful loved ones who have died, now have the very important task of cheering us on, encouraging us not to give up on walking the way of faith with Jesus.

In the words of today's collect: "Almighty God, give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of Christ's redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life." Follow his steps daily and persevere. This is the way of faith. We can do no more. By God's grace, we can do that much. Amen.