

Hebrews 11:29--12:2

Friends in Christ from First Presbyterian near Ely, St. John Lutheran, and those from the city of Ely and surrounding environs- It is good that we are together.

This text from Hebrews is appropriate for a worship that celebrates the 150th anniversary of the founding of the City of Ely. The author of Hebrews is addressing a community of believers that is struggling. They start by orienting this community to their history- here the history of their ancestors in the faith from the Hebrew Bible. They retell the story of their faith up to this point. The story of those who have gone before them, living out their trust in God's promises, even in the face of great trials. How did these ancestors do so? By faith the text says again and again. By faith the walls of Jericho fell, by faith the Israelites passed through the Red Sea and survived Pharaoh's army. Those assembled to hear this text read would have known their history. Just the mentioning of the names Rahab, Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel would have raised their stories in the minds of those who heard it. Would have flooded their memories with this rich tapestry of people all of whom were considered faithful followers of God. Would have reminded those assembled, that these are their ancestors. That this is also their story.

The congregation is reminded through this retelling of their history that they are not alone in facing challenges. There have been people all throughout their history who have only seen the promise of God from afar and greeted it (as our text from Hebrews said last week). Who have trusted in God and God's promises even when it seems distant. Reminded them that those same people who have died in the faith surround us even now.

There was a visible sign this in many a country church. What would be behind the altar- literally- in those churches? The cemetery. What that means is that the table- the altar is not at the front of the assembled worshippers but rather... in the center. This is what is meant in the final petition of the Lord's Prayer- communion of the saints. That when we assemble in worship, when we share the Lord's Supper, we do so not only with those who are with us temporally, not only with those around the world who are doing the same thing, but also with all those in the past and all those into the future. The assembly of the faithful extends through time and space.

The author of Hebrews encourages us to put off everything that encumbers us, that drags down our aim so that we miss the mark in life (sin), to put off that which seeks to keep us from living out our faith. Which usually is something we fear isn't it? Perhaps it is fear of the loss of privilege or power. Perhaps it is the fear that the doors of our churches will close. That after 165 plus years for each of our assemblies, we might not be able to make it. Put that aside, the author of Hebrews says, for that keeps us from being who God has created and called us to be. The visible sign of God's reign here on earth.

Instead, this author says, let us move! Move forward with patient endurance even in the face of the grueling contest before us. Move forward undeterred into the future. How can we do this? On our own? By no means!

Rather, we do so by looking to Jesus who is the pioneer- the one who has gone before us. By setting our eyes on him, as Peter did when he left the boat to step out into the stormy seas. We do this bolstered by our past (who is with us in the

present) and by looking to the future where Jesus has already gone and is leading us.

A question for this day of celebration is about that future. What foundation are we laying for those who will assemble 50 years from now in 2072 for the bicentennial celebration- A time I won't likely see because I would be 102! We in 2022 are thankful for those ancestors in the faith who founded First Presbyterian near Ely and St. John. Thankful for the stories we know of their faithfulness and perseverance. Their sacrifice and endurance in the face of challenge. But also, their foresight and faith in laying a foundation for the church we have today.

By faith the Zvacek, Filipi, and Buresh families, along with others, founded what was the Bohemian and Moravian Brethren Church- what would become First Presbyterian church. By faith the Fuhrmeister, Putnam, Smyth, and Stream families, along with others, founded St. John. By faith these assemblies of believers have survived over the last 165+ years (yes, both congregations are older than Ely) as those families and so many others assembled around Word and Sacrament. Ate countless potlucks. Made mountains of kolaches, drank gallons of coffee. By faith they baptized their children, studied the scriptures, helped each other in times of need. By faith they buried and mourned their dead, weathered war, drought, flood, depression, the farm crisis, and so much more.

We are here today because of their faithfulness as much as we are here today because of the faithfulness of Rahab, David, Paul, Peter, and all those other disciples known and unknown down through the ages.

We give thanks to God for them and their witness. We rejoice in the joy of knowing this story that buoys us when we are feeling down. That inspires us with

the knowledge that people, folk, just like us- with the help of God through trust in Jesus Christ- can create an assembly of believers that transforms the lives of those who enter into that fellowship and that can transform the community they live in.

I am, by nature, an historian. I appreciate how much we can learn about ourselves, our community, country, our world by looking at the past. I know how those people and events from the past can shape how we think and act now. How they can make us afraid of things or give us boldness. You don't think that's the case? Think about those who have survived the Great Depression. How many of those people are thrifty all their lives? How many collected everything because there might still be good use of it sometime? They were shaped by a time of great scarcity. I wonder exactly what we will discover about the Great Recession and its effect on the millennials and generation z?

Knowing our history orients us to our present. History is something we honor and give thanks for. But it is not something we seek to re-create. For that time has come and gone and what worked then, will not necessarily work now, certainly not in the same way. I used to work for a youth leadership camp called WIYLDE (Wholly Iowa Youth Leadership Discipling Event) a most excellent gathering of gifted and talented young disciples that I have had the privilege of being with. We would spend a week at Luther College growing in faith, growing their leadership skills, worshipping together, but also having some fun. You ever have an experience at a place like that where a word or phrase becomes the byword for that week? For us one year it was the story of how Trent saved a tube from floating downstream. It would be prompted by someone asking, "Hey, Brian, what did Trent do?" To which I would reply, "What did he do? What did he do?"

I'll tell you what he did..." and then proceed into a telling of the tale that was even more exaggerated than the last one.

The following year I had a returning student call out to me, "Hey, Brian, what did Trent do?" and I refused to respond. It wasn't because I was annoyed, or didn't enjoy telling the story, or didn't have great memories of that week. As I explained to this student it was because those kinds of things can't be repeated. Rather, they have to arise organically from the group that is present this year. And it will likely be something totally different, focused on someone else. We could set the stage for it with our fellowship and fun together, by keeping our eyes and ears open for it. But we couldn't recreate the past. But we can learn from and honor the spirit of it.

We celebrate and give thanks to God for what has come before in our congregations. All of the faithful sharing of resources and pouring out of blood, sweat and tears that has gone into our buildings and our ministries. We give thanks to that great cloud of witnesses who is around us even now for what they have given us. But for us to preserve that gift, we need to focus not on what they did, but how they lived.

Centering our lives on the Word of God found first and foremost in Jesus Christ, but also encountered each week in worship through song, readings, preaching, and in the sacraments. Spending time in prayer and reading scripture- regularly- daily- so that the story of God's pursuit of God's people, of us, becomes so much a part of our identity that we too need only hear the words- Rahab, Sarah, Abraham, Peter, Paul, Mary- and our own memories will fill with the rich tapestry

of their lives and faithfulness. Serving our neighbors- especially those in need- with extravagant selflessness.

As we do so, then we are more open to the work of the Holy Spirit and where we are being called. Today. Most likely it will not look like the last thing in the specifics of it, but it will always be something that follows after Jesus, goes where he goes.

One way this has worked in my assembly of believers at St. John is when we talk about Sunday School. The question I ask is this, is God calling us to have Sunday School, or to raise our children in the faith? I remember fondly that large Sunday Schools of my youth and even of a few years ago. It was a wonderful place for me to explore my faith and engage the faith of adults other than my parents. But I would venture that my faith would be much the same today even if I didn't have Sunday School, because of the way in which the faith of my parents was evident in their everyday lives.

The specifics of what it means to be church will change in the next 50 years. Heck, it just changed over the last two and will certainly do so over the next five! Let us be open to that. Mourning the loss of things that were so special to us, "Hey Brian, what did Trent do?" But also knowing that as we are attentive to being faithful as our ancestors were, something new and just as wonderful will come along. Something that our children 50 years from now will look back on with the same fondness and thankfulness for how it affected their faith.

How does this happen? By faith, that is give to us as a gift of grace given to an imperfect people, doing their imperfect best to be an outpost of God's reign on earth. By faith, like that of our ancestors- our parents, grandparents, all those

made anonymous through the mists of time- that great cloud of witnesses that is with us still. By faith, trust in the promise of God made visible in Jesus Christ -the pioneer and perfecter of our faith- that God's desire for us is life- fuller and more abundant. Thanks be to God.