

“The Hall of Fame, Part II”

Liturgical Date: Proper 15 (C)

Primary Text: Hebrews 11:17-12:3

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the 10th Sunday after Pentecost is the Epistle Lesson from Hebrews, which is the conclusion of Chapter 11 and first three verses of Chapter 12. Our text and sermon pick up where we left off last week, as the title of today’s sermon is “The Hall of Fame, Part II”.

GOD MAKES IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT IN PLEASING GOD IS FAITH SO THAT WE UNDERSTAND IT IS ONLY BY FAITH IN JESUS THAT WE CAN TRULY BE OBEDIENT AND ENTER THE BETTER AND ETERNAL HOME.

Last week we learned that Hebrews 11 is sometimes referred to as the “Faith Hall of Fame” with its impressive list of Old Testament Saints. We compared this “hall of fame” with the Hall of Fames that exist in the world—especially related to athletic achievements (note that no one spoke up about the Hall of Fames they visited, but I later found out that some of you were holding out on me!). We heard that these heroes of faith certainly had great accomplishments and compelling testimonies as to their works. However, we also emphasized an important difference between the criteria of Hebrews 11 versus what is commonly thought of in the world as achieving greatness. And this is that our text makes it abundantly clear that they did all of these great things, and thus pleased God, not because of the works themselves—but because they had faith. Without faith none of their works would be pleasing to God nor allow them to enter His eternal kingdom.

The word “faith” was used 11 times in last Sunday’s reading and is used an additional 14 times this week. We also took to heart what exactly this faith is that God speaks of. It is not simply intellectual knowledge or a conditional decision to “believe in something.” Biblical faith is a trust, an absolute reliance and confidence in the Triune God and His Word to us. Even more specifically, it is faith-trust, in-Jesus, His work in providing for our salvation. It is not something that we can create or “do”. Saving faith itself is a gift from God, worked by God the Holy Spirit.

So today we will continue in drawing out key truths relating to faith from our Biblical text. We continue to see impressive feats done by faith, that the witness of faith endures, being faithful to God often brings opposition and persecution, the result and destination of faith is better than anything the world can offer, and most importantly that this faith is centered in Jesus Christ.

As we heard today, the list of “Faith Hall of Famers” kept going. As it is said, “the hits keep on coming”, its almost like “but wait there’s more”. And, at least on the surface, the deeds brought forth this week are even more awe-striking. Here is just a sampling. We see Abraham again. This time he is not to just move to new and unknown place, but to offer up his long-awaited son Isaac as a sacrifice. While God would stop him before he had to do it, Abraham was prepared to obey God-even believing that God could raise Isaac from the dead (v19). And Moses, we could say so much about him as the “backstory” itself is very interesting. And of course, Moses would stand up to Pharaoh, lead the Hebrew people to freedom through the Red Sea, deliver the Law from the hand of God, and lead in the wilderness. Then there is Jericho, when after marching around the city the walls came tumbling down. While not named specifically in the text, Joshua played a

part in this and Rahab the prostitute who by faith welcomed the Hebrew spies is noted and she would become part of the lineage of Jesus. Then in verses 32-33 a few more are listed rapid-fire and more people and deeds are eluded to.

One of themes that you see running through Hebrews 11 is that the witness of faith endures. We heard that more specifically with last week's reading in verse 2 and with some of the specific people mentioned like Abel- but we see that today as well. But was the purpose of God allowing them to do the amazing things they did just so they would be remembered by future generations as great people? Yes, we when we remember the saints we can learn from what they did. But primarily, this is not the key purpose. The main point is so that God would be remembered as faithful and His Word as true.

Think about some of the things that you like and enjoy doing. I am using the illustration of athletic halls of fame in this sermon. And this has been enjoyable to me because I have always liked sports. Why? One of the main reasons is my Mom likes sports-she is actually a much bigger fan than my Dad. I remember very often athletic competitions being on TV and topics of conversation growing up. Why does she like sports? Well, her father-my granddad-loved sports and passed this love on. This was a man who would have two TV on to different games in the house, another on the radio, and a sports page in his hand! He was a pretty good athlete too in his own right-medaling in the Senior Olympics. Let's apply this to the spiritual realm.

You see, think about your own lives and how God has worked in them. While we know that our faith is ultimately a work of God, He uses people to pass on Godly wisdom and to model and mentor the future

generations in the faith. For many people it is a family member and you do see certain families that have a history of faithful believers. But some people are not raised in Christian homes. Perhaps their faith mentor was a teacher, coach, boss, co-worker, or friend. The point is that God has a plan and His work is not a past event, but a present reality. God's hand is on the whole of history. He will ensure that there are true believers with strong faith that can witness of Him and His mighty deeds to future generations, all by faith.

We must also realize that following God with faith comes at a cost—in a worldly sense. A good portion of our reading from Hebrews 11 today speaks to that. We hear today about it becoming more difficult to live for Christ in our contemporary society. In fact, living as a Christian has not been easy but difficult for many, if not most, true believers throughout history. Verses 34-38 give a pretty graphic list of some of the things that came against the followers of God: fire, sword, mocking, prison, stoning, and even being sawed in two. And that is just a start. But in these verses we also see that ultimately God was with them and delivered them—even if it cost their life. The devil and his allies in the world can do a lot of horrible things to Christians, but they can't take away our salvation. There are so many Bible verses that could be quoted here. Jesus says to not fear the one that kill the body (Matthew 10:28). St. Peter says our trials are only for a little while (1 Peter 1:6-7). St. Paul, who knew plenty of persecution, says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.”* Of those that endured persecution by faith Hebrews says in verse 38, *“Of whom the world was not worthy.”*

And following God in faith does not only mean being prepared to face opposition and persecution, but also means being prepared to give up the things that the world values. Our text speaks of Moses as a prime example of this in verses 23-30. Baby Moses was in a basket floating in the Nile River and found by pharaoh's daughter. He grew up in the royal family, treated as one of their own. Pretty good gig, right? Power, money, all the trappings of the good life. One may be tempted to stay in that situation. But God had other plans for Moses. He would be called to lead his true people, the Jews, to freedom away from pharaoh. It would not be easy. It would involve hard work, opposition, and giving up any hope of returning to his life of ease. But Moses had faith. He acted in obedience to that faith.

Verses 25-27, *“Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible.”* How powerful. What a faith filled example and inspiration to us today when we are tempted to compromise in order to be more esteemed by or gain more riches of the world.

So we see some incredible examples of faithful believers in Hebrews 11. Can you imagine getting to meet these people? It would be an almost surreal experience. When I get to heaven, one of the things I am looking forward to doing is meeting and talking to the great heroes of faith. Have you ever met any famous people, perhaps even a hall of famer? Well, I have met some fairly prominent people over my life-I even was able to meet and snap a photo with former President Jimmy Carter years ago so he may be the most famous person I have met. But staying in the realm of athletic halls of

fame, I want to share a story of you of when I visited the Pro Football Hall of Fame when I was 16 years old. This was very exciting for me because I have always been a big football fan. And to make it even more special it was actually the weekend of the inductions to the Hall of Fame when we visited. The 1993 Hall of Fame class was pretty impressive. It included guard Larry Little, record setting quarterback Dan Fouts, and legendary championship coaches Chuck Noll (Steelers) and Bill Walsh (49ers). And there was one other person too...

Me, my brother, and my friend were wandering around the Hall of Fame and I don't even know exactly how we did it but we somehow we ended up looking up and seeing...Walter Payton. "Sweetness" himself (with his son Jarrett) was right there before us in the flesh! This is the guy that retired with about every record for running backs: most rushing yards, most touchdowns, most carries, most all total yards from scrimmage, and even most receptions and touchdown passes from a running back. And of course he was part of that legendary and charismatic 1985 Bears championship team. He is arguably the greatest running back in NFL history. And guess what? He was very friendly, flashing that trademark smile, shaking our hands, and talking to us for a few minutes. But my moment of glory was short lived because security showed up and ushered us out. Apparently, we had somehow wandered into a restricted area!

But you know what? I have met someone even greater than Walter Payton. One greater than any hall of famer. And this meeting was not a one-time thing either. It began a relationship that has grown stronger and stronger over time. In fact, it will last for all time. This one that I have met is of course, Jesus!

And I didn't stumble into a chance meeting. In fact, I could never find Jesus because I was so hopelessly lost. But He has found me. He has redeemed me. He has called me His child by creating faith by the Holy Spirit. He has washed me in the waters of Holy Baptism and strengthens that faith through speaking to me through His Word and feeding me in His Sacrament. And the best thing is that He did this not only for me, but for you, for the world. Hebrews 12:1, *"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us."*

As verse 2 says, Jesus is the author and finisher of faith. My faith. Your faith. The faith of all believers in Christ everywhere throughout eternity. He was the promised Messiah that the Old Testament Saints we have heard about had faith in the coming of. He is the Redeemer of those in His lifetime who recognized Him as the Christ. He died. He rose again. And He is the Savior of the countless souls that have confessed Him throughout the ages, right up to today, and right up through when He returns, and then for all eternity. He has prepared this "better city", the one that has built by God Himself.

What a "Hall of Fame" we see in Hebrews 11. But as I said last week, and I will say again, God's "Hall of Fame" is not just for the select few who go down in the history books. It is not only for those who roll up big statistics. It is for all of those who have faith—all those whose names may not be in the history books but are in the Lambs Book of Life. All of those who as Hebrews 11:39 said, "having obtained a good report through faith." This is the good news. Your "ticket" to the Hall of Fame has been punched by Jesus. Paid for in His blood. Witnesses to by His resurrected from the dead.

And being made a child of God the Father, delivered in faith by God the Holy Spirit. By faith. By faith. Yes, by faith. Thanks be to God.

Amen.