

## “KEEPING FAITH”

Nov. 5, 2017

*Prayer*

*In the name then of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these words:*

<sup>32</sup>And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, <sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. <sup>35</sup>Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- <sup>38</sup>the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

<sup>39</sup>These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. <sup>40</sup>God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. <sup>2</sup>Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 11:32-12:2)

*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.*

Due to being in a military family growing up I went to three high schools. In the middle of my sophomore year we moved to St. Louis. In that situation, civilian community in the middle of the school year, it was challenging to make a start and make friends. The way it really began to happen for me was that a PE teacher, who was also the track coach, pulled me aside after one class and asked me to try out for the track team. I declined. He persisted. I gave it a try and there, showing up for an indoor track workout, he introduced me to some who became my first friends in that town.

It was very shortly after that that I can remember coming into the locker room and hearing someone say, “Man, who is Jeff Wood? He’s running everything.” I came around the corner to see a blackboard detailing all the races of that day’s meet and who was running what race. I was shocked because it did seem like I was running in every race! When I, bewildered, asked him about it, Coach Griffith said, “Don’t worry. I just need to see what you can do.”

I eventually settled into running the high hurdles, the low hurdles, the intermediate hurdles, the 440, and the mile relay. A relay is an unusual experience. It isn’t unique for there are other situations like it but what I found different about it was that you, if you were positioned like me in the lineup, watched a runner before you and you watched a runner after you, and your own running, in between them, was done with a great desire to keep faith with them. The one before you ran in sincerity and trust. The one after you waits in trust and hope. You in between run *because* of them and *for* them. Some would call it a burden, to run with the sense of keeping faith. I say it a calling and a privilege.

Our text this morning from the Bible says there is a race of faith and discipleship. In that race there are those who have run before us. Chapter 11 names some of them and alludes to others of them. There is Gideon, Barak, and David. There are the associates of Daniel. There is perhaps Jeremiah, the one sawn in two. They got into the starting blocks. They ran a race. They let the candle of their life be lit by God. They chose faith over cynicism, hope over apathy, trust in God over distrust of him, surrender to him over rebellion against him, dependence on him rather than independence from him, Christ's example over their own way, involvement over non-commitment, see and do over wait and see, being part of the solution over being part of the problem, self-sacrifice over self-or self-fulfilment.

And because of their heart and choice, we have faith and because of that faith a better and truer life. See, we aren't just people. We are beneficiaries. We aren't just people. We are stewards. They have run the leg and carried to us the faith. That faith helped them run and they passed the faith along ...even to you and me. They passed it by going on missionary journeys like Paul. They were crucified upside down like Peter. They copied the parchment manuscripts of the Bible by candlelight in cold medieval castles. They translated those from Greek and Latin into the people's language, German and English and such. They taught the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. They penned the hymns and preached the sermons. They taught my sixth grade Sunday School class and took us to San Diego Padres baseball games so we'd understand through the love of a teacher the love of God. They invited you to your first meaningful hearing of God's message in college. They put that Gideon's Bible in your motel room, the one through which God spoke your name when your soul hit bottom. They built St. Peter's and they built First Presbyterian of Sebastian. Their names were Peter and

Paul, Augustine in North Africa and Patrick in Ireland, Latimer and Ridley burned at the stake, Coverdale and Tyndale (and Chin ‘n Dale, oops!), ... Jim Elliott and Nate Saint martyred in the Amazon, C.S. Lewis and Henri Nouwen, Bob Brown and Don Maclean, Egle Phillips and Mary Jane Bartholow.

They gave us *the* faith (the very name of Jesus and the content that goes with that name) and they gave us *their* faith (what they looked like living in Jesus). Now it is my turn. Now it is your turn. And they watch us. They cheer us on. Will we keep faith with them? Will we run with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength our turn around the track of discipleship and leadership? What do we think we were given life for?

Keeping faith with them. Will we stay true to the core vision and values – getting done what Jesus wants done the way Jesus would want it done? Will we take up the baton? Will we learn the Bible and learn it so as to live it and transmit it? Will we pray so as to touch the face of the master and make others long to pray and touch the same? Will we support Wycliffe Bible Translators? Will we maybe not teach the sixth graders and do the baseball games but invite the new person at church to lunch? Will we build First Presbyterian? Will we keep the faith with Clara, Carey, Rafael, .... *so that* FPC does do well? Will we keep faith with those who ran before?

Will we keep faith with those who run after -- our children and grandchildren and all children? What kind of heritage will we give them? What kind of inheritance will we pass on? What kind of notions about the Bible and what kind of sentiment about worship? Something to be passionate about or something rote? What kind of thoughts, “I did my time” or “There is no such thing as retirement for the disciples of Jesus Christ!”? “I gave” or “It is *always* a privilege to give... Thank you for

asking”? Will we keep faith with those who will run after us if the Lord carries?

What about those who run with us? Will we keep faith with them? Those beside us. Will I attend not just for myself but for them? Will my generosity and cheer break open theirs? Will the tones of my face and faith encourage theirs? Will kind speech foster theirs? Will my humility and teachableness cultivate theirs? Will my siding with FPC promote theirs? Will my leadership, theirs? My tithe, theirs?

Today we take communion and as such we affirm, stand for, open ourselves up to, experience a union ... with the Lord Jesus Christ, with each other here, with all Christians in the church militant, with all the saints in the church triumphant. So as we eat today there is the Lord Jesus. There is a rice farmer in India who confesses the Lord Jesus. There is that person in the pew next to you. And there is the cloud of witnesses. They are here. They gather with you and me around the table. These have run their leg. We are running ours. Will we keep faith with them?

This table today is certainly a table which asks about keeping faith. It may strike you as a burden to do so. I didn't want to be in some relay race! Want to or not the question is there, "Will you run?" Will you move from a receiver to a benefactor? Disciple to disciplinemaker? May it strike you as the calling and privilege it is. Run then, people of this church, and hear *them* feel with you and whisper, "Run well, my brother, my sister."

But you may say, to them, to me, to yourself, and more importantly, to Jesus, "I don't know if I can keep faith." He says, "Do you want to?" If we say, "I don't know," he says, "Come to my table and find the "want to". "I don't know if I can keep the faith." He says, "Do you want to?" If we say, "Yes," he says, "Then eat at my table and feed my sheep." If we say, "I don't know

if I can keep faith,” he says, “That’s why there is this table ... to give you faith and to strengthen you for the keeping of it.”

Men and women, don’t you see on the table the one who ran the race before us so well ... to give us not such a big lead but to give us *the* victory?” “Oh, Lord, I don’t know if I can keep faith with you.” “Oh, Jeff, and all you others, this table is less about you proclaiming that you will keep faith with me than it is a proclamation that I have and will keep faith with you. I have run the race. I have won the victory. Peace. Live. Really and truly live. I have won.”

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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