

***“Faith....Fullness!”***

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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

As I drove out of Fort Scott, Kansas on my sabbatical motorcycle ride, I looked ahead to see four motorcyclists pull onto the road about a mile ahead of me. After catching up with them and riding as a fifth rider in the string of cycles I decided to pass the last biker. As I did he gave me the thumbs up. Rather than passing the other three I decided to cozy in and be one of the guys. It felt good!

As we were coming into Bronson, Kansas, we began slowing down to negotiate the curve but I noticed that the biker in front of me was getting perilously close to edge. Just as I said to myself, *“he needs to bring it back,”* he went off the road. It was one of those *“I can’t believe what I am seeing”* moments. But there he was riding on the gravel between the highway and the ditch.....that is not a happy place! I tried to will him back onto the highway but, instead, down he went into the ditch. Believe me it is a scary sight to see a helmetless rider desperately trying to keep his bike upright careening down the middle of a ditch. Well, he didn’t succeed and, as I passed him, I watched him go down and fly over the handle bars. I felt sick!

I turned around and as I got back to the scene I could not see the biker or the bike because of the depth of the ditch. I wonder, *“Am I going to find a man with a broken neck? How badly will he be hurt? What can I do to help?”* The other biker and a good ol’ boy in a pick-up truck were already at the scene. The bike was a mess and the rider was lying on his back moaning. I asked if anyone had called 911. But they said the downed cyclist did not want 911 called. Scary story made short....the guy wasn’t hurt ....the tall grass acted as a cushion but his bike, which he was borrowing, was a wreck.

Witnessing such an accident raises some interesting questions about faith.

*What role does faith play when your motorcycle has gone off the pavement? If the rider had had more faith would he have been able to redirect the bike back onto the pavement? Was it because he did have faith that he was able to avoid serious injury? What role does faith play in our lives?*

We find insight in the great “*faith chapter*” of the Bible, Hebrews 11.

Read Hebrews 11:29-12:2

<sup>29</sup>By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.

<sup>30</sup>By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. <sup>31</sup>By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

<sup>32</sup>And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—

<sup>33</sup>who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup>quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted,

tormented— <sup>38</sup>of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. <sup>39</sup>Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, <sup>40</sup>since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

**12**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, <sup>2</sup>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. ***“The Word of the Lord”***

Look at all of the miraculous deeds.... ***“By faith the people passed through the Red Sea.... By faith the walls of Jericho fell....By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish....”*** So according to this if you have strong faith then your motorcycle will never crash? *Right?* Not so fast. Hebrews 11 shares the rest of the story of faith.

*Did you notice the sudden change in fortune?* <sup>35</sup>Women received their dead by resurrection. *...then....* Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. <sup>36</sup>Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. <sup>37</sup>They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; Wow! From resurrection to torture, mocking, flogging, chains, imprisonment, and being stoned to death. Then we read, ***“Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised.”*** Both those who are remembered for extraordinary deeds and those whose names and deeds will never be known were commended for their faith.

This past week Connie and I had the privilege of hosting our good friends John and Gwen Haspels. Some of you met John and Gwen several years ago when they came to Fairmont to tell about their Presbyterian mission work in Ethiopia. Friday morning John and I were sitting on the front porch solving all the problems of the world and I happened to mention that I was preaching on faith this Sunday. John immediately responded that his life verse was Hebrews 11:6 ***“And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”***

What pleases God is that we hang in there with God facing every obstacle and every blessing firmly centered in Jesus Christ. John and Gwen have served for close to 40 years in parts of the Sudan and Ethiopiain to which we would never consider going. To me they are the embodiment of those who live by faith.

John and Gwen have seen, figuratively, many motorcycles go down yet they remain faith filled. As John and I sat on our front porch he shared with me story after story of difficulties he and Gwen face, yet their faith keeps them persevering with love, grace and hope in a very dangerous place. He told me that in the last several months one of their beloved youth leaders was killed in a revenge killing. The boy had done nothing wrong but he was killed out of revenge for something one of the boy's distant relatives had done to the enemy family. John shared his sorrow and disgust of the revenge killings and told how Gwen, a nurse, is often treating gunshot wounds. John also, somewhat laughingly, told of being surprised by a black cobra in the outhouse. And then he did laugh as he described how he tripped out of the outhouse with his pants down to his ankles. For 40 years John and Gwen have faced revenge killings, cobras and many "motorcycles going down" but they hang in there believing that Ethiopia is exactly where God wants them. They will also tell you that the difficulties have made their faith stronger. Through 40 years they have witnessed God's faith....fullness and their love for God and the people is stronger than ever.

Our passage concludes by reminding us that we are ***“surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”*** We often interpret the *“great cloud of witnesses”* as those who have died and are in the balcony of heaven cheering us on that we might keep the faith. But I also believe we are surrounded by living witnesses who encourage us to ***“run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.”*** That's what faith does. Faith keeps us running the race. Faith keeps us persevering no matter how tough life becomes. Faith keeps us looking to Jesus who has already finished the race and who adds the fullness to our faith. I am glad I have friends like John, Gwen and you who encourage me to keep looking to Jesus. *Who keeps you looking to Jesus? Who helps you to persevere in faith.....fullness?*

Recently Denise had the opportunity to be with sisters and brothers in the Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla, Colombia. As Denise came back it was as if she had spent time with Christ himself. *(.....Denise now shares her story of faith....fullness)*

I did spend time with Christ in Colombia for I met Christ there in brothers and sisters in faith. It is one thing to know in your head we have brothers/sisters in faith in Colombia. It is another thing entirely to sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty" in Spanish and know at a deep level we worship the same God, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. My entire trip was a powerful, meaningful experience!

I saw evidence of great faith among the Presbyterians in Barranquilla, Colombia, South America.

Members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church of Barranquilla, took a giant step of faith two years ago. The Presbytery of the North Coast encouraged each of their churches to choose an area of focus from either Education, Evangelism or Mission. 1<sup>st</sup> Church chose Education and began to pray and discern how God was leading them. The Session discerned God calling them to apply for a contract to administrate three schools in Barranquilla. Let me give you some background . . .

As I understand it, the government builds the schools, awards contracts to individual groups to administrate the school, pays a certain amount per student and the administrators hire staff and run the school. The 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church was the first non-Catholic group in all of Colombia ever to receive a contract. Church leadership was convinced God was leading them in that direction but some church members thought it was taking on too much. The Presbytery considered it controversial because of the politics involved. Catholic churches administrating schools had had government officials tell them how to vote in upcoming elections in order to keep their contracts. The Church stated throughout the process they would not allow anyone to come into their church and tell them how to vote. After receiving the contract to administrate three schools they hired the best educated, most experienced teachers they could find, social workers, guidance counselors and spiritual helpers to address the behavioral problems they knew they would encounter. They adopted the principle "Discipline with Love." They cannot advertise being a "Christian" school but they readily acknowledge "we teach values" such as respect for one another,

honesty, problem solving with peace rather than violence – values undergirded by Christian faith. Parents and students know it is a Protestant led school.

We visited the three schools, one serves a middle class population, the other two serve very low income students. Children attend either the morning session from 6AM – 12 noon or the afternoon session 1pm -7pm. Some students arrive late for the afternoon session having waited for their sibling to return home from morning session to borrow their shoes to wear. The children seemed bright and enthusiastic in spite of the heat—the schools are not air-conditioned. One school in a poor neighborhood had suffered recent flood damage and only three of the classrooms had a roof over their heads. Classes were being held outside with bulletin boards propped against trees until the school is repaired. I couldn't help but compare it to Centerville High School. Many children came to school not having had breakfast or lunch so the church budgeted money to provide healthy snacks. Similar to the issues of any inner-city school the children deal with hunger, extreme poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, sexual abuse and violence on a daily basis. The children have very little concept of a future as their families struggle to survive that day. I asked how the teachers bolster themselves given the seemingly insurmountable odds they face. "Teachers gather to pray together every morning before school starts," Pastor Marteen said. After their first year of administrating the schools, the church won a national award comparable to our Congressional Medal of Honor for their wholistic, successful approach to education.

These brothers & sisters in Christ inspired me by following their convictions in the face of opposition from church and Presbytery members. They challenge me by the ways Evangelism and Social Justice is wed together in their work rather than compartmentalized as typically happens in our country. They have much to teach us about changing people's lives not just saving their souls. What might God have in mind for us and our Colombian Brothers/Sisters in Christ?

Is God calling Fairmont members to develop a partnership with a sister church experiencing similar struggles? We have students in similar situations in our own community, how are we to balance mission at home and abroad?

I do not have the answers to these questions. I do know I am going to ask asking the questions, however. Only prayerful discernment and time will tell as God leads us. I ask that you, and I continue to listen for God's direction. In the meantime, "let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.