

RUN WITH PERSEVERANCE

Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29-12:2

On Tuesday of last week, Sue Langfitt, Gene Moore and I attended the 111th meeting of Salem Presbytery at First Presbyterian Church of Boone. Travel that morning was hampered by deep fog and bursts of heavy rain. Conditions were treacherous enough to cause me to consider remaining in the safety of my home, but I persevered, at times not able to see beyond the hood of my own car. In the dense fog I missed the turn that would take me to the church, winding up in the University/downtown area of Boone instead. Again, I persevered, finding my way to the beautiful new facility 15 minutes after opening worship began. I am so very glad that I did not remain at home, or turn around in mid journey! Had I given in to that temptation I would have missed so much!

Though I walked in after Rev. Jeff Smith had begun the sermon, I am so glad I was able to hear his challenge to Members of Salem Presbytery to persevere, to move beyond our differences and to accept one another as we are – beloved children of God, created in God's very image – and to work together to build the Kingdom of God on this earth as we build bridges that foster peace and reconciliation in our presbytery and throughout the world.

Today's passage from Hebrews tells the early Christians: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us set 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 perfected 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. "

It is not easy being a Christian today. Neighbors and friends are eager to fault us for our beliefs. Family members ask how we could continue to believe the Gospel Message. Some even try to shame us for believing in "fairy tales". Sports and recreation clamor for our attention and our time. Mainline churches struggle to keep the doors open. Even here, at Thomasville FPC, we struggle to find the "magic formula" that will entice people to come worship, and find the joy we experience in Jesus Christ.

It is lonely and unpopular to be a Christian. However, we are not alone. The members of the early church also struggled with discouragement. What has helped God's people throughout the ages deal with this discouragement is the knowledge that we are not alone. We follow in the footsteps of people, from the earliest biblical times, who were unsure of the future. We follow in the footsteps of saints who along the way chose to trust God anyway. We follow a God who does not abandon us in times of trouble. We follow Jesus Christ who endured pain and disgrace, while focused solely on the joy that would be his through God. Even as we witness great injustices today that has challenged our country and the world for generations, we know that others have traveled this road before us and that God was with them and God continues to be with us.

We, like those who have gone before us, have faith that sees us through the hard times. However, faith, in this passage, seems a bit ambiguous. Faith may lead, on the one hand, to amazing results, such as the crossing of the Red Sea and the fall of Jericho, but it may point, on the other hand, simply to courageous endurance of torture and persecution as in the case of Jesus. So, is it any

wonder that we, today, profess to be people of faith, while refusing to address the injustices that surround us? Our apathy to the "isms" of this world is not what Jesus would have us respond.

Sometimes it takes a long time for people to see the error of their ways and correct the wrongs – even 123 years! On September 22, 1997, the US Army commissioned West Point's first black cadet – 123 years after expelling him! James Webster Smith, a former slave, entered the US Military Academy in 1879. For the next 4 years he was harassed for the color of his skin. White students refused to talk to him. He was forced to eat alone, and others poured slop on him. Twice he was court-martialed. He had to repeat a year. Finally the academy expelled him after his junior year for failing an exam. Smith died of tuberculosis at age 26. That seemingly was the sad final note for a life scarred by injustice.

But 123 years later the army endeavored to some degree to right this terrible wrong. Because he had no known descendants, the commissioning certificate and gold second lieutenant's bars of James Webster Smith were presented to South Carolina State University. In the end a courageous man finally received what was due him.

The treatment of James Webster Smith was WRONG! Christian ethics should demand that we use our imaginations and our focus on Jesus as we run with perseverance to correct such wrongs – but even more than correcting a wrong of 123 years – following Jesus demands, we should never allow such wrongs happen again.

The mention of "sin" in 12:1 calls us to reflect upon our definition of sin. There is a tendency to think of sin as a list of acts or deeds that cause trouble and for which one is worthy of blame. Too often we run through the list of arrogance, presumption, pride, or the will to dominate as sin, failing to recognize the more passive forms – despair, apathy, servility – the refusal to accept our responsibility to God and neighbor and to God's future. We easily accommodate ourselves to the structures and institutions of power and privilege. We volunteer to work in the soup kitchens, or gladly fill a child's wagon with canned food items to assist those living in poverty, but we draw the line at the idea of real structural change, when we realize just how hard it is to effect change in our neighborhood, and how much it would really cost us to advocate for structural change in society. It is hard being a Christ-follower when the world around us wants to maintain the cultural, financial, gender, race, and age divides. But apathy and refusal to accept our responsibility to God and to neighbor is a SIN. Sins of OMISSION are as real as sins of CO-mission.

This passage calls us to persevere in running the race called life. This passage calls us to transform the world in which we live as we focus on Jesus. With our eyes on Jesus, we do not concentrate on the pain and suffering, but are reminded of the joy that is ours in the distance. You see, joy will be ours only after we risk it all to "do what Jesus would do." Ferguson, Charleston, Dallas, Orlando, and others demand that Christians speak up and out for the victims, condemning violence as the answer to anything. As Jesus followers we are called to be the voice of peace echoing throughout our land, giving voice to those who have been silenced.

As Jesus was not consumed by the pain of the cross, turning his eyes to the heavens, focused on God, so we are to look to Jesus Christ, staying in tune with what is going on around us and not ignoring the pain our brothers and sisters are experiencing. As Christ looked to heaven, we look to Christ. Trusting in God is the best approach for people of every time and place. For only through faith can we find real joy as we hold out for the ultimate promise.

Later in the meeting of Salem Presbytery, The Commission on Peace and Justice declared the focus for 2017 to be Racism and discrimination. They urge every church in Salem Presbytery to be intentional in our study and practices to talk openly about the injustices of our country and recent events that continue to perpetuate racial conflicts and prejudice. Gene Moore and I had previously determined that we would lead a study in the adult SS class of the book by Will Willimon, titled, *Fear of the Other: No Fear in Love*. I urge each of you to come, join in the study, learn all you can, and let us....FPC Thomasville...be bridge builders as we run with perseverance the race that is before us. Amen.