

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 . . . *Hebrews 12:1*

### **Imperfectly Faithful**

Yesterday I preached on the lectionary passage that precedes and includes this very beloved passage from Hebrews. In chapter 11, many of these witnesses are mentioned by name, including Gideon, Barak, Samson, and Jephthah. These names raise memories of the comical way God reduced Gideon's army to a few hundred folks selected for their questionable judgment; of Barak the military commander who wouldn't go into battle unless Deborah the woman judge went with him; Samson of superhuman strength who didn't always show superhuman wisdom; and what can we say about Jephthah, whose unfortunate oath to God led him to practice child sacrifice? The passage also mentioned Rahab, the prostitute who enabled the entry into Canaan, and those who know the Bible well would remember that Jephthah's mother was a prostitute. These folks might not be welcomed into many churches today, yet they are listed among the most faithful of God's people.

It's really quite remarkable how many of the people in the Bible are characterized in such human terms, veering from stock models of the "hero." Some of our spiritual ancestors were quirky, most were quite imperfect. Even the great ones, like King David or the apostle Paul, made serious mistakes or suffered from persistent weaknesses. It's telling that reports of their sins and idiosyncrasies would be retained even through the development of the biblical canon. Clearly, God and the scriptural editors wanted to remind us that the great work of God's people is not initiated or enabled by their prowess, but God working through even the most imperfect individuals. In the story of Gideon's army, God made the point that the reduced number (and competence) of the members of the army would prove God's glory, because it was clear that these humans would not be capable of doing such great things on their own.

This is an important lesson for us who are recovering or full-blown perfectionists. So much of ministry is constrained because we dare not risk making a mistake or trying something beyond our capabilities, because church folk love to correct each other or seek out who is at fault for any misstep in the life of the church. For myself, I know it is a burden of people working with me that I can be as picky as anyone—and yet I am aware of many times dealing with a problem, when I have to get people to stop focusing on who's at fault in order to determine what we need to do to move forward. So many times the thing that seems a failure or disappointment turns out to be the beginning of a major new ministry, you'd think we can face these bends in the road with more faith and less condemnation.

Maybe I am saying this because I've noticed that I'm starting to suffer from serious "short-timers syndrome." My last presbytery meeting as executive is three months away, and I have tried to approach work as an interim: not starting new initiatives that someone else will have to implement, and worrying about what issues will still be unresolved by the time I retire. So sometimes I look ahead to retired life (Should I take up ceramics? I'll have time to help rebuild Altadena!), sometimes I'm stressed and testy about things that will not be fully resolved by the time I leave, and much of the time I'm not able to focus on the task at hand. So I ask your forgiveness now, if you find me to be more irritable or befuddled than usual. And this is *before* I begin the regimen of tamoxifen on Labor Day, when according to the oncologist I might become "snippy." (Yes I started laughing when she said that—and so does everyone else when I tell them!)

When I made my first major mistake while in seminary, I thought it was a sign that I should not be in ministry. Instead, I heard a voice saying “Don’t think this is an excuse to give up on ministry!” As I look ahead to ending my ministry with San Gabriel Presbytery, I will try to be productive until it’s time for me to go. And I continue to be grateful for your grace when I mess up!

Blessings,

*Wendy*