

Eugene Peterson says, "This world is no friend to grace. A person who makes a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior does not find a crowd immediately forming to applaud the decision or old friends spontaneously gathering around to offer congratulations and counsel. Ordinarily there is nothing directly hostile, but an accumulation of puzzled disapproval and agnostic indifference constitutes, nevertheless, surprisingly formidable opposition."

He also says, "We know that the spiritual atmosphere in which we live erodes faith, dissipates hope and corrupts love, but it is hard to put our finger on what is wrong."

He also says, "One aspect of *world* that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once." (15-16, Peterson)

We all face the challenge of remaining or continuing in the particular work which is ours, a work we consider God has given us to do.

This morning, the writer of the Hebrew letter encourages Christians who are ready to give up their life of faith and good works. A significant part of the encouragement is this roll call of faith, people through the story of the Bible who have trusted God.

Consider with me then, this great word of exhortation which calls all believers to continue, to try, to remain, to keep at it, to keep going, to keep doing what God calls us to do in Jesus Christ. All of us come here with some task that is true to our well-being. We are being asked to hold on. We are being asked to stay true.

We are to persevere for several reasons.

First of all, remember this roll call of faith. If you seek to apply your faith in the life you are living, you are part of a great and glorious history of people whose life and example should be recalled. Remember this roll call of faith.

One scholar says, what is significant about this passage "is the fact that faith seems strangely ambiguous. It may lead on 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." While there does seem to be an over-emphasis on military victories, there is something to faith. "The promise is not simply an extension of the present, based on what seems possible at the moment. It is a new creation that invades our present reality and makes the impossible possible." (353-354, Shelley)

So, the author takes you and me down a hall way of portraits. It includes not only the celebrities Abraham, Moses and others. It includes people who have figured significantly in your own faith development. Perhaps your parents are there. There may be some coaches or teachers. We are walking down this hallway and the writer is saying to you and me, "Do you remember how important she was in getting your attention?" "Do you remember this woman; she was a friend of yours in the youth group; you thought she was crazy at first, but you came to realize how much she means to your own faith development today?" "Do you remember this guy? One of the best friends you ever had in the world who knew what he believed and why? Do you remember him? Do you remember this set of friends who were part of that study you had; do you remember them?"

There are people in your life and mine who have made a difference. To persevere it is important we remember we are part of their work and their influence. Are we going to give up what they started? Don't do that! You have been part of something for greater than yourself. Remember these people who have been important to you. They want you to keep trying. Remember them and this roll call of faith.

Secondly, let go of the things that are pulling you away from your good work. There are so many influences going on all around us. It is hard to live alone and remain steadfast. We think we can live

secret lives and we cannot. We need someone reminding us of “every weight and the sin that clings so closely.”

Fortunately, we are not given here a list of sins that pull us away from the life, the work, the task in which we are persevering. The trouble is identified as “weight and the sin that clings.” There are behaviors. There are thoughts and ideas. There are ways of acting that take us away from the central task God has given us. The exhortation is to let go of these things. Let them go. Lay them aside.

In recent decades, some have challenged the church to “consider the dialectical opposite of presumption and arrogance also as sin. Thus sin takes on the more ‘passive’ form of despair, apathy, servility, the refusal to accept my responsibility to God and neighbor and to God’s future.” (356, Shelley)

There are certain ways of living, there are choices that are clearly wrong. Sometimes we believe we can practice these and do what is right and the same time. The clear insight here is that we cannot behave a certain way. The insight is that we know we are in the wrong. These words, the Living Word calls us to let this go, lay aside every weight and the sin that” seems not to go away. It can go away. By the grace of God, we have the ability to put it down, set it aside, walk away from it. Let go of the things that are pulling us away from God’s good work.

Finally, keep your eyes on Jesus Christ who is building you into a new person. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says he is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus is the one who is taking us where we have never been before. He is helping us to do things we have never done before in our lives. He is our pioneer. He is the coach, the mentor, the teacher, the trainer who is shaping us in ways we may never have considered.

This week in one of our Vision and Discernment groups we were remembering Paul’s words to the church in Corinth. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.” (2 Corinthians 5:17) This sounds as if there is something painless. It sounds as if there is no struggle at all. If we find ourselves in the place where we need an invitation to persevere, we know there is a struggle. To affect the right outcome, we keep our eyes on Jesus Christ. We remember he is working in us for good leading us and shaping us in ways that are good for us and for others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, who wrote The Cost of Discipleship has been quoted to often. He wrote, “When Christ calls a person, he bids him (or her) to come and die.” Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who grew up in younger years believing that the Sermon on the Mount calls Christians to shun military service, not to take up arms against another. After struggling for so long, after wrestling with what God wanted of him, he decided he had to get involved in an effort to take away the life of Adolf Hitler. His involvement with that failed plot was central in his being arrested and eventually hanged. He has become a Christian martyr in the twentieth century. He has been seen as someone who teaches us that Christ is our pioneer and perfecter. Christ lives with us in our hearts if we have responded to his claims and he teaches us and shapes us. Jesus Christ leads us to give ourselves away in love and joy to God’s glory. There may not be a crowd applauding what we try to do with our lives as we follow Jesus Christ. If we keep our eyes on him, we will persevere and we will reflect the grace and glory of One who died that we might live.

Today, we are being called to persevere: to remember this roll call of faith, to let go of things pulling us away from God’s good work, to keep our eyes on Jesus Christ who is helping us realize a new creation.

God of all Strength and Encouragement, enable us to persevere in doing your will. Enable us to remember these who have gone before us, these who have shaped our lives with their instruction and their living. Grant us the grace and the will to let go of those sins and shortcomings that keep us from the task that is ours. Let us always see Jesus Christ. Let us see him as our Pioneer and our Perfecter. Let us see him as our great Teacher showing us

what we are to do. We thank you this day for his presence. Let us all respond to him now as we devote ourselves to the tasks you are giving us...as we pray Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...