

Running the Race

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND CARMEN PERRY

BASED ON HEBREWS 11:29 – 12:2

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“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)

This past February 80 countries from around the world competed in the twenty-first Olympic Games. Throughout the Olympic Games, the newscasters from NBC’s Today show were in Vancouver, and they reported on various aspects of the Olympics. On one particular show, one of the newscasters sat down with some figure skating champions for tea. Among the figure skaters profiled was Dorothy Hamill, who won a gold medal in women’s figure skating in 1976. Following her win at the Olympics, people in the United States began to imitate Dorothy Hamill. Women and young girls began to wear their haircut short. Some parents bought their children a Dorothy Hamill doll. On the Today show, Kristi Yamaguchi, another Olympic gold medalist figure skater, talked about how she would take her Dorothy Hamill doll to the skating rink when she practiced. Today, Dorothy Hamill acts as a mentor to the current U.S. women’s figure skating champion, Rachael Flatt.

In our own country, mentoring has become one of the more popular volunteer activities. An article put out by Cornell University reported that mentoring positively influences the lives of our youth. Youth who had mentors, according to this report, improved their grades and their relationships with their families. Consequently, these children had less tardies and absences, and children who had mentors got into less trouble in and outside of school. As people, we are social creatures. It is natural for us to look to others for role models. Frequently, though, we find ourselves inundated with more negative and less positive role models. The advertising business thrives on our human need for role models. They create ads that suggest if we use this product or that product, and then we will live the happy, carefree lives that the actors in commercials seem to enjoy. Today, it seems like it is more and more difficult to find quality mentors and good role models to follow. Yet, if we look at our New Testament lesson this morning, we find that we are not the only ones who have been in need of positive role models.

Once again, we are looking at a community of Christians that lived in the first century. You might recall that this particular community of Christians was enduring persecutions. This community began to doubt God and God's promises. The author of Hebrews writes a sermon for this community. Last week, we learned about how the author of Hebrews used the example of Abraham to encourage this community of Christians to embody characteristics that would demonstrate their faith to their peers.

In this morning's text, the author of Hebrews begins by listing more examples of God's faithful followers. As I looked at this list of people, I was reminded of something I heard when I visited a Jewish temple. The rabbi at the temple said that the Torah was made of black ink and white ink. The black ink is the words that you read on the scroll. The white ink is the space in between the black ink. The white ink is the space where people sit, discuss, and study the black ink. As I looked at what the black ink on the pages of my Bible said about the faithful followers of God, I began to wonder, "What do these words *not* say?" Then, it hit me. These followers of God were faithful, but they were not faultless.

Take, for example, Rahab. The author of Hebrews describes Rahab as a prostitute (Hebrews 11:31, [NRSV]). Yet, despite her profession and reputation, Rahab risked danger and hid spies in her home. What about Gideon? Sure, Gideon led a small army to victory, but not before he tested God—twice (Judges 6:36-38). How about David? David, whose seed was promised as the future, David who wrote psalms of praise to God, is the same David who slept with his general's wife and then had the general killed. As we look at this list of people in Hebrews, we can see what made them faithful. God made these people faithful. When Rahab, Gideon, David and the others failed, God's steadfast love remained. Through God's grace and God's forgiveness, these and all the other witnesses listed were made whole. It is God who carried these witnesses through their journey. It is God, through his son Jesus, who provided sustenance for the community of Christians addressed in Hebrews, and the same God strengthens us.

"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). We are heirs of God's promises. Like the faithful witnesses who have come before us and who now sit among us, we are not faultless. We are called, and we must resist the temptation to use our faults as excuses not to serve. Before I entered seminary, I could not talk in public without crying. Can you imagine? God called me into ministry, to preach and to teach, and as soon as I would open my mouth I would start crying. My family, friends, and classmates called it the gift of tears. I called it

embarrassing. Slowly but surely, I began to put things into perspective. Now, before I preach or before I teach, I pray. I pray for God to use all of me, including my tears as God wills.

The only person who can prevent us from running the race is our self. We are often our hardest critics. We are not perfect, but we are perfectly made and perfectly loved, and as a community of faith we are called to go forth, to serve our church and our community so that others may come to experience God's love. Take heart! We are not alone. As an affirmation of our faith and of our commitment, I invite you to stand now and say with me the creed found on page 883 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*.

We are not alone, we live in God's world.

We believe in God:

Who has created and is creating,
Who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
To reconcile and make new,
Who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the church:

To celebrate God's presence,
To love and serve others,
To seek justice and resist evil,
To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
Our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.