

Series: Faith in Action
Part III: Fixing Our Eyes
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This morning as we finish up our faith in action stewardship sermon series, we are once again looking at this great passage from the book of Hebrews about persevering and running the race marked out for us. But I want to begin with a true story I heard a few years back told by a parent attending his daughter's school track meet. He writes:

One of the most interesting things about kids' sporting events is the parents' reaction to their children. I attended my daughter's track meet. On the fourth and final lap of the boys' mile run, everyone was clumped together except for the two front-runners who were leading the pack by a few yards. As the runners came toward the finish line, the crowd began cheering wildly. Just then, I happened to look back, and there, hopelessly last, was a short, portly kid who never should have walked a mile, let alone run one. His entire body was wobbling toward the finish line, and his bright red face was twisted in the kind of pain that made me wonder if death was near. Suddenly, I was brushed by a frantic parent who was leaping down the bleachers to the railing surrounding the track. It was obviously the poor boy's mother. She then yelled at the top of her lungs, "Johnny, RUN FASTER!" I will never forget that moment and the look of hopelessness on Johnny's face. He had to be thinking, "Run faster? Run faster? What am I? An idiot? What do you think the problem is here – I just forgot to run faster? I'm running as fast as I can!" (As told by Mike Yaconelli in *Messy Spirituality*.)

Have you ever felt that way? You are running as fast as you can just trying to keep up, and yet compared to everyone else, you just keep falling farther and farther behind? I know I have – both in actual races when I was younger and in the race of life. And especially during this pandemic, we all may feel like we are running as fast as we can, just trying to keep up. When it comes to running the race of faith "marked out for each of us as the book of Hebrews describes it, we may also feel that way. So, how do we "keep on keeping on" and "not grow weary or lose heart?" These words from the writer of Hebrews may help with that:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV)

Soren Kierkegaard tells the story of a novice sailor who was instructed by the captain to take the helm of the ship at night. The captain said, "Just keep your eyes focused on the North star." But late into the night, the young sailor fell asleep. When he woke up, he realized that he had lost his

bearings. So, he called out to the captain and asked for new directions -- saying that they had passed the North star. (As told by Craig Barnes)

So, why fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith – as the passage from the Book of Hebrews has just told us? Haven't we passed that “North star?” Isn't there something new and more recent or more relevant for us to fix our eyes on? In short -- no! If we want to run the race of faith and persevere to the finish, and if we want to find “the joy set before” us so that we will “not grow weary and lose heart” -- then as the old hymn reminds us, we need to *turn our eyes upon Jesus*. We need to *fix* our eyes on Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

When we think about our passage from Hebrews, the scene is once again a race in the coliseum. We can imagine what that race might look like today -- so, I want to invite you to imagine that you are in the race of life to find joy, and perhaps the source of that joy. Envision yourself down on the track with the other runners. The race is about to start. You are surrounded by the spectators - “the great cloud of witnesses” from the “Faith Hall of Fame” who are there and they have been where you are before. They know what it is like to be on the track of life – the anxiety, the excitement, and the endurance it will take to do well in this race. And they are not critical of you. Instead they are cheering you on saying, “You can do it!”

Imagine also that Jesus is also there with you in the crowd of runners. And because this is a distance race, you all start in a group. As the race is about to begin, Jesus looks at you in the eyes and says this: “Stay focused on me. Fix your eyes on me. Stay with me and you'll get through this.” So, the race starts and you are off! You look for Jesus and try to stay with him as you jostle through the runners.

After a while, you start to find your pace. You know this is going to be a long race. Soon someone starts to pass you on the right and you wonder if you should speed up and run as fast as they are, so you speed up and get out in front of most of the pack. But then you look back and see everybody else lagging behind. So you wonder if maybe you should slow down, so you decide to decrease your pace. But then it dawns on you, “Hey, where's Jesus?” You realize you have already stopped doing the one thing he told you to do – keep focused on him. So, you search the pack, find Jesus, and get back next to him.

Soon things are going pretty well, so you start to look around. You notice the crowds and how they are all cheering. And they are cheering for you! So you smile. You take it all in. You start waving to the crowd, thinking – *Hi! Yes, it's me; I'm pretty good at this, aren't I?* But then you suddenly realize you are running off the track and Jesus is somewhere up ahead of you. Those spectators in the crowd – the witnesses from the “Faith Hall of Fame” are looking at you now elbowing each other and saying, “Yep – been there, done that! He took his eyes off Jesus and started waving to the crowd. Rookie mistake.” Then one yells out at you, “Hey, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus!” So, you look around to find Jesus once again, learning from your mistake.

But, we all do those same kinds of things, don't we? In the race of our lives, we sometimes start comparing ourselves to others -- “the competition” -- to see how we are doing. We compare our houses, our income, our kids, our jobs, our status, our bodies, our social standing – you name it. We start running as hard as we can to keep up or to be like someone else, but if we try that we

soon find out that it doesn't lead to joy. It doesn't even lead to happiness. It just leads to a sense of exhaustion and a lack of meaning in life.

Or, when things *do* go well in life and we are blessed, rather than thanking God for those blessings, keeping our focus on Jesus, and discovering how we are blessed to be a blessing to others -- we just start waving to the crowd. *Hey, look at me! Look at how happy I am and how well I am doing. I am pretty good, aren't I? Don't you wish you could be like me?* But that doesn't lead to joy or happiness either, because there is always someone whom we discover is "more blessed" than we are, so we are always trying to "play catch up." But, if we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our sights set on joy, we *can* run and even finish the race God has put before us.

Remember that our race is not anyone else's race – or vice versa. I believe each one of us was put here by God to run our unique race. Trying to keep up or run someone else's race will not lead to happiness, joy, or purpose in life. But, if we will trust God and fix our eyes on Jesus, we can run the race of our lives that will lead beyond happiness to joy – even when, not *if* -- even *when* we face the hard times like the storms of life we are going through now. Through the grace of God, we are each given the capacity to persevere and endure to the end -- as the writer of Hebrews says, "so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:3b, NIV)

Author Eugene Peterson says we respond to being blessed by first blessing God. He notes that blessing God is a command and not an option. For example, in Psalm 134 it begins, "Come, bless GOD, all you servants of GOD!" Now, in response to a command like this to bless God, someone may say, "But I don't feel like it. And I won't be a hypocrite. I can't bless God if I don't feel like blessing God. It wouldn't be honest." When it comes to that line of reasoning, Peterson says this: "Act your gratitude; pantomime your thanks; you will become like what you do. Many think that the only way to change your behavior is to first change your feelings. . . . But there is older wisdom that puts it differently: by changing our behavior we can change our feelings." (*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*: 194-195) Maybe that's what it means to put our faith in action – change what we are doing *first* and then the feelings will follow.

So, when it comes to blessing God, saying, "I don't feel like it" or "When I feel like it, then I will do it" – that doesn't get us to where we want to end up, *if* blessing and joy are our ultimate goals. When it comes to blessing God, or to being a blessing to others, don't wait until you feel like it – do it anyway! *Do it anyway! Act your faith.* The more you do it, the better you become at doing it. The more we bless God and others with our actions, the more we experience joy. That's because we were each created in the image of God to experience joy through our giving. And that's why we are blessed – in order to be a blessing to others. One of the best ways to do that is through our giving.

When it comes to giving, I have heard some other perspectives over the years on how our giving relates to how we *feel* about giving. C.S. Lewis said this:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc, is up to the standard common among those with the same

income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

Lewis seems to be saying that that as Christians, we should *give until it hurts*, or at least involves some sacrifice that we *feel*. From his perspective, feeling uncomfortable about what our giving costs us is actually a *good* indicator that we are doing the right thing. Maybe it is like stretching our muscles when getting ready to exercise. During your stretch, if you don't feel some discomfort in what you are doing, you are probably not stretching enough. In the same way our giving should always "stretch" us.

Ted Bailey was an elder at a church I once served. Ted was also the primary fundraiser for one of the larger hospitals in Atlanta. He had even taught fundraising for not-for-profits at the college level and wrote a textbook on how to do it. Ted knew something about giving. One Sunday morning in that church, he stood up in worship and challenged the congregation by saying this: "Give until it feels *good*." In contrast to C.S. Lewis, Ted believed that you needed to push *beyond* the discomfort of giving until it finally feels good again! If giving doesn't yet feel good, then it is because we are not yet giving enough away to make a difference in the lives of others.

On this Kirkin' of the Tartans Sunday we celebrate our Presbyterian heritage. Our history is filled with stories of people who *gave* and made sacrifices, sometimes of their lives -- so that we could be here today, worshipping God and making a difference in the lives of others. They are people like Patrick Hamilton, the first protestant martyr who preached the faith in Scotland, which led to his arrest and execution. Or, George Wishart, who preached fiery, hour-long sermons in the language of the people that they could understand. He created a popular songbook of hymns to energize congregational singing. He, too, was arrested and later killed. There was Andrew Melville, sometimes called the "Architect of the New Church" in Scotland. He helped create the first document to lay out the key tenets of how we should organize ourselves as Presbyterian Christians. He was imprisoned for four years in the Tower of London and later exiled to France. There was also James Stewart who used his position of influence with Mary Queen of Scots, even though it was very risky. He was "determined to set Scotland on a course of peace and unity" (J. Stephen Lang, *Dates with Destiny*, Revell, 1990) They gave – often to the point of giving their lives.

So, what better day than today, when we remember our Presbyterian heritage and those who have gone before us giving generously, some even in the point of giving their lives so that we could be here today worshipping God -- what better day to make our pledge to give generously of what God has first given to each one of us to do God's work through Johns Creek Presbyterian Church? As we've said before, prior to the pandemic, we were touching the lives of 2,300 individuals each week during the school year on the campus of this church through our ministries and our ministry partners. We want to continue making a difference in the lives of others. I believe that together through our giving and our support we can do that in 2021!

This past week, I was reading the story of the Good Samaritan for my devotion one morning. The idea of being a "Good Samaritan" is now a part of our culture, when we help someone in need . We even have laws about being a Good Samaritan. The story of the Good Samaritan is

told by Jesus when someone asked Jesus about what we might describe as the essence of *faith in action*. What is faith in action? Jesus says it is loving God and loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

Today as we worship God, we are expressing that love of God. And loving our neighbor can be done in many ways using our time, our talents, and our treasure or our financial resources. All three are important and needed. But as I reread the story of the Good Samaritan, after the Samaritan had helped the Jewish man left for dead by the roadside who had been attacked by robbers, the Good Samaritan took him to the nearest Inn and he gave the innkeeper two silver coins to cover the expenses of the man. He also promised to come back and pay for anything else necessary to care for him. In other words, he gave not only of his time and talents, but of his treasure.

Friends, Jesus gave his life to save us and the whole world. So, what will we give to love our neighbor in response to God's love for each of us?

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.