



# DAILY FAITH PRACTICES

## Sunday, August 14-20 (C) – Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Focus: *The Great Crowd of Witnesses*

### word of life

**“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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ....”** Hebrews 12:1-2 (NRSV)

Read Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Our readings for today continue the parade of the heroes of faith begun in the previous verses of chapter 11. Some names are familiar and expected in this litany of people who lived by faith – Moses and his life of faith, the people of Israel who trusted in God and crossed the Red Sea dry-shod, as well as Joshua and the battle of Jericho where the walls come tumbling down. There is even a surprise in the litany of names: Rahab, the prostitute, who welcomed the spies of Israel prior to the fall of Jericho. Faithfulness is witnessed in the lives of great men and women, and it is evidenced even in unexpected people.

1. *Read over the list of names in Hebrews 11:32-34. What do you know about them?*
2. *Who are some unlikely “heroes of the faith” in your life?*

The word in Greek for *witness* is *martyria*, from which is derived *martyr*. The author of Hebrews continues to hold up examples of faithfulness of the heroes of the past by naming some of the suffering, torment, and persecution they endured. (See Hebrews 11:35-38.) These graphic experiences point to the faithfulness of those who endured hardship and serve as examples for the believer.

3. *Whom do you think suffers for the faith today?*
4. *How can their experiences strengthen our faith?*

After the litany of chapter 11, the letter to the Hebrews reaches a summary conclusion. “Therefore ...” The case for faithfulness has been made. The author enlists the strongest of words to bring the message home. “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, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ....” (Hebrews 12:1-2 NRSV)

Note the imagery: the journey of faith is not a sprint to the finish line, but it is rather a marathon to be run with perseverance. It requires us to be lean, to discard all the things that weigh us down and inhibit our running. The focal point of the race – the goal to which we strive – is Jesus. He ran the race before us (the pioneer of our faith). He ran it in absolute obedience to God’s will (the perfecter of our faith).

5. *Does the image of the life of faith as a race speak to you? Explain.*
6. *What does it mean to “look to Jesus” in the race?*

We do not run the race of faith alone. We are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses.” All the names included in the litany of heroes in chapter 11 – all the faithful people who have lived and died trusting in the promises of God – all are in the grandstand, cheering us on.

And ultimately, we have Jesus, who lived the life of faithfulness and obedience to God – the great high priest, the perfect sacrifice – “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.” (Hebrews 12:2)

7. *How might enduring the cross become a source of joy for Christ?*

## **word among us**

The church is nestled in a grove of oak trees. One has to drive off the main road through two different pastures and grazing cattle to find it. Behind the church building – behind the altar wall – is the church cemetery. Familiar names are engraved on its tombstones, forbearers of current member families, names of faithful, faith-filled people.

1. *Where have you seen a “country church” like the one described here?*
2. *Have you ever walked through an old cemetery? If so, what was it like to do so?*

The setting is pastoral and serene. It’s far from the busy crowds of the city, which is why the words of the pastor’s sermon that Sunday morning were so startling. “When we celebrate communion this Sunday, it is a crowded communion rail around which we gather.”

The people looked around. The words did not make any sense. The sanctuary was only half full, and there was plenty of room for everyone at the altar. The pastor continued: “Imagine in your mind’s eye the communion rail extending out beyond the walls of this church building and including all the graves of those buried in the cemetery. As we celebrate Holy Communion today, we are joined by the faithful followers of long ago. Their witness to the faith brought them through difficult days, and their faithfulness serves as a model and an example for us on our faith journey. Yes, it’s a crowded communion rail around which we gather this and every Sunday.”

3. *What point was the pastor emphasizing in his sermon?*
4. *When have you experienced a “crowded communion rail”?*

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...” (Hebrews 12:1 NRSV) We are supported and guided in our race of faith by the communion of saints who endured hardship, built churches, and passed the faith on. We look, as they looked, to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, to lead and guide us. We strive to live faithfully, just as our heroes of faith did.

5. *If you were writing your own litany of heroes of the faith, who would you include?*

## **faith practice in daily life**

### **Hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s Supper**

“And so, with angels and archangels, with the church on earth and all the company of heaven....” We hear these words proclaimed as the community of faith gathers in worship. “We believe in the communion of saints.” We say these words as we confess our faith.

Each Sunday, we are united with all the faithful of every place and time. As we hear God’s word and share in the Lord’s Supper, we are strengthened by the great cloud of witnesses for the journey of faith.

6. *Who do you hope and expect to be in that great cloud of witnesses?*
7. *What does it mean to you to have their support for the coming week?*

### **Prayer**

We give you thanks, gracious God, for the great cloud of witnesses, for those who taught us the faith and serve as examples in our journey of faith and life. Focus our eyes on Jesus to lead the way. Amen

## ***last word***

Make a list of your heroes of faith.  
Offer a prayer of thanks for them.

