

History in the Making  
Heb. 11:29-12:3  
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One of my favorite displays at the Reds Hall of Fame in Cincinnati is a life-size recreation of a homerun celebration from 1975, one of the years they won the World Series. The statue of each player is gold-plated and visitors can stand right in the midst of them. I love standing next to Pete Rose and Johnny Bench and Joe Morgan and George Foster, raising my hands and hollering and cheering until the security guard escorts me to the exit. Being in that display is like reliving the moment with those historic heroes.

That's the same feeling I get when I read today's passage. Chapter 11 of Hebrews reads like a Faith Hall of Fame, as the author recounts notable examples from Israel's past of people who boldly lived out their faith, even in the face of difficult circumstances. It was a word of encouragement that the readers of Hebrews needed to hear. They were a group of newly converted Christians who were facing serious persecution and were considering returning to Judaism or just giving up the faith all together. They were struggling to understand if what they believed about Jesus was actually true and worth the sacrifice. Wouldn't it be easier just to give up? So, the author lines up this litany of people who persevered through incredibly challenging times and yet kept their faith in Christ intact. The author is basically saying to the Hebrews, "If they could do it, you can do it."

It's an impressive list. Moses leading the people through the Red Sea. Gideon helping make the walls of Jericho fall. Rahab saving the life of Israelite spies. And the author says, "I really don't have time to tell you anymore," then goes on to list Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. He reminds them of people who conquered kingdoms and administered justice, who routed foreign armies and escaped the mouths of lions.

Then the author brings it down a notch, moving from the more famous examples to those whose fate was less desirable. Don't forget about those who were tortured, chained, and put in prison. They were stoned to death and impaled on poles and – my personal favorite – sawed in two, which sounds like an amateur magic act gone horribly wrong. And yet, through all of this, they never lost their faith.

This is quite an impressive Faith Hall of Fame. As you walk in, you see the gold-plated statues of Gideon and Barak. There is Moses' staff and David's crown and a lock from Samson's hair. In this other wing there are memorials to those who suffered for their faith. Look, there's a pile of stones and a centurion's sword, and here's the statue of the man who was sawn in two – and there are his legs!

And yet, if we look more closely at the plaques, we might be able to see the blemishes that tarnish each one. Heroes? Really? Abraham lied about being married to save his own skin – twice! Jacob swindled his brother twice and deliberately deceived his father. The almighty Moses was a stutterer with low self-esteem – oh, and a murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Gideon worshipped idols. Barak was blood-thirsty. Samson was the Dennis Rodman of his time, with a wild lifestyle and libido to match. David was an adulterer and murderer. Samuel was a complete failure as a father. The prophets? Don't even get me started on all their neuroses. Gold-plated heroes? More like rusted tin men. All of a sudden our extraordinary people of faith are looking quite... ordinary.

Ordinary. I was thinking of that word as I read through the list of people we have lost in the past year, people like Bill Burkhart and Phil Harlan and Joan Tozer. Each name represents someone who was a part of our church family, who participated and contributed to the life of the church, who helped make Crestwood what it is today. But there are no World Series champions on that list. No Nobel Prize winners. No one who rescued a bunch of slaves from Egypt or got sawn in two for their faith. In many ways, these saints are...well...ordinary.

And yet, each time Doris Hightower served as an Elder or Ben Buckley gave an offering or Libby Whalen participated in a Sunday School class, that was important, because the history of this church is made up of just those kinds of ordinary moments experienced by ordinary people. As we look back, we get a glimpse of the shoulders on which we are standing, the people who sacrificed and served so that this church could be here today, inviting and blessing and sending out.

I love what the Hebrews author says to encourage his readers to keep going: "Yet all of these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect." To truly capture the magnitude of what's being said here, let's read the translation of this verse in the Message. Think of this applying both to the heroes of faith in Ch. 11 and to the people who helped make Crestwood what it is today: "Not one of these people, even though their lives of faith were exemplary, got their hands on what was promised. God had a better plan for us: that their faith and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours."

That feels like a lot of pressure, right? The legacy of faith left by Henry Spencer and Jerry Reece and Nellie Stapleton is dependent upon us to carry it through. Can I be as faithful as the saints we named earlier? Hebrews says that as we combine our faith with the faith of those who have come before us, we are making history, we are writing the story of who Crestwood will be. That's an amazing responsibility with which God has entrusted us. Doesn't God know we're just ordinary people?

Can we really do it? I don't know about you, but it's a bit daunting to me to think that the faith of Abraham and Moses and all the Crestwood saints can only be made complete through me. Now, last time I checked, we haven't had any congregation members that were sawed in half. No one here has lived in a cave or hole in the ground, and unless you've raised children, you haven't been subjected to any cruel torture. So, I almost hesitate to ask: what do we have to offer these examples of faith? What can we ordinary people possibly do that will help bring them to their perfection?

I think it's pretty simple. We run our race. That's it. We run the race that's been set out for us. We lace 'em up, we take our place, and we put one foot in front of the other, no matter how shaky or unsure, trusting that God is making history with each step. I know, I know, easier said than done. That's why I love the fact that chapter 12 of Hebrews starts with a most important word: "Therefore." That implies that all that has been said previously has a bearing on what comes next. We are the living "Therefore." Because of all of the ways God has been at work here at Crestwood, because of all the people who have made this congregation what it is, "Therefore." Therefore, what?

"Therefore, because we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Whenever I read that passage I always think of the old Saturday Night Live skit that spoofed Wheaties cereal. John Belushi, not a small man, was shown in a track outfit winning

sprint after sprint. And then we see him at the breakfast table eating of bowl of his “secret training ingredient”: little chocolate donuts, the breakfast of champions. How often do we weigh ourselves down with the little chocolate donuts of life – the insecurities, the bad decisions, the feelings that we’re not good enough or faithful enough - that keep us from running our race?

We are not alone on this track. Hebrews reminds us there is a great cloud of witnesses cheering us on. It’s Moses and Abraham. It’s Jim Havens and Ty Warriner and Mildred Cox. It’s our own family members who have gone before us. They are all there, encouraging us to make history by doing the ordinary things of faith, creating space for God to continue working through us ordinary people here at Crestwood. So, we run our race.

That’s not easy. Sometimes my race feels more like a stumble than a swagger. Some days I feel like I’m stepping backwards in my faith, tripping over even the smallest hurdles. There are no shortcuts in this race. It’s not a 100-yard sprint. When I go for a run, I mentally prepare myself to strain, to sweat, to struggle. And that’s just bending over to put my shoes on. This race we’ve been called to run is life-long. We’re not called to be the fastest. We’re not called to beat someone else. We’re simply called to run, following the example of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who ran from Bethlehem to Nazareth to Galilee to Jerusalem, running to the cross, then to the grave, then OUT of the grave! Jesus fired the starting gun for us, those who’ve gone before set the example for us, so we run.

Where are we running? Well, that’s what we get to find out, isn’t it? The future is a bunch of blank pages, waiting for God and us to join together in writing the next chapter of Crestwood’s life. I don’t know the specifics, but I trust that chapter will be filled with moments of transformation and transcendence, moments when Crestwood will change lives and embody God’s kingdom here on earth. And what’s even more exciting is that there are people who aren’t even here yet who will one day say things like, “I found a home at Crestwood because some ordinary person welcomed me and made me feel like I belonged.”

We have work to do, Crestwood, because God is not finished with us. We will be called to welcome and serve and teach and learn in new ways. We’ll do those things on behalf of those who have gone before us, those who are cheering us on, and we’ll do it to honor the One who gave us life and faith and calls us to live it, no matter how imperfectly.

You are here for a reason. Maybe you were born into Crestwood, maybe someone invited you, maybe you stumbled across this church on your journey of faith. However you got here, you are here, and we can make history together in serving and loving God. Because next week, someone new is going to come here, looking for welcome and acceptance and even a glimpse of God’s love. And maybe, just maybe, that person will say down the road, “I’m here because someone took the time to make me feel like I belong.” We have work to do, Crestwood. We have another chapter to write. God has given us the strength we need. Jesus has marked the path. Our saints are cheering us on. Let’s give this faith thing all we’ve got. Are we ready to make history? On your mark...get set...