9/14-15/19 By Faith Rev. Amy Haines

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 Confirmation

My least favorite part of junior high and high school gym class were the days in which we were made to run the mile. One mile. Around the track. One mile. Around the football practice field.

I was not then, and have never been, a runner. Finishing that mile in the time allowed by the gym teacher was a challenge, because I often walked more than I ran.

So imagine my amazement at my friend Lisa, who after we graduated from college began to train for the Honolulu Marathon to raise money for the Leukemia Society. Each day she would learn to run a bit longer, and push a bit harder, until she could complete the entire 26.2-mile marathon.

Although running is an individual sport, Lisa was not alone in her training. She was supported by trainers and other marathon runners who shared their stories of hitting the wall and continuing to put one foot in front of the other. She was supported by her family and the many who financially and prayerfully stood beside her. Lisa not only ran and completed the Honolulu Marathon her time was good enough to qualify her for the Boston Marathon, which she ran a few years later.

Whether you love to run, like to walk, or struggle to put one foot in front of the other, our scripture today invites us all to keep going in the race of faith, to keep on keeping on following Jesus. Like those who have gone before us, we, too, are called to live by faith as we follow Jesus.

In theory, following Jesus sounds as easy as running just one mile in gym class.

In reality, following Jesus is more like a marathon than a one-mile sprint.

So our Scripture today from the letter to the Hebrews includes words of encouragement, words written for the 1st century church that are still appropriate for us here today in the 21st century church. They are encouraging *this weekend/today* for our confirmands who close one chapter and begin a new chapter in their faith journeys, and they are encouraging for all of us, no matter where we find ourselves on our faith journeys.

Consider where you are on the journey of faith today. Whether you have faithfully followed Jesus for many decades, you are still struggling to accept Jesus’ grace in your own life, or you are somewhere in between, you are still traveling the journey of faith, somewhere between doubt and belief, somewhere between head and heart, somewhere between selfish desires and full surrender to God’s will and ways.

Our confirmands are not at the same place now that they were at the beginning of confirmation nine months ago. They have changed while on this chapter of their faith journey.

Since beginning together they have learned more about God, sin and salvation, and they have reflected on the importance of prayer, church, and spiritual gifts.

Since beginning together they have been reminded at the Believe Tour to claim their identity as God’s beloved and they have learned more about poverty and struggle from those they served on the mission trip. Since beginning together they have learned a little more about themselves, one another, and their mentors.

My prayer as they go forth from this weekend is that they will now *choose* to continue to learn and grow and serve together so that a year from now they are farther along the journey of faith. They have heard me say time and again confirmation is not a graduation, but rather a new beginning in faith.

I am certain they all still have some doubts and some questions, some hesitancy and some hope, for that is a part of all of our faith journeys. We study, we question, we pray, we go and we grow.

In those times when we struggle with faith, we can remember words such as these today in the letter to the Hebrews. Remember you are not alone on your Christian journey. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Be encouraged to continue on by faith. Like so many who have gone before us.

We are not the first to live by faith. Today’s Scripture begins halfway through Hebrews chapter 11, in the midst of what I like to call the Faith Hall of Fame. Faithful men and women are lifted up, some by name and some unnamed. Abraham and Moses, Rahab and Gideon, David and the prophets. Those who by faith conquered kingdoms, those who won strength out of weakness, even those stoned to death.

Hebrews reminds us of the flawed and faithful men and women who journeyed on the road of faith before us. Yes, they are remembered today for their faith in God, yet they are also remembered for the human failings which God worked with, around or in spite of. Abraham kept trying to rush God’s promise of an heir; Rahab was a prostitute; and some of the unnamed faithful were tortured for their faith. Several in the Faith Hall of Fame achieved victory; many more experienced struggle.

Not all of their lives were perfect. Not all of their prayers were answered the way they expected. And most of them were not spared the struggles of ordinary life.

Yet they all are honored, for they chose to live by faith. They trusted in God’s promises, even if they didn’t see those promises fulfilled in their lifetimes. Their faith, hope and trust in God influenced how they lived their lives.

Today, these Faith Hall of Famers call us to live by faith on our Christian journeys.

We are not perfect, and never will be, but like the many faithful named and unnamed men and women who have gone before us, we, too, can choose to live by faith.

Yet what is this faith we are called to live?

First, faith is belief. We believe there is a God who loves us. We believe God’s Son Jesus lived among us, died for our sins and was resurrected from the dead. We believe in the Holy Spirit as God’s presence with us now and we believe in the church as God’s people in this world.

Next, faith is trust. We trust God to be God. We trust God’s presence and promises. When life is out of control, we don’t give in to fear and worry, instead trusting God to be in control. We live into the verse that begins Hebrews chapter 11: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

When we believe and trust in God, faith becomes commitment. We commit to living out what we believe, commit to living for God, commit to God and God’s ways at the center of our lives.

We strengthen our commitment to God through holy habits that teach us how to love God and love our neighbor. This is where prayer and worship, study and service, compassion and care become important as part of our faith journeys.

This faith commitment then leads to faith as authentic living. How does what we believe influence all we think and say and do? How is our faith shown in our actions, in our love for friends, family, strangers and even enemies?

On the first night the confirmands met with their mentors, they pondered together this very same question, what is faith? They sought together to describe and define faith. They participated in trust drawings instead of a trust fall. And they pondered the words of James 2 that reminds us our faith must be seen in our actions.

Last weekend the confirmands had their final meeting with their mentors and discussed next steps. How do they continue to live by faith? How do they live out the vows professed this *weekend/day*, vows of faithful living that follows Jesus and is evidenced in prayers and presence, gifts, service and witness?

How do we live out these vows in our own lives?

As Hebrews reminds us, we are all called to keep on keeping on:

“So then, with endurance, let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us,

since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us.” (12.1 CEB)

“Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in.

Study how he did it.

Because he never lost sight of where he was headed

—that exhilarating finish in and with God—

he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever.

And now he’s *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. (12.2 MSG)

This race is our Christian journey. This race is the desire to be more like Jesus. This race is the mission to continue to pass on the good news of God that has been handed down to us. This is the same race that was laid out to the flawed yet faithful listed in the Faith Hall of Fame in Hebrews 11. This is the same race that was run by those who shared the faith with us as parents and mentors, Sunday School teachers and pastors. This is the same race that will be run by those to whom we share our faith in Jesus, and those who come after us.

Whether or not we like to literally run, we are all called to run the race of faith. But be warned—this race is much more a long distance marathon than the 100-meter dash.

This race will be ongoing for the rest of your life. This race may have moments of energy and enthusiasm, and moments when we struggle to put one foot in front of the other. Each mile in this race may be different—what we face and how we respond.

We are all called to run the race of faith, to keep on keeping on in our Christian journeys. The goal is not to win the race, but to finish the race. To live for Jesus until we meet Jesus face to face.

..During the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City a few thousand spectators remained in the Olympic Stadium waiting for the last of the men to finish the marathon run. By 7pm Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia had crossed the finish line looking as fresh as when he started out and all but one of the other runners had come in, each looking worse than the previous one, to be carted off to the first aid station.

As the fans were getting ready to leave they heard from the marathon gates the sound of sirens and police whistles. A lone runner, John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania was the last man to finish the race. His leg bloodied and bandaged from a fall, he winced visibly at every step as he hobbled the 400-meter circuit around the track. The spectators rose and applauded him as if he were the winner. Crossing the finish line he walked slowly off the field without even acknowledging the cheering crowd.

In view of his injury and having no chance to win a medal someone asked him why he bothered to finish the race. Why didn't he just quit? He replied: "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it."

Akhwari knew for whom he was running. He knew that it was important for all those people who were counting on him that he finish well. He didn't have to win; he didn't even have to place. But he knew for whom he was running and that kept him going when every logic of the world said quit.

--Ross Bartlett rockies.net, adapted

We are called to keep on keeping on, living by faith in all we say and do as witnesses to the good news of Jesus.

Yet don’t let anyone fool you—the Christian journey is not easy. Living by faith is hard.

While we may experience blessings, we may also experience hardship. While some will be receptive to the good news of Jesus in our lives, others may ridicule us for believing in a fairy tale. God’s ways are not our ways. Jesus calls us to reach out to people and in ways that will pull us out of our comfort zones.

Yet ask those sitting around you today about the gifts of a life of faith, and you will hear stories of strength and comfort, of passion and presence, of transformation and love, of hope and grace.

You will hear stories that remind us on our faith journeys, we are not alone.

God is with us. As we hold onto God, God will hold onto us. Jesus is not only our savior, but the pioneer of our faith. He has endured the journey to the cross, and through the cross to the empty tomb, so will guide us through all of our journeys and struggles and celebrations. And the Holy Spirit also offers us guidance and grace, strength and stamina, honesty and help.

God also gifts us our own cheering sections, like any good marathon runner, a great cloud of witnesses.

This cloud of witnesses includes those who have gone before us. Those listed in Hebrews and throughout the Scripture as our Faith Hall of Famers. The unnamed faithful who persevered in generation after generation. Ordinary men and women who offered us tangible grace.

As my son claims this race of faith *this weekend/today*, I imagine in his cheering section family members who have run this face before him--grandfathers and great-grandparents who faithfully followed Jesus in their own time and place.

This great cloud of witnesses also includes all of you present here for worship today. Whether you are here for your 50th year or for the first time, you are part of the great cloud of witnesses.

Look around you at those from whom you learn and gain support, at those for whom you pray for and serve alongside, at those who are your brothers and sisters in the family of God.

For the confirmands *this weekend/today*, this cloud includes parents and mentors who stand up front with them as well as family members in the pews. This cloud includes other senior high youth who will watch them from the back in the service, then continue to grow alongside.

This cloud includes the kids of our congregation who will know this is a special day for them, and will look up to them to see how they live and grow in faith.

We are all surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Those who cheer us on, who want us to keep going, who celebrate with us and mourn with us, and who will one day be present to welcome us into our heavenly home. Give thanks for their support, as they cheer you on!

..In a World Series game between the Yankees and the Dodgers in 1963, Sandy Koufax was pitching in Yankee Stadium before a record crowd of 69,000. Koufax was one strike-out short of breaking the record of 14 "strike-outs" in a World Series game. As he later said, it was not only a challenge, but an inspiration, for among the spectators that day was the "Champ," Carl Erskine, who held the record, up until that day. As Koufax broke the record, he knew that Erskine was pulling for him too!

-Thomas Lane Butts “Look Who is Watching” 11-1-98 day1.org adapted

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses encouraging us to run the race of faith.

We are also surrounded by other spectators, those who look up to us to learn from our faith, and those who are skeptical of faith so watch to see if we live what we say we believe.

Surrounded by observers and cheerleaders and skeptics,

Now is our time to go and live by faith.

Now is our time to go and live for Jesus.

Now is our time to grow more like Jesus each and every day.

Now is our time to run the race of faithful living.

May we go forth to love and serve and live by faith.

Let us pray.