

Faith for Real

Menno Mennonite Church
August 17, 2025

Purpose: To be reminded of the way that we live our faith together.

Message: The promise of faith is not an easy payoff, but rather the graciousness of God.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:29-12:2 (I will read); Luke 12:49-56 (please read)

Synopsis: We bring our own expectations to the work of faith. Listening to the recital of faithfulness is meant to be a moment of coaching but can sometimes feel like being compared to a task that can seem well beyond us. We look to faith as the means to accomplish that which we have to payout the real world benefits, but we also know that faith is always a challenge. This list is also quite earthy too: These people were faithful yes, but were also faith challenged at the same time. But it was the action of their faith that defines the race that is being run. Might we credit more our action of faith than feeling time and again the moments of faith.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2 (CEB)

²⁹ By faith they crossed the Red Sea as if they were on dry land, but when the Egyptians tried it, they were drowned.

³⁰ By faith Jericho's walls fell after the people marched around them for seven days.

³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute wasn't killed with the disobedient because she welcomed the spies in peace.

³² What more can I say? I would run out of time if I told you about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets.

³³ Through faith they conquered kingdoms, brought about justice, realized promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ put out raging fires, escaped from the edge of the sword, found strength in weakness, were mighty in war, and routed foreign armies.

³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured and refused to be released so they could gain a better resurrection.

³⁶ But others experienced public shame by being taunted and whipped; they were even put in chains and in prison.

³⁷ They were stoned to death, they were cut in two, and they died by being murdered with swords.

They went around wearing the skins of sheep and goats, needy, oppressed, and mistreated.

³⁸ The world didn't deserve them. They wandered around in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground.

³⁹ All these people didn't receive what was promised, though they were given approval for their faith.

⁴⁰ God provided something better for us so they wouldn't be made perfect without us.

12 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.

Let's throw off any extra baggage,
get rid of the sin that trips us up,
²and fix our eyes on Jesus,
faith's pioneer and perfecter.

He endured the cross, ignoring the shame,
for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him,
and sat down at the right side of God's throne.

These days we are overrun by GOATs. There is a common claim to being the greatest of all time—the best of the best as we walk down the aisle of the Hall of Fame. You name it there is a ranking for it. If it is a part of human endeavor and there is more than one person doing it, there can be a debate about who did it the best of the best, and likely a shady corner of social media facilitating the conversation-come-argument. Why? Well it is what we do. Comparative opinion offering and debate have always been there in one form or another. It is as good a way to pass the time as any. The primary difference now being that we have a far larger audience for the debate and the meme to go with it. Besides that—who doesn't like a GOAT?

It is easy to read this chapter in Hebrews in just such a way- a recitation of the best of the best. In some ways this is true, and some ways it is not. Reading chapter 11 of the letter—I would encourage you do just that—it is part of a whole larger structure that basically walks you all the way through biblical history and then some. It tells the story of faith and faithfulness realistically from the very beginning to the present, recounting the stories that so many of the faithful who came first from the Jewish part of the tradition might be prone to cite and know well. It was the pantheon of the greats, lining the way and forming the way for us to follow on the do likewise. Given a little time I bet we could add more than a few stanzas to the poem of those who have lived their lives by faith within the 125 years of Menno and have, in their turn, made us who we are now. We all have those examples of faith that we hold in our lives who played their parts in making us who we are. We likely have our list of those who we might in our turn call the greatest of all time. And rightly so.

The trouble is when you bring “greatness” into something as deeply human as faith, you are asking for trouble. Of course, we have those to whom we aspire to emulate where we saw the work of Christ and the way of grace clearly. We need the inspiration of those who we admire all the time to inspire us along the way. But when we start ranking ourselves we lose what is also most essentially true about faith: that our faithfulness and our ability to be people of faith is not something that is singularly up to us and our determination to accomplish the lofty goal of performance. It is easy to forget that the work of faith is also about God too. We love the regime of Christian practice to be about the stuff that we do—we go to church, we read devotions, we pray with fervor and regularity, we check ourselves and our habits and inclinations. All of this is good things that we should be doing—the more, the better. But of themselves they do not determine faith. They prepare the soil in which faith can grow and inspiration can be found.

They establish the inclination to listen, to hear, and to be moved when the calling of the Spirit does come and perhaps give us courage to answer the awkward call. But as the reading from Luke reminds us, following Christ has the strange side effect of always putting you outside that which is ordinary and making you somehow other. It can be easy to forget that as we find ourselves never having stepped outside a markedly Christian community. Sometimes it is a good weird, sometimes it is a rejecting weird, but being a sincere Christ follower will mark you. Faith is meant to be followed, is meant to be lived. That means it is of a far more durable character than simply what can be accomplished by putting the hall of fame on the wall behind a velvet rope.

So why then the recital of all the greats and what then are we supposed to do with them all? I think the basics are there—to give us an example to inspire ongoing following. Maybe, though, not always in the way that we might think.

We don't know precisely when Hebrews was written, but it is almost certain that the audience was 2nd generation Christians. That would be the generation who was actively catching the blame from Emperor Nero of Rome who was in need of scapegoats for the fire of AD 68 that decimated Rome, and found the Christians. This was when Rome got fed up with the low level rebellion of the Jewish members of their society and destroyed the temple in 70 AD and putting the people of Israel to flight, many members of *the way* among them. Beyond all this, these were people of the generation who were coming to grips with the fact that Jesus was not going to be coming back TOMORROW but was going to be something more complicated than all of that. They were tired. They were falling on hard times. They were suffering. Their passion had begun to wane. They did not always want to keep doing what they were doing because all that Jesus was talking about in the Gospel was coming true with a vengeance.

This is when the preacher has a lot of options open to them. It might be a time for a good scolding, rallying the troops for one more assault. Or to decry the weakness of the will, and demand greater commitment. Better still, it might be a good time for a new program, new marketing, and a fresh coat of paint. But none of this is for the Author of Hebrews. He responds not with recriminations, shame, or gimmicks. Instead he suggests that their theology might be a bit too shallow to give good root, their concept of Jesus a bit too warm and cuddly to offer protection. He admits that there is no hardcore evidentiary data for the truthfulness and effectiveness of Christian faith. Indeed to the contrary, what they see is primarily suffering—

their own and others-- as payment for their pains. In his long recitation in chapter 11 reads like the biblical hall of fame, but also includes those “who were commended for their faith, but still did not receive what was promised” but instead suffered for the allegiance they declared. What he is saying in the midst of all of this is that if we base our experience of Christianity solely on the immediate benefits realized, we are setting ourselves up for disappointment and disillusionment. The offer here is to have something else to aspire to than the world as they see at present in its all-too-unvarnished nature.

When you spend a great deal of your summer on the road you have plenty of time to think while you drive. As you may have heard we made the trip pulling our improvised cargo trailer-come-camper behind us. Spare a couple of dicey situations it really could not have gone better. I will admit, though, my trailer driving experience has been limited and that was a part of the trip I was often worried about. There were times when driving that I was profoundly uncomfortable doing what I had to get us down the road. Especially in tight spaces where I was convinced that what I had behind me could not help but snag on the big rig beside us causing us no end of heart ache. It was at that moment that I did what we all do—I started staring at the thing I had convinced myself was going to squash us, and not at the road where I wanted to go and needed to be. Refocusing myself on where I needed to go and needed to stay and not on where I did not want to be cleared the fear and got me through. It’s a trick of the brain that takes ongoing practice to maintain.

That is what we have here. Keep your eyes on the prize, Hebrews says. Not because these people had it figured out—actually far from it. When you look down the list you see the people of faith, yes, but also the people of pretty human and ordinary circumstances as well. For all the stories of faithfulness cited here we have an equally balanced diet of their human failings as well. We know this of the patriarchs—Abraham, Jacob, Issac and their various schemes and disappointments of faith. We know this of Moses who when called by faith wanted to sit it out on account of his voice, Even within the snippet we read we know the people of Israel triumphantly crossed the Red Sea by faith and then proceeded to panic about the state of the buffet. Rahab who welcomed the outsider was not one to be thought well of. Even the list of those there was not time for-- Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets-- have just as many stories of failing as of faith. These are people who are being held up not for their perfection necessarily, or that which must be accomplished to enter their mighty

company, but those who came warts and all and knew what it was to have and act in faith, and be the better for it along the way. They are held up to be those who came from circumstances much like our own and found a way to be faithful all the same.

It is our turn now. It is our turn for faith. It is our turn to take the baton and run the race of faith. We are asked to look back not to find our way, though that might be a source of inspiration. Rather it is to make sure that our eyes remain focused on the goal that is before us—the goal of the kingdom of God. There is much in this world that would deflect and distract us from that goal. There is much that can cause us to despair for the possibility of the kingdom being realized with reality and truth. There is much that demands our tears in this world.

Our call in this world is not to fix the world. We can try, we contribute as we must to shape the world in which we all want to live in. But that aspiration must come first and foremost from what is our call—the call to be faithful and to follow where Christ is leading. We take after the cloud of witnesses not that we might laud them and their perfection, but that we might keep our eyes not on where we fear we might be heading, but on the places we are called to tread. Our is not a faith that is based in fear. It is the hope of all that has come before.

May it ever be so and be for us an inspiration for all that God is doing. Amen.