

August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:29-31,39-12:2

“Too Close for Comfort”

Reading the gospels, we notice right away is that *following Jesus is neither intuitive nor easy*. Jesus shows compassion to the *very people* we have been taught to hate. Jesus travels in *hostile territory* and treats everyone there as if they are loved by God just like the people back home. And he taught in parables – after which the disciples were always saying, “*Lord, could we have the cliff notes on that?*”

And yet, somehow, we have accepted that understanding *the Bible should be easy, praying doesn't require any real attention and if life is hard – we have made a mistake* somewhere along the line because following Jesus should be easy.

The congregation addressed by the letter to the Hebrews was dealing with some of these same disappointments that come with believing faith gently takes the hard edges off of life – but *life didn't get the memo*. They were wondering where they went wrong and flirting with any number of answers including the ever popular – *let's go back to where we were before*. Which in their case meant the Jewish law. Or perhaps not going all the way back but to more recent developments like angels. Maybe if we have an angel bumper sticker on our chariot, we won't have an accident.

Times were tough. They were grasping at straws and wanted relief, now! We know what that is like. We know what it means to wonder what happened when *we thought we were on the road and now we feel lost*.

Our author has *straightforward prescriptions* for our health as both individuals and a community of faith. First, we are reminded *our life of faith doesn't sit in isolation*. We not only share life and faith with other people – we also share life and faith with *those who have gone before*. The author builds a strong portfolio of those who have gone before in the life of faith – and **encourages us to be encouraged by them**. It is always harder to keep going if you think you are alone – Like Elijah after the showdown on Mt. Carmel – “I and I only am left...” It is a dangerous thing to think *only we* are connected to God and only we have a corner on the market of faithfulness. So, our author reminds us that life is really one big relay race. A race which connects our lives with the lives of others.

We have received faith from the faithful who went before us – and we run the race of faith during our time – and ***we pass the baton of faithfulness along to those who come after us***. But sometimes, it is discouraging to look at the surrounding circumstances and wonder if we missed a cue from God somewhere.

To help us in this moment, does our author tell us to *judge* our neighbor or tell them how to *straighten up* and fly right? As often as that is our go to move, you would think so. Instead, our author says, “You are worn down and tired in part because ***you are carrying weight you don’t need*** – and you are holding on to things which ***make it hard for you*** to run the race for God who loves you. Analyzing ourselves and not our neighbor pays much bigger dividends.

You don’t have to be a track star to know that carrying extra weight slows down a runner. And you don’t have to be a swami on a mountaintop to understand we often *don’t see our own self-defeating patterns of behavior*. Those patterns aren’t necessarily the same for all of us. The author tells us to set aside the extra weight and the sin with clings so closely...*the things which take our attention and our allegiance from God*. We are not given a list. It is up to us to do the work. It is up to us to discern what blocks our life with God. It is up to us to set aside the things we thought we couldn’t do without. Not a list – because we are all different– *a call to developing healthy relationship – with God and each other*.

Once we have lightened our load – we turn our gaze away from what has held our attention to the place it rightly belongs - ***Jesus*** – the originator of and the one who makes complete our faith. Throughout this letter the author reminds everyone that Jesus is superior to all the other things we might look to because life is still hard.

Yet, there is not an “easy path option” given – we are simply told to *run the race with Jesus as our guide: and most days it doesn’t get any better than perseverance*: remembering those who have gone before us – shedding the unnecessary weight we carry, and by setting aside what trips us up and is so close we mistake it for a friend.

We were kind of hoping for the secret to make life do what we want. Instead, we are invited to see what is too close for comfort for what it is. And then to practice again and again and again - that which is pleasing to God.

This life of faith has never been easy. But is always good. ***Set aside; Look to Jesus – Run like it matters...because it does.***