

Surrounded

Hebrews 11:29-39, 12:1-6, 12-24

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First Mennonite Church

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Quite the powerful preacher, wasn't he? The first-century author of Hebrews had a real rhetorical flair. As you heard in the scripture reading, the text is woven through with rhythmic repetitions, striking images, and vivid contrasts.

The Preacher seeks to draw an early band of Christians out of their tentative, hunkered down, fearful posture. The Preacher wants them to see themselves as participating in the broad sweep of salvation history. The Preacher wants them to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and head for the prize. The Preacher wants them to claim the hope that is at the heart of their faith.

I'm referring to the author of Hebrews as "the Preacher," because this New Testament book is not composed as a letter in the manner of Paul's communications to various congregations, but rather has the form of a sermon or homily.¹ We presume that Hebrews was sent in written form to be read in worship. There has been much speculation about the author's identity. For a long time, it was assumed to be Paul, but careful studies of the language show a different hand at work. This hand obviously belonged to someone with an elegant command of the Greek language and a passionate conviction about the living Word of Scripture.

We have jumped into the flow of the sermon as it builds toward the climax. The message pulses with the reassuring reality that the congregation is not alone in its struggles, but rather belongs to the long line of faithful witnesses chronicled in the Hebrew Scriptures. Chapter 11 announces a majestic parade of historical heroes, prophets, and martyrs. In a dramatic roll call of names and deeds, we see marching past Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and all the others mentioned in today's reading beginning with verse 29.

The stirring parade passes by and the first-century Christians are directed to fall in behind these faithful forebears who resisted the powers, renounced the ways of the world, and faced danger, persecution, and death. The Christians are to take their place in the unfolding story of the people of God. But theirs is a *unique* place and to illustrate this, the Preacher evolves the imagery.

As chapter 12 opens, the Christians are no longer the tag-along band at the end of the parade. The parade has entered the athletic arena and all the faithful forebears have taken spectator seats and formed a cheering section. The congregation's time for public witness has come. They march into the open arena as a team of athletes anticipating a daunting race. Yet standing there, exposed and nervous, they find themselves surrounded by encouraging support. The Preacher aligns himself with them, speaking in the first-person plural—"therefore, since *we* [emphasis added] are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (12:1).

The believers enter the arena as a community. They take up their assignment as a community. They identify with a great community—the cloud or crowd—that spans time and space.

¹ Thomas Long refers to the author this way in his commentary on *Hebrews* for the Interpretation series (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1997).

As they line up for the race, team congregation gets a pep talk laced with advice! Throw off any excess weight you are carrying so you can run well, says the Preacher. What weights might they need to discard, do you suppose? Wealth? Worry? Weariness? Faint-heartedness? Fear? Hostility? Immorality? Any and all of these hinder a Christian witness. Certainly, as the text says, “the sin that clings so closely” (12:1) must go! Sin weighs people down and fallible human beings encounter temptations at every turn. But the Preacher turned track coach suggests a winning strategy for overcoming these difficulties. There is a liberating, inspiring, incomparable model who has set the course and blazed the trail and in whose perfect footsteps we can follow. This pacesetter is none other than Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (12:2).

Until God sent Jesus, there was no perfect example. Now we have Jesus’ earthly example of peaceful non-resistance and holy love. The winning strategy is straightforward: look to the life Jesus lived and to the death he died. As the NIV translation puts it, “Fix your eyes on Jesus.” Emulate Jesus. Don’t be distracted or seduced by other models or training methods. Persevere as Jesus persevered. Keep going even when the path gets rocky, even when it leads outside the city to the place of suffering on the cross (13:12-13).

When the race is run as discipleship, human frailty is channeled into straight paths and what is lame is healed (12:12). The Preacher coach elaborates further, exhorting the believers to pursue peace with everyone and to root out bitterness and immorality, such that no one falters (12:14-16). The ethical imperatives continue in Chapter 13, as the sermon moves toward its benediction: show hospitality to strangers, remember those who are in prison, honor the marriage bed, be content and keep your lives free from the love of money.

Following Jesus is synonymous with witnessing to peace. Discipleship is the means. Peace is the mode.

Thanks to the new covenant mediated by Jesus, the discipleship path of peace leads not to the terrifying fire of Mt. Sinai where the covenant of the law was given. It leads rather to the joyful communion of Mt. Zion, “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” The Preacher transports the congregation to that enduring kingdom and makes it clear that there is only one acceptable response on their part: “let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe” (12:28).

In the course of this sermon, an unknown, struggling congregation is reminded who they are, whose they are, and how they are to witness and praise. Community, discipleship, peace, and worship form the mosaic of their identity. And this identity points toward a result of wonderful simplicity and power: God’s kingdom has come near.

Why are you here this morning?

One reason most of you are here is because of the people who comprise this community of believers. Even though we use habitual forms of speech like “go to church” and “at church”—meaning the building here on the corner of Lincoln and Springfield Avenues, we recognize that the church *is us*—a gathered assembly, a family of sisters and brothers in the faith, the body of Christ. Shane Claiborne repeats this telling quote, “Referring to the church as a building is like referring to people as two-by-fours.”²

²Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 62.

Anabaptist Christians have consistently identified the church with peoplehood. We are the people of God, created for relationship with God and with each other. We function as community and in community. Community is the context for worship, for interpreting Scripture, for discovering God's will for our lives, for practicing faithful living, for fellowship and sharing joys and concerns. And yes, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, stretching from the kingdom communities in the Bible up through the early Anabaptists, our 16th century forebears, to today's global communion—Mennonite World Conference, about which we will hear next Sunday.

Cultivating a loving community of peace is one way we Mennonites practice discipleship. Another is relating nonviolently and with acts of mercy to persons outside the church. We take Jesus seriously when he says, "Follow me" and "love your enemies" and "whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me." We coach each other, saying "press on" (remember Pastor Cindy's summer sermon on Philippians 3) and "keep your eyes on Jesus"! For us, true faith is lived faith. As Menno Simons wrote, "Whosoever boasts that he is a Christian, the same must walk as Christ walked."³

Like the church in Hebrews, we Mennonites see community, discipleship, peace, and worship as significant markers of the church.

The congregation in Hebrews needed encouragement to enter/re-enter the race with vigor and hope. Sometimes we, like they, find ourselves reluctant, limping, and exhausted. Sometimes the church takes on the way of the world, importing modes of debate and decision-making that undermine community discernment and relinquish the commitment to agree and disagree in love. In those times, we may despair of truly being the church.

However, I have great confidence in the ability of our First Mennonite Church "good soil" congregation to engage difficult questions and differences and still be the church. There is already considerable theological and experiential diversity among us. We are a people of prayer and we invite the Spirit into our midst. We have a fine heritage to draw upon, with an amazing cloud of witnesses, and we have access to savvy tools like the ones we will hone at the upcoming all-church retreat.

Through the month of September, our worship and study will highlight Anabaptist Mennonite distinctions, both the "what" and the "how" of our traditional identity, with a focus on community discernment—how we discover God's will for us. A handy guide to such study is Palmer Becker's pamphlet "What is an Anabaptist Christian?" We have purchased sufficient copies so each household can receive one, in addition to those participating in the young adult and "Eyes on Jesus" Sunday School classes.

In addition, we will add to our congregational repertoire the practice known as "Dwelling in the Word," which honors the authority of the Bible as experienced through deep listening—to the Gospel, to the Spirit, and to each other. Pastor Cindy and I experienced this practice throughout the week of the Mennonite USA Convention in Columbus. We can attest that even very familiar Gospel stories continue to generate new insights when approached in this way.

³Quoted by Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973), 20.

Sisters and brothers, our beautiful new worship banners prompt celebration.⁴ They also prompt self-examination. How *do* we understand ourselves as a peace church of welcome, praise and service? This fall, we will be giving special scrutiny to the “welcoming” dimension of our community life. I invite our congregational chair to come forward to say more about this.

Please pray with me:

Lord Jesus,
We fix our eyes on you and seek to follow.
Help us to put aside every weight and trust in you.
We ask your Spirit to accompany us into this new territory.
Help us stay open to the Spirit’s leading each step of the way.
Convict us that we will grow in understanding and discover your will as a gathered people.
In your power, may love prevail and fear be banished from our midst.
Pour out your mercy on us and grant us peace.
Amen

⁴Commissioned through the Frances Massanari Memorial Fund and created by Rosanna McFadden of Goshen, Indiana, these three banners: *Welcoming; Praising; Serving* were inaugurated on September 6, 2009.