“Our Eyes on the Prize”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder how many among us have ever doubted. Can I ask for an honest hands-up if your faith has ever been challenged. We are in good company, aren’t we? We are in good company and I am grateful for the sharing earlier today about our coming together as family, as people of faith. I think I sang this anthem this morning without tears, “Shall we gather by the river where bright angels’ feet have trod? Yes, we’ll gather by the river, the beautiful river that flows by the throne of God.” That’s a dream, a dream, maybe the prophets were dreaming of and one we hold close when our faith is trembling.

In the past several weeks, I have been very powerfully moved by a sense of God’s presence both near and far, no matter where we might travel, no matter where we may be sending our prayers worldwide. I also have been moved by examples of faith in the face of great difficulty, which reminds me how we often bump into such examples, just when we need them. I also had already been thinking a lot about races, even before reading our text today from the letter to the Hebrews. I wonder if you also might find ever yourselves among the recipients of this letter: a community of believers whose faith has been challenged such that you are moved to abandon it altogether or seek an easier way. I also wonder if, with the people to whom Jeremiah prophesied, you wonder whether God, if a part of your life at all, remains either too close for your comfort or too far to be of any help.

My friend Mari is one of my teammates in our recently organized crew we call Holy Mackerel; you can guess what spurred the holy part. After we finished yesterday’s rowing regatta in Belfast, I declined continuing on socially, because I had more writing to do for today. She quickly offered up that I could surely find something in our day’s activities to be sermon fodder. She threw out suggestions without knowing the theme, of course, even as I had been reading and writing in response to different passages with different foci. She and I both got a kick out of the fact that our lesson from Hebrews includes mention of, shall we say, *rowing* rather than running “with perseverance the race marked out for us,” particularly when she had said that perseverance was a part of every race, even when she did not know the passage to which I was responding. At that point, we were still kind of reeling from the difference between the morning heat’s race and that of the afternoon.

I want to tell you a couple of things about yesterday, climate facts you may not know. It was very, very calm in the morning on Belfast Bay and it was a little breezy, just enough to keep things cool. We were thinking a lot, wondering about how our energy would fare as we rowed from the public launch, a mile down to the start of the race, which was at the public park. We wondered how much energy we should save from the end of that race and how hard we should row to save enough energy for the second heat, still competing as well as we might for that first race, which would determine when and where we were racing in the second heat. It was a lovely row and we felt very good about it. We were nearing the end, racing most closely against our own teammates, four women named “wave warriors.” It came down to the very end, and both crews slowed down because we thought we had passed the finish line, but we hadn’t. There were checkered flags we somehow missed. We somehow kept rowing a bit longer than they, after overtaking them at full speed moments before. I mention this because we sometimes don’t quite know where the finish line is, in life, and Mari was right to say, “I’ll bet there’s a lot in this race.” We slowed down and later learned that by beating them, our boat became the slowest among the second group of racers, and so they were the fastest boat in their second race. By finishing first in the opening race, we finished last in the second race in our grouping. In the second race, the Wave Warriors won their heat.

There’s a funny thing, isn’t there, about thinking you know where you are going and being certain you know just exactly what you need to meet the challenges. We were certain that our race in the second heat would be super fast, because it took us nearly three times as long to battle the wind that had come up, making our way to the starting point a mile away. We should have just flown with the wind behind us and on an incoming tide. We *would have* done so had we rowed perpendicular to those waves, but we jostled and turned and at the times that two of us on one side of the boat had oars in the water with good purchase on the water, the two others had oars flailing and catching in the waves. And we need each other, and sometimes, when some of us have good strong purchase on our faith, our friends and family, our sisters and brothers in Christ need the push and need us to be rowing right with them. Circumstances change. We were, I would say, prayerless,

which is not to say that we did not have a prayer of success, or of finishing; we simply weren’t praying. I think at some point other members of the larger body of rowers probably were praying. For example, the two men also from Blue Hill, in a two-person shell in those same rough, rough seas had finished the first race close to the front. They were at a loss in the second race, however. Our strongest rowers, our strongest, fittest men in the skinniest, fastest boat couldn’t compete well, given the circumstances. As we all gathered for our meal when the race was completely over, we celebrated with members of the last of our three boats, which actually won an award. We were one team, after all. We were three boats in varying circumstances, with different gifts in different surfs, and we celebrated the joys together, as much as we also heard all of our griping together as we spoke of the difficult circumstances.

In keeping with our scripture, and I hope not pressing the connection too much, I was as much struck by how *I felt*, when, after the first heat, when with the other four-person boat from Blue Hill, we vied for the last of the 12th of 18 in order to be placed in the second group, we felt like one team. I had actually joked before the race that we might have tried to slow down at the end of the first race in order to be among the slower boats and therefore best among the least. Isn’t that sometimes what we do in this life? We strategize, wondering how we might “get one over” on the next boat. But this isn’t a race; this is our life. This is our faith life, in which we need one another.

There is no author and perfecter of our coastal rowing community as there is in our faith community. Still, we know our achievements are possible only with our togetherness. And thank GOD, through Christ, we DO have one who guides us, having given of himself perfectly. No storm may fall that Christ has not borne, and we are still bearing these storms, individually and as one humanity, while always looking forward to the greater prize; while always looking forward to greater hope.

For a long time, Kate Huey wrote what were called “sermon seeds” for the United Church of Christ, while also serving as the dean of Amistad Chapel in Cleveland. I love her description of the race to which the author of Hebrews speaks.  “Eugene Peterson's translation of verse 40 in The Message offers one understanding [of our passage from Hebrews that inspires me, and I hope will offer you a strong image to carry with you, as well]: "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 suggests that our faith is also not complete apart from theirs. Gary E. Peluso-Verdend describes this well:  "Imagine a race, staggered over time, that no one can finish until the last of the participants has entered." He pictures a cloud of witnesses assembled near the starting line (New Proclamation Year C 2007). No wonder that they're gathered there: they are watching a race that is still going on! The race, of course, is not a sprint but a long-distance one, perhaps like a Boston Marathon of Faith. And it is a race not for sport or entertainment but one with utmost importance.” [Not a sprint but a marathon, and one that no one may finish until all others have entered.]

What is the finish line you have placed before yourselves? Keeping our eyes on Jesus, who has taught us a perfect faith, what will be the course we follow to get to that end? I wonder if we have in our hearts and minds a sense that we are accompanied on our journey? Not only by those around us here, but by strong persons of faith from throughout the generations?

I’d like to quote to you from a website called Online Christian regarding the background of a wonderful hymn.   "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus" has become a familiar hymn, which has been widely used in Christian circles to challenge believers musically, with the necessity of making Christ the paramount priority in their lives, and then living each day with eternity's values in view. The author and composer of this hymn, Helen H. Lemmel, relates that one day, in 1918, a missionary friend gave her a tract entitled "Focused." The pamphlet contained these words: "So then, turn your eyes upon Him, look full into His face and you will find that the things of earth will acquire a strange new dimness. " These words made a deep impression upon Helen Lemmel. She could not dismiss them from her mind. She recalls this experience following the reading of that tract:

      "Suddenly, as if commanded to stop and listen, I stood still, and singing in my soul and spirit was the chorus, with not one conscious moment of putting word to word to make rhyme, or note to note to make melody. The verses were written the same week, after the usual manner of composition, but none the less dictated by the Holy Spirit."

"O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Savior,
And life more abundant and free!
Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace."

May it be so for us.