

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
 Hebrews 11:29-12:2 *By Faith*

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By faith, Norma went throughout her town, inviting children and unchurched families to Sunday School, doing everything within her power to make sure those kids knew that Jesus loved them. At the end of her life, more than sixty years after she began that ministry, some of those children, now Medicare eligible, showed up at Norma's funeral to express their gratitude for a woman who showed them God's love and extended Christ's extravagant welcome.

By faith, Benjamin labored year around in his basement workshop making carefully crafted wooden goods to be sold at the annual church bazaar, the proceeds of which went to help fund special projects and ministries to enhance the life of the church.

By faith, Pearl got her four kids to church nearly every Sunday, missing only eight Sundays over the course of thirteen years, delighting when her youngest was elected the youngest elder in the history of their congregation.

By faith, Deloy, the third generation of his family to farm that land, worked and toiled in the fields, cultivating the land and doing what he could to be a good steward of God's creation, studying diligently throughout the winter to learn the best ways to produce safer food and preserve soil quality.

By faith, Lynne practiced the piano and organ, preparing her offerings for worship every first and third Sunday of the month for nearly twenty years, using her musical gifts to glorify the Lord.

By faith, Joe served as the president of the Church Council, chaired a search committee, headed up the annual donut sale to support the youth group, taught Sunday School, and went on mission trips.

In so many ways, faith, or at least how to live a faithful life, is learned—not through sermons or classes or studying—but rather through the example set for us by other people whose lives speak of their faith with so much more volume than words ever could. I didn't learn what the life of a faithful person looked like when I went to seminary, I learned what the life of a faithful person looked like by watching my grandparents—Norma, Benjamin, Pearl, and Deloy and my parents, Joe and Lynne—I learned about the faith life by watching them.

Rarely was a word about religion spoken in our home. Faith wasn't something you talked about. Faith was something you did. You served, you loved, you gave, you helped, and, in accordance with my mom's mantra, probably the most important thing you did—you showed up—because church comes first.

By faith, I was raised to never take my church for granted. By faith, I was raised to support my church with whatever I could. By faith, I was raised to love the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my strength and with all my mind, and to love my neighbor as myself. By faith, I was raised to do it and not talk about it. And oh, the irony, that here I am, as I am most every week, seemingly unable to stop talking about faith. And yet, there is no place that I would rather be on a Sunday morning than here with you talking about faith.

And I wonder about you? Why are you here? Homer Nye is fond of saying that a wise minister walks into every worship service remembering that the people in the pews are there for a reason. Each of you isn't sailing or golfing or shopping or sleeping in or working out or out for brunch . . . You are here. I imagine that there is a good reason you chose to be here, instead of someplace out there, this morning.

For many of you, I imagine part of the reason you are here is because you, too, have a Norma, a Benjamin, a Deloy, a Pearl, a Lynne, and/or a Joe in your life. At some point in your spiritual journey, you were impacted by someone who lives by faith and their example helped to set you on whatever path it is that you're on today that led you here.

I've heard it said that the church is always one generation away from extinction. While that overemphasizes the role human beings play, if God wants there to be a church there will be a church, I can appreciate the intent of the sentiment. Faith isn't taught, it's caught, and if we're not spreading it, others aren't getting it.

But sadly, so much of the faith that is being spread these days is a faith full of messages of us and them, greed and gain, hate and division. At a time when church attendance is dwindling and abandoned church buildings are being converted into restaurants and health clubs, followers of Christ, now more than ever, are called to act by faith.

The world outside of these walls doesn't need our judgment, it needs our compassion. It doesn't need our piety, it needs our service. It doesn't need our opinions, it needs our action. The world needs us to, in the words of the author of Hebrews, "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles . . . and run with perseverance the race marked out for us . . . by Jesus." The world needs us to help others along in the spiritual journey, not to throw stumbling blocks in their way.

Over and over again, scripture offers up this image of a stumbling block. First introduced way back in the book of Leviticus, the third book of the Bible, in a section of the book that teaches us about how we are to treat others, we read, "Do not put a stumbling block in front of the blind." (Lev. 19:14) In other words, don't be cruel or take advantage of those who are less fortunate than you are.

The New Testament takes the law in the Old Testament and finesses it into a spiritual directive. In the New Testament, a stumbling block is something that is said or done to hinder another person in their relationship with God. In Matthew, Jesus says, "And whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! (Mt 18:5-7) A word study of the word "child" in this passage reveals that Jesus was talking not just about children but also about anyone else who was vulnerable, powerless, and dependent on others. This passage is a stern warning not to be a stumbling block to, not to mislead or take advantage of, anyone who has less power and influence than we do.

The Apostle Paul also refers to stumbling blocks when he writes in this letter to the Romans ". . . let us determine how not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in another's way." (Rom. 14:13)

Stumbling blocks create obstacles for people in their relationship with God. As Christians, we are called to a higher standard of conduct because our behavior is being watched and what we do and what we say has a significant impact on how others perceive the church and its relevance in the world. If, as followers of Christ, people see us acting or speaking in ways that are inconsistent with the Gospel, we can create stumbling blocks for them in their own journeys with the Lord. Now I know this isn't right or fair, I know that just because we follow Christ doesn't mean we are perfect. But, the reality is, if we want to live "by faith" and have a positive impact on the spiritual lives of others, we are called to a higher awareness of the impact our behavior has on their faith journeys.

When we claim to follow Christ but laugh at racist jokes or support racist behaviors even though we know scripture declares "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:28), we are creating stumbling blocks for others. When we claim to follow Christ but gossip at a dinner party or talk about people behind their backs or don't fact check ourselves even though we know scripture declares "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." (Ephesians 4:29), we are creating stumbling blocks for others. When we support companies or organizations that pollute the environment even though we know scripture declares "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable." (Jeremiah 2:7) we are creating stumbling blocks for others.

People who act "by faith" do just the opposite, they inspire and encourage others on their faith journeys, they set a good example, they clear the way and engage others. People who act "by faith" accept that while we might not all agree, we can still serve together. People who act "by faith" aren't afraid of people who are different than they are and seek to celebrate what we have in common, not highlight our differences. People

who act “by faith” are humble listeners, cognizant that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. People who act “by faith” run the race set out for us by Jesus—they are the ones who become our Great Cloud of Witnesses.

But here’s the thing about the race set out for us by Jesus—it’s a relay race. No one runs it alone. And, how we run it impacts how others do, too. At some point in our lives, the baton is handed to us and it becomes our responsibility to run. And as we run we make choices—big choices and little choices—about how we will live “by faith” and how we will avoid creating stumbling blocks for others.

As for me, I still carry the batons passed on to me by Norma, Benjamin, Pearl, and Deloy. They are gone from this earth but I am committed to trying to carry on their legacy of faithful service to the Church of Jesus Christ.

And as for you, I’m grateful we are running the race together. I’m grateful for the people in scripture Doug read about who lived “by faith.” I’m grateful for the people who are part of your “Great Cloud of Witnesses”, the people who played a role in your journey that brings you here today. And, I’m grateful to God for the race set before us, the example Christ sets for us, the opportunity and honor it is to be running this race together. Thanks be to God.