

“On Being Faithful and Focused”
Hebrews 11:1, 32-12:2

November 4, 2001
Dr. J. Howard Olds

It was Henry David Thoreau who wrote: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost. That is where they should be. Now put foundations under them.”

For the past few weeks, we have articulated a new vision for this congregation focused on “touching hearts and transforming lives.” We have organized our church and deployed our staff to embrace a mission of inviting, worshiping, discipling, serving, and healing. We have built castles in the air. Now it is time to put foundations under them. What keeps dreams from dying at daybreak? What enables a vision to be fulfilled in the heat of the day? This passage in Hebrews suggests two things: being faithful and being focused.

When the writer of Hebrews established the “Hall of Fame,” he filled it with the faithful. Some are well-known: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Others unnamed and unknown, facing great persecution, wandered in the deserts and mountains, hid in caves and holes in the ground, with no place to call home and no name to be enthroned- “yet,” he says, “the world was not worthy of them.”

To be faithful is to be committed and consistent, dedicated and dependable, loyal and reliable, tried and true. In Yellowstone National Park the most visited, most photographed, and most talked about attraction is Old Faithful. Old Faithful is not the largest and grandest geyser in the region. Its popularity lies in its dependability. Old Faithful is on time every time, giving tourists what they have come to see and experience. Over the years, I have met a lot of faithful people in the church. They may not be the loudest, nor the pushiest people around. Most do not come to see me very much. They are often low-keyed, quiet, and lost in the crowd. Their greatness lies in their dependability. They are there every time, all the time, waiting patiently in line to do their part in their time on earth.

In the circle of life, our lives are intertwined with those who have gone before us and those who are yet to come after us. So, I ask you today, will those who have gone before us find us faithful? Will G.W. Winn, the McGavocks, the Hayes, the Hudleys and those who founded this congregation 150 years ago find us faithful today? Will R.I. Moore and Jeff Fryer and those who marched from Church Street to this place on Franklin Road find us faithful in our watch? Will the gifts of Walter Nipper bear dividends for the future? Will the seeds of Henry Bixler, planted by Bob Spain and watered by Joe Pennel, come to full fruit and reproduction in our time? In God's plan, “only together with us will they be made perfect,” says the writer of Hebrews. Will those who went before us find us faithful?

The year was 1995. Professional golfer, Ben Crenshaw, was in Augusta preparing to play the Masters. He had won the green jacket in 1984. He was determined he was going to win it again. Then, Ben received a call informing him of the death of his longtime friend and teacher, Harvey Pinick. Ben flew to Austin where he served as a pallbearer at Harvey's funeral. After the funeral, he flew back to Augusta and played, perhaps, one of the best games in his professional career, winning the Masters for the second time. In an emotional moment on the 18th green, when he simply broke down and wept from the tension of the last few days, a reporter asked, "Ben, what were you thinking?" The great professional golfer said, "I had a 15th club in my bag today. It was Harvey. I could hear him saying at every shot, 'Don't just swing, Ben, take dead aim.' He said it to me a million times when he was trying to teach me. Today, with every swing of the club, I could remember every word that he said to me when he was teaching me the game." I suspect that deep in our own souls today, each of us in our own way, has a roll call of heroes as we recall these listed and others. We recall the words, advice, help, care, and support they have given us. They have made us who we are and what we are. Will those who have gone before us find us faithful?

Will those who come behind us find us faithful? Isn't it interesting, this intertwining of life, where nobody is on the stage alone. We are here with all of those who marched before us and with the generations that are to come after our brief moments here.

Mr. Holland's Opus is a touching movie about a high school band teacher in Portland, Oregon. Mr. Holland really wants to achieve critical acclaim as a classical musician. But, the pressure to make a living, raise a family, deal with a deaf son, and with students who really do not want to learn music, denies him the opportunity of fulfilling his dream. For a lifetime Mr. Holland pushes on, doing the duties of each day, fulfilling the promises to be faithful in circumstances that are difficult and hard. One day, the school board closes down the entire music department. Mr. Holland is jobless. In his depths of despair, he is invited to the school auditorium. The place is packed with the students who, over the years, have been touched by his fatherliness. He had thought they were totally disinterested and disconnected. They are here now to pay tribute, in one shining moment, to a life that had been faithful. I watched that movie and wept. It said to me powerfully, that if we keep our promises, if we do our best, if we resist the temptations to sell our self short, if we remain faithful even when it is hard, we will teach our children and our grandchildren tons about self-respect and responsibility. Will those who come behind us find us faithful? That is the question. Being faithful.

Being focused. Hebrews 12:1 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily besets us and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith."

Be focused. Be focused on Jesus the Christ. Psychologists say, "Look within." An opportunist says, "Look around." An optimist says, "Look ahead." A pessimist says, "Look out." A Christian says, "Look up." Look all the way up until at last your eyes catch the eyes of Jesus the Christ and you discover in that reflection not only what you are, but what you have been created to be in His image. Look all the way up until your eyes are fixed on Jesus the Christ, Himself. This is no meandering down the road on a Sunday afternoon that we are doing. We are engaged in a marathon race, says the writer of Hebrews. It calls us to stretch every nerve. It calls us to extend every muscle and press on with vigor until we win the heavenly prize of our eternal home. A race like that calls for determination and concentration. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus.

It seems to me, Americans suffer from a disease that I have nicknamed "Multiphrenia." We are forever tending our choices. We like the option, the choice, so much that we find it impossible to focus on really important things. We are not bad people. We just do not know how to make sharp decisions in our life. We want it all. We have yet to learn the difference between the urgent and the important, our wants and our needs, marking time and redeeming time. There is a difference. Recognizing that to be true of the human personality, the author of Hebrews dares to say, "fix your eyes on Jesus the Christ," the singular purpose for your being. 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. Fix your eyes on Jesus the Christ.

You can be focused that way through prayer. Nothing is impossible when we put our faith in God. Do you believe that? History is the story of ordinary people doing extraordinary things by the power of God. I invite you today to a week of focused, concentrated, praying.

You have a bookmark in your bulletin today. There are some great statements here that will help us focus our attention. "Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks," said the great preacher, Phillips Brooks. Hudson Taylor says, "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply." Maude Royden wrote, "When you have nothing left but God, then for the first time you become aware that God is enough."

When I read the passage in Thessalonians that talks about "praying without ceasing," I used to assume that was meant for the monks in the monastery. Praying is not easy for me. It is one of the most difficult spiritual disciplines I try to practice. I can give a lot easier than I can pray. Then, I made a discovery. I discovered the process of breath prayers. There are other forms of prayer. Breath prayers are the words that come to our lips that express the hunger of our hearts. They are simple words. "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Or, simplified, "Lord, have mercy." This prayer gets me through the day. For years, when I awaken, the first prayer on my lips is, "Help me, Lord. Help me be a faithful servant today." Every time I walk in a hospital room I stop at the door and I pray, "Help me, Lord, to be sensitive to this person at this moment in time."

Every time I walk up the tall steps of this pulpit I pray, "Help me, Lord, be your instrument of peace." "Help me, Lord. Help me today. You know I need your help." That is a breath prayer.

I want to suggest a breath prayer for this week. "Lord, make me a blessing." When you go home today and walk in your house, remember your breath prayer, "Lord, make me a blessing." Your family needs it. When you go to work Monday morning, when you are driving down the highway and you are caught in a traffic jam and you are having all these evil thoughts, pick up your breath prayer, "Lord, make me a blessing." When you get to work on Monday morning and you have to face some people you would rather not face at all, offer that prayer, "Lord, make me a blessing." When you get on your knees after receiving communion, pray to the Lord, "Lord, make me a blessing." This week, when you are thinking and pondering about next Sunday and what you can do for this church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service, remember your breath prayer, "Lord, make me a blessing."

We are pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road. Those who have gone before us line the way. May all who come behind us find us faithful. "Lord, make me a blessing to somebody today." Amen.