

*A Piece of the Way*

We all learn things from trials, from races, from times in our lives when we think we've spent our last ounce of strength and yet somehow manage to go on. The reading we just heard from the Letter to the Hebrews is really not a letter at all but an extended sermon, an exhortation to courage, perseverance and strength. Most scholars concur that it was probably not written by Paul but by another early Christian leader perhaps Apollos, Barnabas or Priscilla. The belief is that the community to whom the letter was addressed was Christian but of Jewish origin. Living in Rome, the people had experienced persecution and discouragement. This letter recognizes their struggle and encourages them to carry on in spite of it all, citing the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before them. In naming the prophets and kings, their trials and accomplishments, the author notes, "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised." (*It's Not About the Bike*, p. 39)

The great exemplars of faith mentioned did not get their heart's desire; what they longed for was denied them, what they assumed would be theirs, was not. But as their paths changed, new gifts were bestowed. This little band of Christians who are struggling in Rome are called to keep the faith and to remember those who have blazed the trail before them, the cloud of witnesses, and most of all the great example of Jesus.

This cloud of witnesses is like the flank of cyclists in a bicycle race. Though he has fallen from grace, Lance Armstrong once attested to this cloud of witness in recounting his first Tour de France.

"All day, every day, my teammates rode in front of me, protecting me from wind, crashes, competitors, and other hazards. We constantly dodged overeager spectators and photographers and their various paraphernalia....In the second stage, we came to a four-kilometer causeway called the Passage du Gois, a scene of almost surreal strangeness. The Passage is a long, narrow, blacktop road across a tidal marsh, but the brackish water floods at high tide, covering the road and making it impassable. Even when the road is passable, it's slick and treacherous, and the edges are covered with barnacles and seaweed.... The Postal riders

gathered around me and we surged near the front...but it was frightening, the road was so slippery under our tires that we hesitated so much as to turn the wheel.”  
(233)

It’s an engaging image, the phalanx of protection, the cloud of witnesses pulling close and shielding you from hazards. This is what we all long for in trying times when we feel that the road beneath us is slick with grease and we can’t keep our footing. We just want someone, a small group even, to walk close enough to keep us from falling, to encourage and support us. Families can be this for each other, the rim of protection and support, but they aren’t always. What’s crushing is that we know this; we know we need help and we think our families should provide it. So when they don’t, when they roll their eyes at our familiar whining, our all too frequent crashes, when they shake their heads in disbelief that we can make the same mistake yet again, we feel mocked and dismissed.

Good friends provide the shield too; they break the wind and give draft. Church communities can do the same. It’s really part of the central mission of the wider church as well as individual churches, to provide assistance, encouragement and love to those in need. As a community we do a pretty good job—the bags for Lund collected this morning are an excellent example; but we can always do more. We can reach out to those who are struggling with personal trials and we can make an asserted effort to welcome those who might hesitate to come here: strangers, single parents, people gripped by grief, mental illness, addiction; members of the LGBTQ community, the homeless and the hungry. You’ve heard me say this countless times: First and foremost we provide a sanctuary, within these walls, within the programs and ministries we offer and out in the world as we provide compassion and presence to those in need.

The odd thing is that though we may think we need support, what really feeds us is supporting others. It’s when we can lend a hand to someone who can’t keep their footing on the slick, greasy road that we feel better ourselves, feel less selfish and grabby, less dragged down by those sins “which cling and entangle.”

A dear friend of mine, Francis Brooks, longtime Sargent of Arms at the Vermont Legislature and a State Senator, who grew up in the south, told me that whenever he hears this passage from Hebrews, he’s reminded of a practice he learned when he was young.

“Many years ago when I was a little boy I spent the summer with my cousins who lived in rural Virginia, and there I was introduced to a custom that no longer is done. When a neighbor walked by the house headed towards their home several miles away, my cousins would ask my aunt if they could walk "a piece of the way" with the neighbor.”

An interesting part of this is that the gift was in the companionship; Francis and his cousins had no destination other than the walk. They went a part of the way and then they turned around. So too we remember that the great exemplars of faith cited in the Letter to the Hebrews never got what they thought they wanted; never achieved their primary goals and aspirations. But something else was revealed to them along the way, something deeper and perhaps more lasting.

This happens to us all; we set out with a goal in mind and somehow get side traced. The road is slick, the investment tanks, the relationship crashes, the illness is not cured, the addiction relentless, our intention of becoming this or that just doesn't work out. But along the way, pretty inevitably, something else happens, someone happens, someone happens to walk a piece of the way with us.

I don't mean to suggest that it's always a human being either; I believe that we are saved by God's love revealed to us in this amazing creation in a million different ways. Music can speak to us at a deep level that is often inaccessible. As the Celtic poet John O'Donohue said, “It is as though music reaches that subtle threshold within us where the soul dovetails with the eternal.” (*Beauty the Invisible Embrace*. P. 62) A poem can free a part of our hearts locked behind doors of fear and trepidation. An animal can look at us with utter trust and suddenly we are inclined to trust ourselves as well. Tears are God's grace made known in truth and vulnerability. Physical love awakens us to the force and passion of the Holy Spirit. Parents enmeshed in the lives of their children, sleep deprived and barely able to think deeply about anything, are actually doing little else than everything as they walk a piece of the way, day in and day out, with the small beings entrusted to their care.

There will always be times when no matter how desperately we ourselves want help, we simply won't be able to find it and, likewise, times when we want to help others, but don't know where to begin. First and foremost, we need to remember that we have a windbreak before us, that on the steep hills we are pulled forward in the draft of Jesus.

He has gone before us to throw sand on the greasy road, to kick the barnacles aside. I know it doesn't always feel like this, but if you start thinking that Jesus is with you, if you operate on the assumption not that you are alone, but that you are *never* alone, the road might begin to look different. And if you find someone who is staggering or quietly holding back, show them what it feels like to walk in the draft of compassion, compassion and courage.

During WWII, a Jewish family named Rosenberg was confined to a concentration camp where prisoners could escape the gas chambers as long as they could work. A young boy in the family was partially disabled from birth and could not carry a full workload. The parents were separated during the day by their different work responsibilities, so they would hasten in the evenings to check on the condition of each family member. One evening the father's worse fears were realized. He could not spot his little boy. Then he saw his older son weeping in a corner. He told his father that his little brother was taken to the gas chambers because he could no longer work. The father asked, "But where is your mother?"

The older boy told how his little brother was afraid to go and clung to his mother, who said, "Don't cry. I'll go with you and hold you close." And she did.

Sometimes walking a piece of the way is pure sacrifice; Jesus knew this and did it anyway. This is where love and sacrifice get tangled up together, when we stand by one another in the rough times, when we allow ourselves to be drawn forward in the draft of Jesus' love.

Grace and Peace.