

Don't Stop Yet!
September 18, 2011 9:16a.m.
First Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Donald W. Hackett
Text: Hebrews 12:1-2
Lancaster, PA

The Text: Hebrews 12: 1-2a New International Version (NIV)

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 entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Introduction

This fall we are using the wonderful stained glass windows in the Sanctuary and the scripture that inspired them be our preaching guide. We are calling this series “Witness of the Windows.” The witness of each of these windows is manifold. Look at our focus window today, “The Pilgrim”, by Nicola D’Ascenzo which was created in 1937. The first level of witness is the sheer beauty of the art. The colors and composition all point to the God of all beauty and glory. Then there is the witness of the artist, the one who used great skill, imagination, and patience to create this window. Let me tell you a little about Nicola D’Ascenzo whose studio made this and two other stained glass works for this church.

The Witness of the Artist

We read in a Philadelphia art newsletter that: *Nicola D’Ascenzo (1871-1954) was an Italian-born artist who established the most successful stained glass studio in Philadelphia. Working in the medieval guild tradition, but unafraid to incorporate modern content into his designs, D’Ascenzo developed a nation-wide clientele and designed windows and murals for ecclesiastical, academic, residential and commercial structures* ([*Athenaeum of Philadelphia*](#)). Elsewhere we learn that Nicola came to this country at the age of 11, studied art in Philadelphia and later returned to Italy to study some more. This particular window has the deep, rich red which was a difficult color to reproduce at that time. I wonder if red is meant to represent the cleansing blood of Jesus which makes our live with God possible.

The Witness of the Benefactor

Another level of witness is the benefactor of the window, Miss Susan Frazer, who after her death made this purchase possible and also gave her personal jewelry and silver to the church to be transformed into part of our communion service. Her earthly wealth was given to honor God and her family and invested in serving the church long after her time on earth was done. Thank you, Susan. You gave so others could be encouraged in Christ for years to come. May each of us follow in your footsteps.

The Witness of the Window's Images

The most obvious witness is by the images told by the window. This is one of my favorite windows. When I am assisting in worship and am seated near the choir, I can look up and get a clear view of this window. As our booklet describes, “*The picture shows a figure, a pilgrim, on life’s rocky road looking toward the cross being borne by an angel. It represents the promise of salvation for all mankind. The shield at the top and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega at the sides symbolize the sustaining power of faith.*” Can you see yourself in this window?

The Witness of Scripture

Finally, there is the witness of scripture that inspired this great art. Let’s reflect on that passage from Hebrews 12:1, 2: *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 entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.*

Setting the Context of Hebrews

The whole point of the book of Hebrews is to remind us that Jesus is greater. As Dan said last week, Jesus is greater than the angels. Though wonderful, powerful, and ever attentive to God and the needs of his people, angels are servants to the Lord Jesus. Hebrews reminds us that all our religious systems and resources bow at the feet of Jesus. For First Century Jews this meant that the commandments, the rituals, the feast, the sacrifices, their leaders (like Moses), their priests, their sanctuary, and even their covenant were all were pale in the light of Jesus. Many of these would be shed like an old coat and the fulfillment of all things in Jesus the Christ would now hold center stage.

For people of faith in the 21st Century this book of Hebrews questions our religious “sacred cows.” Just how essential is a three point sermon, a hymn book, our Christmas and Easter traditions, power point, a rock band, a choir, an organ, an historic brick building or even a brand new worship arena? The author of Hebrews would say that Jesus is one essential focus for all people of faith. As our journey becomes difficult, as it did for our first century friends, Jesus will carry us though each day.

Faith Cheerleaders

Let’s reflect on that passage from Hebrews 12 once more:

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 entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

What is standing out to you in this passage? Who are the witnesses mentioned in the previous chapter? Who are our witnesses of faith today? As I was cleaning out our basement last week I came across this photo book that Rila made after my dad, James W. Hackett, died nineteen years ago. This book gives us a glimpse into the life of a man who was one of my greatest mentors. Jim Hackett was the one who modeled for me a consistent faith life. Even though we moved all over the world as a military family, we were always involved in a local church. My Dad was the first person to suggest I become a pastor. My Dad was and continues to be one of my biggest cheerleaders.

Who on earth is one of your faith journey cheerleaders? Who in heaven is cheering for you right now? We have a huge stadium of faith cheerleaders looking down right now and yelling “Keep running. Don’t stop yet! Your race is not over!” When things get tough it is easy to slow down, take our eyes off Jesus and get sidetracked. When we consider Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, we know we can make it. This is his race too. Jesus is committed to run with us all the way. Jesus is committed to encourage and shaped us as we run. Jesus is even ready to carry us when we cannot move another step. Jesus will help finish the race if we let him.

Missional Communities

We have begun conversations on birthing missional communities. What is a missional community? It is a way of doing mission together. You can do mission on your own. You can help a neighbor clean their flooded basement or you can pray with someone at work who is going through a crisis. *I know a friend who was grocery shopping this week and ran into another mom she knew in the aisle. As they talked the woman had a important concern. My friend asked, “May I pray for you now?” The woman said yes and they prayed right there. Afterwards the woman told my friend she was so grateful that she would stop, listen to her and then pray.* We are surrounded by people who need hope. Jesus is the source of all real hope. Our privilege is to simply connect other people to Jesus. Each person in tune and responsive to Jesus can be involved in important mission work right where he or she is every day. It is vital that you and I are equipped to serve as individuals. We need the wisdom, skill, and Holy Spirit power to love people in all sorts of situations. It is as equally important to be in a serving community with others.

You and I can also do mission together by serving on mission teams and projects here in the city, around the country, or even in another part of the world. We have mission teams go to do construction work at Camp Donegal in York County, home repair in West Virginia, medical teams in Honduras and Kenya. We have a team of drivers and tutors that serve our Future Generations after school program. We join other churches in serving meals and hosting overnight housing during the winter months. Together we have raised

money for school uniforms, rent of men and women coming out of prison, and to support the work of campus ministries at Millersville University, Franklin and Marshall, Penn State Harrisburg, and our friends, Michael and Bev Harrar in Tanzania. There are many effective ways to serve with others. None of these strategies are “missional communities”.

A missional community is a group of 30 to 50 people who are committed to do mission together for a sizeable season with a particular missional focus. This could be for six to nine months. They are committed to do life together so they can more effectively be nurtured, trained, and shaped to serve in Jesus’ name. They would meet together at a time and place that would best serve their mission focus. Many missional communities would gather monthly to worship, pray, learn, care and support each other. They would also discuss and plan how they are going to serve. Each community would be guided by volunteer facilitators, but everyone would be involved in contributing to the mission of group. Over the next three months Dan and I are going to slowly unpack what these groups can look like and how they will function day to day. We believe that our missional communities will give us a new way of serving together that will greatly transform us as we seek Jesus. *(see our links tour blog).*

<http://cherrystreetconversations.wordpress.com/conversations-on-mission-shaped-communities/> and <http://congruentchurch.wordpress.com/2011/08/27/what-is-the-missional-church/>.

As I look at this pilgrim in our stained glass window, I have one question, “Why are you alone?” I know we each have our own life to live, our own race to run, but I do not believe we were ever expected to do it alone. We are designed to work most effectively in community. We come with our particular gifts and abilities and we allow Jesus, the head of the body and the church, to help us all function together in ways that bless the world.