



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Wiser Than its Members”

Hebrews 12:1-2

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The presidential election of 2016 was over a year away, but the political debates were raging. One debate was about who should be allowed in our country?

- What about undocumented workers?
- What about the legal path to immigration; should it grow wider or be more restricted?
- Should we build a wall?
- What about war refugees? There were hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in bordering countries, with the bulk of them in Germany and German resources were strained to meet their needs.

A friend and I were having a discussion about whether or not our country should help relieve the strain and bring some of those Syrian refugees from Germany to America. (My friend gave me permission to talk about this conversation). One of us thought that this country should do so and do our part and the other of us was worried about potential terrorists who might be among those who were brought in. We were not arguing. We don't do that, but it was a disagreement.

And then the conversation took a *wonderful, graceful turn*. One of us said something like this: “Let's forget policy for a moment. This is a massive humanitarian crisis. These refugees have lost everything, and it is an enormous strain just to keep them fed and sheltered. What can we as Christians do right now? How can Second Presbyterian Church respond?”

In the blink of an eye, we were on the same page. My friend was an elder at the time who served on the Stewardship Committee which had *just* asked the session to set aside loose plate



offerings for specific mission needs. He proposed to the session that we communicate to the congregation the magnitude of the Syrian crisis and that the congregation be given the opportunity to contribute to Syrian Refugee Relief with their next month's free plate offering.

Side note: Our church had recently offered a seminar on immigration policy and 20 people came. That's enough people to justify the seminar, but I would not call that a massive response.

But given the opportunity to actually *do* something to help, the response *was* massive. And then a few years later, the congregation had an opportunity to help with refugees at Massanetta; this time with visits and donations as well as money. Of course, people who helped had different ideas about immigration and refugee policy, but our tradition of compassion carried us all. Often, the church is wiser than its members.

Think about that possibility in light of the biblical book of Hebrews. Listen to the reading of the first two verses of chapter 12.

Hebrews 12:1-2:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Sometimes—many times—the church is wiser than its members.

I use the term, “church,” loosely to refer not only to a faith community, but also to that faith and tradition that feeds that community. So when the Preacher of Hebrews preaches his sermon, he speaks not only to the Jewish Christians in that make up his audience, but also to the faith and tradition of their ancestors, the faith and tradition of Judaism. In this Jewish-Christian community, there is a lot of deconstruction of Judaism going on. Some don't see their new Christian faith as a development, but as a rebellion and a new thing. And to justify what is already a growing schism between Jews and Christians, they are attracted to those who want to say that the old faith is outdated and no longer relevant.

The Preacher of Hebrews does talk about fresh expressions of faith in God. In his book, he says,

- The Judgement of the Law has to, in the end, give way to the Salvation of Grace.
- The sacrifice of animals is no longer necessary it is replaced by the sacrifice that was life of Jesus.
- Hired priests in the Temple are no needed to address our sins, for we now have Jesus who is the Great High Priest.

However, while the Preacher clearly is a theologian of change, I do not see him as a deconstructionist. By chapters 11 and 12 we learn how much appreciation and respect he has for what has been passed on to the Jewish Christians of his church. Everything he wants to say about



Jesus, he sees as a flowering of the ancient faith. In a way, he would like them to know that *the faith of their ancestors was often wiser than their ancestors.*

His sermon hits a fever pitch by the time it gets to chapter 11. In chapter 11, he tells story after story of ancestors who could be deconstructed and dismissed for their flaws and failings. He tells of Abraham who had some major *fails* in his life like passing his wife off as his sister and abandoning one of his sons. But the preacher wants you to remember that when Abraham's story is fully told, it is a story about faith carrying Abraham to where he needed to go.

He tells of Jacob who brings *blessings* to his family—the family that he had earlier in life ripped off and took advantage of.

He tells of Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, who put her life at risk saving the lives of Jewish spies.

The Preacher tells a lot of stories like these because he wants his readers to carry forward the wisdom of the faith of these sinners as they, in their own flawed ways, follow Jesus. At the beginning of chapter 12 he says (and I'm paraphrasing), "Look at the cloud of witnesses who have gone before you. Like you, they messed up. They were not perfect and, if we wanted, we could let their sins cling closely to their reputations to justify why maybe we should disown them and leave them behind. But don't do that because the faith that carried them carries us."

In fact, notice that when he speaks of "sins that cling too tightly," he is really speaking not to their sins, but to the sins of his congregation. You see, they can just as easily parse what is wrong about themselves as they can about their Jewish forebears, and they can get so caught up in this journey of shame that they become paralyzed to do their part to be the next generation of God's witnesses. "Look to Jesus," he says, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross and despised that shame." He despised the lasting stain of shame that can be so focused on how far we fall short that we feel too unworthy to move forward. "Don't fall back into shame," he says, "but move forward as imperfect people who—like Abraham, Rahab and Jacob—somehow make a witness despite their flaws and mistakes."

A few weeks ago, Bill Lee and I were having lunch together at Montanos to plan the next *Bible in Black and White* session. I talked about this passage and how it seems so often that a healthy congregation is so much wiser than its members. I am preaching this sermon today because Bill strongly encouraged me to talk about this with you. You see, Bill, as a Roanoke minister who has served an African-American church in a distressed neighborhood for half a century, he's known many of the members of Second Presbyterian Church. And he knows our congregation.

Keep in mind that the purpose of the class was to help white and black folks consider how the Bible is seen differently from different cultural perspectives. Obviously, there is a lot to be learned both ways, and obviously there is a lot we at Second Presbyterian have to learn about racial and social inequities; about system problems that need to be addressed. We could be wiser about issues of race.

But what this church looks like to Bill Lee is different from what some of us see. Let me tell you a little bit about how this church has looked from his perspective and why I suggest that sometimes the church is wiser than its members.



It would not be a shock to you that back in the pre-civil rights days, there were members of this church who were racist and did not hide it. We're not naïve. But what about the church?

But, while many white southern churches of all mainline denominations had an enforced policy of segregation, this church never, ever, closed its doors and never seriously considered it. Again, I am sure some members back then would have liked the church to be all-white, but the doors stayed open because sometimes the church can be wiser than some of its members.

There happened in Roanoke, as in many cities across the country, a decimation of neighborhoods. In Roanoke, families migrated from this southwest community to the suburbs, with many of our members moving to the new community of South Roanoke. The makeup of this SW community changed and housing values plummeted. In many cities where this happened, churches moved right along with their members. This included Presbyterian churches. A lot of the Presbyterian churches that moved had "First" in their name because being the first Presbyterian church established in the city, their buildings were in the heart of downtown:

First Nashville moved,
First Ann Arbor moved,
First Richmond moved,
First Roanoke moved.

We can't judge all these church's motives. Sometimes moving can be for the simple reason of parking as more people drove to church than walked. But there were places where race was a major factor.

Dr. Edmunds, Dr. Hollingsworth, and Dr. Klein heard from members who thought that this church should move as well. Never happened, and never came close to happening. This church stayed right here because here is where we can best serve the needs of the whole city. Sometimes the church is wiser than its members.

Other neighborhoods were decimated. The thriving black Gainsboro community was destroyed when eminent domain was used to place the I-581 corridor right through it. And when the VISCOSE plant shut down and there were no employers to replace it, the southeast community went from being a strong blue-collar community to being an impoverished one.

Maybe individual members of this church didn't care what happened to those neighborhoods or didn't know enough to be upset. Maybe some were involved in decisions that could have been better made. Certainly, there is history to be learned and issues of poverty and race to be better understood by those of us who do not live in those communities.

But Bill has seen this church do more than possibly any other church in Roanoke to establish, support, and expand ministries that seek not only to meet immediate needs but also heal and restore the neighborhoods.

An example. Because of our Mission Build campaign, we have been given the right to name a large room in the new Presbyterian Community Center facility after it is constructed. The session decided to give this name to our room: "The Founder's Room" in honor of Ben Sparks and Ted



Edlick. Ben and Ted are two Presbyterian ministers who worked out of this congregation to create the Center. They first worked out of space in a building on what is now our Mountain Ave. parking lot.

Then, over the years, this church provided countless board members and volunteers, plus many hundreds of thousands of dollars, to fuel the center's efforts to not only meet needs but restore the community.

Now, no doubt, over the years many members have been ignorant of the conditions of southeast, and perhaps some thought of it as a neighborhood to be avoided except to drive through it. And we continue to have our opinions about how to address poverty, and I'm sure some of those opinions need a little education. Meanwhile, the church, which is often wiser than its members, keeps strongly supporting ministries that actually address the problems.

I could keep going. There is now unintentional bias baked into housing and health care that I do not fully understand. There are local problems of opioid and drug abuse, education issues, debates about the current state of our democracy... There is so much to be studied and learned, and our flaws and mistakes are going to show themselves as we learn them.

But Bill would tell us this. While studying, and debating, and thinking about issues, *don't stop* carrying forward what has been passed on to us here at this church.

- Keep building Habitat houses and give support to the potentially homeless for who needs.
- Keep supporting the health ministries out of Loudon Ave Church and at the Horizons Health Clinic to help those who are under-insured and under-served.
- Keep being the church where when there is a Category 5 hurricane that hits the gulf coast, or a tsunamic that hits overseas, or when a pandemic hits, asks first the question, "What can we do?"

And *please, please, please*, do not go backwards and undo what the greater wisdom of the church has passed on to us because the Roanoke region counts on us far more than we know. Don't let our individual sins—those we know and those we don't know—cling so closely that our generation skips making its own witness of compassion.

I see this as cheerleading because I see us making a witness.

Imagine God knowing our inner thoughts. It really is OK if we sound like a fool sometimes to God, so long as we don't make a god of our foolishness. There is out there, and I think there is within this congregation, a faith and a tradition that will carry us as we become the next generation of those who do not let our sins cling so closely but who continue to look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

