

On the occasion of our 275th Anniversary year, as I stand behind this historic pulpit, I am reminded of those who have gone before us. I think of those early settler families, like the McPhersons and Blacks, who sacrificed to build a log church building and pay for the services of a pastor under very difficult circumstances. I am reminded of the leaders mentioned in our bulletin today who helped to found Dickinson College in 1783 and set the pattern that members of this church would be community leaders, contributing to the greater good of our society. I think of those who later decided to move the congregation into Gettysburg around 1813, a decision that came after long and spirited debate! I think of the women of this congregation who ministered to the wounded and dying during and after the battle, and who engaged in arduous cleanup efforts so their sanctuary could be used again for worship.

The congregation became engaged in the Temperance movement in 1912, believing this was the best way to fight against the devastating effects of alcoholism on families. In 1917 the members of the congregation reached out with hospitality to soldiers being trained nearby for the 1st World War. One of those who received the church's hospitality was Capt. Dwight Eisenhower.

I think of Rev. Bob MacAskill, a gifted pastor who ministered to the Eisenhower family, hosted a weekly radio program, began the summer

amphitheatre services, served the poor in this community, and started the Men's Interfaith Lunch along with Judge MacPhail (who sends his greetings to us from SC). Rev. MacAskill also oversaw the difficult decision to renovate this historic sanctuary.

I think of Miriam Robert, who served as the first woman elder of this congregation in 1969, and if you don't think that took courage, you weren't paying attention! And I think of Rev. Dan Hans, who served as the President of Habitat for Humanity, and helped launch hands-on mission trips to Honduras and South Dakota. He also began the Bethel Bible and Alpha courses here, beginning a vital tradition of intensive Bible study that continues today with the Disciple classes.

In addition, I think of countless elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth workers, musicians, custodians, and bookkeepers who worked to further the mission of this congregation for the last 275 years. We can look back upon a rich heritage, can't we?

The writer of the book of Hebrews also looks back, creating a list of those who had gone before the Christians of his day, those who made a difference. In chapter 11, he looks back all the way to Genesis, naming Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham. He mentions Rahab and other heroes and heroines of the faith, who showed great courage in remaining faithful to God even against fierce and sometimes lethal opposition. But he doesn't stop there, leaving his readers to bask in a cloud of historic nostalgia. He

helps them see how those who went before still make a difference to them as they are living their Christian lives at that very moment. Listen to what he writes.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebr. 12:1-3)

The image here is wonderful! The Christian life is compared to running a race. Those who have gone before us are now a “great cloud of witnesses” to this race, watching us, cheering us on as spectators as we now run. They have handed the baton off to us and now we run the race that they previously began while they root for us from the stands. On this day, we can imagine those who have gone before us at GPC, watching as we continue the work they began!

After stirring our imagination with this image, the writer says three important things to us as we take our turn running the race. First, “...*let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.*” (Heb. 12:1) When runners prepare to race, they get rid of any extra weight, even

wearing the lightest shoes and clothing they can. Likewise, the writer instructs us to get rid of any extra spiritual weight we may be carrying, specifically, the weight of sin. Certainly, personal sin can weigh us down—greed, lust, self-centeredness, and coveting what others have. These need to be admitted, confessed, and gotten rid of.

But I wonder if the social, relational sins are the ones that weigh us down most as we seek to do what God is calling us to do together as a church. Gossip, slander, a lack of kindness, holding grudges and failing to forgive. These drag us down as we try and run the race together. And there is one more specific relational sin that seems to beset us here in at GPC. I've seen it and experienced the results of it several times. There is a tendency here to read motives (usually bad ones!) into the actions of others and then share that insight with others. "Well, I know why she did that!" someone will say. And then we will share our opinion with others as if we really know some ulterior motive of the other person, without ever asking the person face-to-face! I believe this is exactly the sin that Jesus had in mind when he commanded us to refrain from judging one another. We pretend to know what only God can fully know, knowing what is in the human heart.

It's not only unfair to the other person, but when we read motives into someone else's behavior, we build walls between members of the Christian community. You see, after we have told someone why we believe

someone else has said or done a certain thing, our “judgmental insight” taints their view of that person from that time forward. And that damages our community. The writer of Hebrews commands us to lay aside the weight of sin that so easily besets us. Let’s do that!

Next, he lifts up the virtue of perseverance. “...*let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*” (Hebr. 12:1b) John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania finished last in the Marathon in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. When he finally arrived back at the stadium to finish the race, he was limping badly as he made his way around the track, his right leg heavily bandaged. A reporter went up to him and said, “You’re bloodied and in great pain. Why did you keep going?” Akhwari replied, “My country didn’t send me here to start the race. My country sent me here to finish it!” Perseverance.

The race isn’t over for GPC, even after 275 years. I believe God still has much for us to do here in our community, throughout our nation, and throughout the world. We’re called to persevere in this race we call the Christian life and finish it strong. Now, these are difficult times to be the church. Our values- like compassion, tolerance, hospitality, caring for the poor, purity, avoiding violence and protecting life- are no longer in vogue in many parts of our society. Just listen to the words of some of our political candidates recently. The church has become a much more counter-cultural institution than we were in the 1950’s, for example. Fewer of our

fellow citizens are interested in church at all. In addition, there are many more activities that now compete for the time and energy of our people, many of them happening on Sunday mornings. These are challenging times to be the church.

But God calls us to persevere. To worship God together each week. To proclaim the Word of God and the love of God to all people. To demonstrate God's love with ministries of compassion and justice. To train our children and adults in the ways of Christian faith. To make disciples. In some cases we must find new ways to do these things, using social media, for example. Lou has been helping us with this on our Facebook page, which I encourage you to check out!

But, in spite of new ways of doing some things, many people will find what we do to be quaint and out-of-touch. Still, we persevere in doing the things God has always called the church to do.

And, finally, we are encouraged as we do so by the example of Jesus Christ. *"...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart."* (Hebr. 12:2-3)

Whether in our church life or in your personal life, Jesus knows what it is like to persevere even though it seems like what we're doing isn't

making a difference. He knows what its like to proclaim the good news to people who don't want to hear it. He knows what it is like to suffer because of our beliefs and practices. He knows what its like to be just plain tired of doing the right thing. He knows. And his example encourages us not to lose heart. Because just as God was at work even during Jesus' darkest times, God is at work in the life of this church today. And in your personal life, too.

As we celebrate our 275th anniversary year, let's remember and honor those who have gone before us. But let's not stop there. They have passed the baton to us as we continue to run the next stage of the race they began. Let us be faithful as we run, let us persevere, let us live as those who are being changed by the grace of our Savior, let us serve God creatively and energetically, and never lose heart.