

“Running Together”
Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56
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If you ever dig into your family history, and sometimes you don't have to dig very deep, you're likely to find that you are related to some interesting people. They might be interesting because they were (or are) famous or because they did something noteworthy. I'm not the family historian, but I did verify that I have a distant cousin who came to America as a passenger on the Mayflower. That's kind of noteworthy, and I know that in my ancestry, there's a story of at least one villain. There's a story about a “wicked stepmother,” who was really an aunt, who made my great grandmother the Cinderella of the household and led my great grandmother to believe that she was unloved and unwanted by her father. He did sort of abandon her when he ran away to Alaska because he was heartbroken over the death of her mother who died of tuberculosis when my great grandmother was only two. He left my great grandmother in the care of Aunt Carrie, and he wrote letters and sent money regularly, but Aunt Carrie burned all the letters and kept the money leading my great grandmother to believe that she had been completely abandoned by her father.

Every family tree probably has some people that you're proud to claim and maybe one or two that you'd rather not, but no matter what they are your relatives. In today's reading from Hebrews, the author gives us a little snapshot of some of the members of our spiritual family tree and just like our biological family trees, our spiritual family tree is a mixed bag of characters. Some of them did some very brave and good things. Some of them did some stupid and even evil things. Some of them, like David, did both. Some of them faced threats and danger victoriously, and some of them suffered persecution and

injustice. What they all had in common with each other and with us is that they had a relationship with God through faith. They were members of God's family, not because they were perfect people, but because they received mercy, and they responded to God's grace and mercy with faith that was expressed through their lives and actions. Regardless of whatever victories or failures marked their lives, it's the faith of our spiritual ancestors that marked them as God's own and set them apart in the world. This is how we become members of this spiritual family: by believing that we have received God's mercy and by responding to that mercy with a commitment to live in obedience to God. In our baptism both *God's* promises to *us* and *our* promises to *God* are confirmed, and in our baptism, we are marked as God's own and as a people set apart. Another way to describe being people who are marked and set apart might be to say that we are separated out or divided from the unbelieving and the unbaptized.

Now we have to take a minute to talk about this word *divided* because we know too well that division is something that often creates pain and suffering in human relationships. We want less division not more, which is why we find it so jarring when we hear Jesus say in our Gospel passage that he didn't come to bring peace but division. Didn't Jesus come to heal divisions and to deliver us from the sins that cause them? That's what the prophets, and the Gospels, and Jesus himself says so why does Jesus talk about bringing division and how are we to understand being a faith family that is set apart as something good? Doesn't this just encourage more unhealthy "us vs. them" thinking and behavior? Well, it *can* if we think that Jesus was talking about dividing people into the kind of exclusive and hateful groups that sinful people are so good at dividing ourselves into or if we think that being set apart as members of God's family is some kind of mark of superiority, but this isn't what Jesus was talking about.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus is talking about judgment and judgment naturally brings division. In this case, Jesus is referring to a

division between those who would believe and follow Jesus and those who wouldn't. Jesus is the revelation of God who came into the world to reveal the truth about who God is and how we can have peace with God and in our lives, and in so doing he also exposed sin and evil for what they are which is part of what judgement is – exposing the truth about things. Sin is our resistance to and rebellion against God. It leads to death, and this truth was exposed most clearly through Jesus's death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus experienced God's judgment and wrath when God didn't intervene to save him. Instead, God allowed human pride and rebellion to run their course, and the natural consequence was that humans chose to kill Jesus rather than trust and submit to him. Theologians describe what Jesus experienced as the passive wrath or judgement of God, and Jesus experienced the full measurement of it. The beauty of the cross is that there, God exposed the truth that sin leads to death but then *transformed* this supreme act of human sin and evil into the means by which sinners obtain God's mercy. Jesus experienced the full consequences of and judgment for all of our sin and because he did we don't have to. As the prophet Isaiah says, "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed." Understanding that Jesus makes his comment about division in the context of talking about judgment helps us understand his remark about bringing division rather than peace.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus lived and shared God's truth and invited people to believe him and follow him in living a different way and some people did believe him and did follow him, but others did not. Some insisted on resisting Jesus and his teachings. They saw him as a troublemaker and a blasphemer, and they wanted no part of him or the kingdom that he was inviting them to be part of. Those who didn't want to be part of it were naturally divided from those who did – not because Jesus was saying they couldn't be part of it but because they were self-excluding by their own choice. He did invite people to follow him and become part of what he was doing, and a

community of people did form around him, a community that was set apart, but this wasn't like a cool kid trying to form an exclusive clique around himself in high school. The purpose of the group he was forming was that they would become a community that would show through their lives and life together the new and transformed way of living that Jesus came to make possible, and when those who weren't yet part of it saw the way this new community lived they might be compelled to change their minds about their lives and choices and about Jesus and become part of it, too.

When we go back to our passage from Hebrews, we are reminded that when we live as people of faith in this world, there is a real sense in which we are divided out because of our faith. That does make us different, and we feel it sometimes. This is part of the point that author of Hebrews is making when he talks about our spiritual ancestors in Hebrews 11. They seemed kind of weird to others – think Noah building an ark when it wasn't raining or John the Baptist living out in the wilderness eating locusts. They did brave, non-mainstream things, and they had unusual, sometimes terrible, experiences because of their faith in God. This was true of our spiritual family members who went before us, and we can expect that we will be different and everyone won't always understand or like the things we do or don't do because of our faith. Some people take a lot of pleasure in being non-conformists, but it's not easy to be the one going against the grain. There are times when it can be painful and difficult to stand up and do or say the things that no one else is doing or saying, and when those times come, we may feel a temptation to doubt what we have believed or to just give up on following a Savior who leads us to live differently than those around us.

I remember a time like this in my life as a young adult. I was spending more time with people who were not yet a part of the family of God who did not share my faith than I was with people in my faith family, and I began to feel the weight of being strange. The more my friends questioned my choices and wondered why I was the way I

was, the more I questioned my choices and wondered the same thing. Thankfully, by God's grace, I did remain connected to my faith family, and they were the source of encouragement that I needed to help me keep going. They didn't even necessarily know that they were encouraging me, but just by showing up faithfully to church for worship on Sundays, they showed me that I wasn't a lone believer and that encouraged me to keep going and hold on to the God who was holding on to me. This is a gift that we can and that we are meant to give to each other, and like my faithful church friends, sometimes we can do it without even realizing by showing up for worship, or making time for Bible study, or delivering meals on wheels, or going to iCare meetings we are giving strength to our brothers and sisters who need some strength and encouragement.

When I was more devoted to running I had a friend that I ran with sometimes when I was training for a half marathon. I never trained for a longer race than that, but several years ago my friend began training for 100 miler races. Now I think he even does 200 milers. That's a long race, and like all races, you do the running, but you don't do it without help. When Jeff does a race like that there is a team of people that help him. They set up stations along the route where he can rest and rehydrate and help him if he gets an injury. There are also pacers, people who will run a portion of the race with him to help him keep going. As people of faith, the race we are running is much more like a 100 miler than a 50 yard dash. We are running a long race which is hard enough as it is, but as we run after Jesus, we are also running against the flow of a lot of other runners out there who are running after a different goal. It's not easy to keep going, or to keep running in the right direction so we need the people around us who can be like Jeff's team supporting us, offering refreshment or bandages for our blisters, running at our side when we are tired and don't want to keep going. That support team is the family of faith that we belong to. We are meant to be with and for each other, and we need to do that and

be that to each other because we all want to finish the race that has been set out for us.

There is a temptation that we experience regularly within the family of faith, and it is the temptation to *not* be for each other. It is the temptation to be critical, and judgmental, and impatient, and angry with our spiritual siblings over all kinds of things and to forget what a gift and blessing it is to be surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses who are pressing toward the same goal as we are. We can be realistic about the fact that it can be hard to get along and that it takes great effort and lots of grace because like I said at the beginning, we're a mixed bag of people and just because we're family doesn't mean that everyone in the family is your cup of tea or that you are everyone else's, *but* we need to ask Jesus for help and make the effort to support, and lift up, and encourage one another. My faith needs it so I can keep running, and I'm sure yours does too. We need to keep running so that we can finish well, and we've been reminded today that it also isn't just about us. Jesus has set us apart and called us to live together in a way that reveals his kingdom and his will for human life and relationships so that others can see that the new life Jesus offers is real. This is our mission to share this good news and to share it through the example that we set together when we faithfully follow Jesus and live together in his love and peace. Amen.

