

Blessed Imperfection

**A Sermon by the Rev. Brian D. Ellison
House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, Minnesota
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Text: Hebrews 11:29-12:2

My partner Troy and I had the incredible opportunity a couple of weeks ago to cross a few new countries off our bucket list of places to visit in the world – the Baltic republics in northern Europe. Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania are places of rich heritage, beautiful cities, natural beauty. And the stories of the people who live there are rich and beautiful, too – but also ... complicated.

One of the memories I'll be carrying ... and working through ... a long time, was from the day we spent in Riga, the capital of Latvia. Yes, we enjoyed some local delicacies and beverages, and I highly recommend all of them (... in moderation). But the memory I'm wrestling with was from the couple of hours I spent at the newly built Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. It's a striking building – the former site of a Soviet military museum – gutted and renovated to tell the story of a healthy, functioning democracy that over the course of 50 years from 1939 to 1989 was occupied – first, by the Soviet Union in a secret deal with the Nazi government of Germany – then by the Nazis themselves who held out the promise of restoration only to draw the Latvians into war and holocaust – and then finally in 1944 by the Soviets again, with Stalin promising liberation but after the war was over fully suppressing a people who had only six years before been free. All told 180,000 Latvians died in those first years, between deportations, war deaths in forced military service, and removal to concentration camps. Many more would die in the decades that followed.

The museum—which just opened in this new space in June of this year—stands right off the town square, prominent in its starkness alongside ancient buildings and charming cobblestones. It stands there almost defiantly, beckoning to the people who live there and to the many tourists passing through as they load off of cruise ships or follow tours across the continent. The walls of photos, the timelines, the voices, the uniforms, they all seem to say: You can't really say you understand this country by tasting the sprats and sweet potato dumplings and black peas, the black balsam and caraway liqueurs – you can't understand our identity as Latvians – if you don't also know about the things that have challenged us, threatened us, shaped us, but not defeated us.

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The 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews is a chapter of the Bible I grew up learning to call the "Hall of Faith." It is history, after a fashion. It paints a picture of a people – God's people – although it is a bit of a curious way of telling the story.

Hebrews 11, which we have joined very late in the recitation in this morning's reading, offers a laundry list of some of the Bible's great heroes – an all-star team of servants of God.

It's not unusual in ancient literature to find lists of great persons like this, offered to the reader as an inspiration, an example. If you play your cards right, if you work hard and live as you should, you too might one day be named in a list like this. You might obtain the honor and recognition to which your virtuous, high-achieving behavior rightly entitles you.

But there's something a little off about this particular listing, which reads like a march being played at a steady rhythm but where the notes are starting to go slightly off key. We recognize the names from Sunday School perhaps... Abraham and Isaac, Joseph and Moses. We pick it up at the Israelites who passed through the Red Sea Moses had parted, and Rahab the prostitute. So long a list that the author throws his hands up ... *time would fail me to tell of, oh you know, David and Samuel and the rest.*

But what's a little off is what is being celebrated about these so-called heroes. These are not tales of unparalleled military triumph, or uncompromised moral purity. They are tales of leaders who struggled to maintain control of a rebellious people. Of deliverance that came only with accompanying cost of death and destruction. The celebrated Rahab lived an outcast life and succeeded by lying. And many of these positive examples of faith saw no liberation, but only sorrow. The reward for devotion was inadequate apparel and poor housing conditions. Maybe a few of you remember the children's hymn "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God" – it's in our hymnals, and it's based in part on this passage.... If you're board with the sermon you can look it up in the hymnal. Let me refresh your memory with a bit of it....

*I sing a song of the saints of God,
patient and brave and true,
who toiled and fought and lived and died
for the Lord they loved and knew.*

And then in each verse, the good part...

*And one was a soldier, and one was a priest,
and one was slain by a fierce wild beast:
and there's not any reason, no, not the least,
why I shouldn't be one too.¹*

Well sure there is, friend. You might be slain by a fierce wild beast! Isn't that reason enough?! We have children sing this?!

Honestly this litany of God's people experiencing setbacks and sorrow, shortcomings and shortfalls, unfulfilled expectations and good guys finishing last and races never finished at all It could all be a little discouraging. Unless ... there is something important ... something essential ... about understanding who the saints of God are ... who we are ... something that includes struggle, alongside the success.

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¹ Lesbia Scott, "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," published in *Everyday Hymns for Little Children*, 1929.

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians is celebrating its 25th anniversary this month. We have been advocating for the full inclusion and affirmation of LGBTQIA+ people in the life of the church through many twists and turns this past quarter-century, and you at the House of Hope have been right there with us almost from the beginning. It seems right for me to be here with you in this year of your own reflections on your life and ministry. "There Is Hope" indeed, even amidst challenging transitions, and the hope is secured in part by your commitment to provide a space for all God's people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and to build a community and world that does the same.

I have to say that the history of that work across the Presbyterian Church as a whole, the history we're celebrating in this anniversary year, has – in its own way – been filled with struggle and setbacks, but also considerable success. I've been in this role for a decade now, and even since I last preached here in 2013, much has changed: Dozens of openly LGBTQIA+ people are now ordained ministers and surely hundreds are ruling elders and deacons. Hundreds of same-sex marriages have now be performed – legally in the eyes of church and state – in Presbyterian sanctuaries, and not just in the courtyard. The General Assembly has taken positions of support for transgender and non-binary people. We could assemble our own little "hall of faith."

But if it is to be an honest story, it has to include its own hefty share of painful acknowledgements. That there are few presbyteries where openly queer ministers are truly seen as equal or given the same opportunities. That there are many churches that haven't discussed being more welcoming at all, or have frankly decided not to be. Even the churches that have done some work still struggle with how to show the hospitality and generosity they hold in their hearts. This passage through the Red Sea of exclusion and disorientation and discrimination is far from over. Hope remains ... but it is hope not yet realized.

So what do we do with that? Indeed, what do any of us do with the fact that we have often walked this road of faith, carried burdens with courage and endurance, done the right things or sought the right answers ... and still, the imperfection lingers. Victories are costly or elusive. Struggles, public and private, persist.

Perhaps the author of Hebrews can help.

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 ... (Hebrews 12:1-2a).

Ah.. Jesus. Not a Jesus who has merely done the work of suffering for us, but Jesus, who set an example for us of what life in the midst of imperfection looks like.

Jesus, whose own triumphal entry launched a journey not to a throne but to a cross, whose crown was made of thorns, whose very resurrection was reported in the dark, and disputed, and disbelieved by his closest disciples.

Jesus, who we are told, goes before us, and with us, on whatever this road may be.

If as Hebrews says, Jesus is our example, then we are led to a reality as stark as that museum standing in the midst of Riga's town square: **Faith that is perfected requires imperfection.** The identity of a child of God is of one whose journey is not easy or yet complete.

On a day when we baptize a child—when we mark the identity of our newest member as belonging to the community of saints, we are saying that this fellowship into which Benjamin Christopher, together with all of us, is initiated is not a choir of perfect angels but a motley mess. Not a group that can be satisfied or smug with its progress but rather painfully aware of its brokenness. Our baptism is into the life of the crucified and risen Christ, and that is who we are. It is our identity. Blessedly imperfect.

And maybe you'll hear this as comfort, knowing that whatever fear we hold about the future of our country or our family or our work or our health or our church ... we are not alone.

And maybe you'll hear this as a call to action, recommitting yourself to the road, knowing that the hard work is not in vain, but honored as part of God's story.

And maybe you'll hear this as an invitation to see yourself in a new way, to understand your siblings in Christ in a new way, as sojourners enduring present challenges for the sake of joy that is set before us.

None of this, of course, is a matter of just trying to glory in suffering, it is rather about living with a certain humility. It is not a matter of accepting death or destruction as good, but rather facing whatever comes with dignity even as we seek a deeper life and wholeness.

One of the great gifts that LGBTQIA+ people have to offer the church, borne of long and painful experience, is the reality that God embraces the fullness of our identity – all of us – even when others do not, even when we don't embrace it in ourselves. And so it is true for everyone here today: Whatever we carry, God embraces the fullness of us. Even our faltering steps, even blessed imperfection. And that is who we are.

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The tension in Latvia this summer ... and in Estonia and Lithuania, too ... was palpable. It was hard not to see in the mind's eye the shellings happening in Kiev and Donetsk as one walked through the urbane and relatively defenseless cities of Riga, Latvia, or Tallinn, Estonia. As those countries have gone all-in on their advocacy for a free Ukraine, one knows their own history is part of that fervor.

You see, there is something else that happens, when you embrace the imperfect parts of your story, when you understand who you are as including the parts that are hard to talk about. It feeds your hope.

At the end of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, is the story of what happened in 1989 and after. As the Berlin Wall was falling and the Soviet Union was crumbling, the long burgeoning movement for a return to independence and democracy was rising to its moment of glory. And in May of 1990, the Latvian legislature declared the nation's return to independence. It reinstated its 1922 democratic constitution. And in 1991, the Soviet Union recognized the nation's full independence.

As you leave the museum, you walk past one last display wall. As you pass, a projector casts the image of a Latvian flag which moves with you down the wall, which contains just a single quote in large letters, from the Latvian poet and journalist and longtime Soviet political prisoner, Knuts Skujunieks —who died last month, just weeks after the museum opened, and just four days before my visit. The quote reads:

*Do not shed your tears for yesterday
Do not fear what comes tomorrow
Just in a steadfast, measured way
Plough your furrow – straight and narrow.*

Friends, even as we endure challenging times, let us draw hope from our imperfect story. Let us keep ploughing our furrow in a steadfast, measured way, without fear. And ... *Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, ... let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.*

May it be so. Amen.