

# **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle**

## **Receiving The Promise Together**

**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**

## **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15) Analysis by Carolyn Schneider**

11:29By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. 30By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. 31By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. 32And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets – 33who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, 34quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. 35Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. 37They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented – 38of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 39Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12:1Therefore, 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, 2looking 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.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Settling for Small Promises**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Unpromising Appearances*

Hebrews 11 goes through name after name, generation after generation of people in Israel's history as examples meant to encourage readers in their faith in God's promise: that they have a happy future with God and all God's people. Holding up these ancient examples of faith, however, was a risk on the author's part that could have backfired. These were a people weary of fighting in apparently futility against the world. They could easily have noted that the struggle of that great "cloud of witnesses" from the past seemed to have brought no lasting improvement in the world, and furthermore, that the witnesses themselves were badly flawed. What kind of role model is Rahab, the prostitute and traitor to her own people (Joshua 2:1-21)? What about Gideon, who slaughtered many people and who made an idol from the gold of those he conquered (Judges 7-8)? Sampson was no better, nor were the rest on the list. It would be easy to perceive in these examples as those who gave in to the fear of death and took the quick victory. Why not? After all, those on the list of witnesses who did resist ended up miserable or dead. And to what purpose? The author himself admits that "they did not receive what was promised..." (11:39).

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Every Generation for Itself*

The author of Hebrews must have been aware that the Christians of his generation were feeling the pinch of being a minority group. The rewards of this life must have looked so good to them that they were tempted to believe that this life is all there is. But those who consider previous generations of no account because they feel that their own generation is the best, or the worst, or the most important, or the only generation, also render themselves of no value in the future. The every-generation-for-itself approach leads to the conclusion that it does not matter what you do or how you live. The past is past, and the future holds no guarantee. Why should we struggle? Why not just conform? Sin clings so closely that it can be discouraging, especially when the world promises instant gratification to those who choose to ignore the past or the future.

## **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *Lesser Promises, Lesser Gods, Lesser Standards, Lesser Life*

Besides, how can you trust a God who promises and doesn't deliver, even to those who are tortured, mocked, beaten, imprisoned, stoned, sawn in two, stabbed and exiled because they refuse to compromise justice for the sake of a lesser promise? But to settle for a lesser promise is to settle for a lesser god. There are gods who are lenient with people who think the promise is for them alone, and who find justice too hard or who prefer not to be concerned with the poor. After all, the poor can offer nothing, especially if they are orphans (the unrelated poor of the next generation). But Psalm 82:7 reveals how the living God deals with children of these lesser gods: " 'You shall die like mortals,' like the mortals whose foundations you have shaken." Lest there be some doubt of God's sincerity, Jeremiah reiterates God's conviction: "Is not my word like a

fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (23:29).

## **PROGNOSIS: Obtaining the Big Promise**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Hard-Won Life from a Big-Hearted God***

To avoid this morass of human hedonism and divine damnation, the author rivets his readers' eyes on Jesus, the "founder and finisher of faith" (12:2). This one chose to endure the cross rather than to enjoy a partial, temporary or solitary victory. A win too early is not big enough, and comes from a god who is not big enough. The author of Hebrews describes Jesus as one who calls us brothers and sisters so that his death can stand for ours and can make us people for whom sin has been laid aside. Jesus does not want his victory to leave anyone out, so he comes to his resurrection the hard way, through a shameful death as a sinner, in spite of the temptation to avoid it. The risen Jesus is humanity's future. And the cloud of witnesses testify that in Jesus' resurrection God is creating that future.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *A Faith with Lots of Room for Others***

The faith that Hebrews encourages in any generation is not faith in human goodness, but faith in God's promise fulfilled. What made the ancient Judges of Israel faithful witnesses was not their lackluster goodness, nor their conquest of their enemies, but their firm conviction that God was telling the truth when God assured them of a future for their people in spite of the strong opposition they faced. Having faith does not necessarily result in experiencing victory because it is not victory that is promised—or, at least, the victory that is promised is not complete until all have come through, which Jesus makes possible. We could not win if the witnesses before us had not struggled. They cannot win if we do not struggle. The same is

true for future generations. We finish together. “See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God...” (12:15). Faith hangs on to Christ and the cloud of witnesses testify to that.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – ...In Spite of Appearances**

The community that keeps its eyes on Jesus is not so easily distracted by sin with its lesser promises. But Jesus himself warns that such a group can expect stress, both within their own souls and from others, until the Holy Spirit has seared her way through all generations and has completed everything (Luke 12:49-56).

But even if we struggle throughout our lives with the weight of our particular sin, God’s promise holds, as it did for the not-so-saintly ancient witnesses. God has “promised something better” (11:40) for us because of the faith we share with “so great a cloud of witnesses” (12:1). When everyone is ready, we will all be together in Christ with God, sharing in God’s powerful goodness in a trouble-free world forever.

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An additional submission for your reading enjoyment...

## **The Good Discipline**

### **Hebrews 12:1-13**

### **Analysis by Michael Hoy**

1Therefore, 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, 2looking 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 God. 3Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. 4In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5And you have not forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children—

“My child, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, or lose heart when you are punished by him; 6for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves, and chastises every child whom he accepts.”

7Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? 8If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children. 9Moreover, we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness. 11Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. 12Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, 13and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.

## **THE PROBLEM: Losing the Race**

The Crossings Community U.S.A. has tended to use the term “Diagnosis” to describe what our Australian colleagues simply call “the problem,” or sometimes “our problem.” To be sure, it is our problem—also God’s. “Diagnosis” is a lot more opaque. It derives from the Greek and more clinical use of the term, “seeing through one.” But the basic point of concepts like “diagnosis” or “the problem” are not dissimilar. Both are

attempting to analyze texts, as well as what the clinical pastoral experts have been fond of calling the contemporary text of “our person,” through the lens of God’s law. There is a corresponding use of the terms “Prognosis” and “The Solution,” as we shall see below. “Prognosis” means “seeing one through,” as God-in-Christ does in his promising Word. The Australian equivalent is “the solution,” or “God’s solution.” To be sure, it is God’s solution—though, as we shall see, also ours by faith.

Each of these two main categories have three steps (1, 2 and 3). Here, again, my Australian counterparts are much clearer in the use of terms. The External Problem refers to the problem at the level of behavior—what we might call ethics, or practice. It may not be even perceived as a problem, though that perception difficulty is true at all three steps. The Internal Problem points internally, to the “heart”—what Jesus tends to call our “unbelief.” Here we up-the-ante on the problem, to perceive what is at the heart of our theologically misguided practice. The Eternal Problem is the most critical, and is also the one most often missed—not only in our reading of Scripture or theology, but in our analysis of our own desperate situation. It is rarely public, and perhaps appropriately, since it is between the human being and their God. Nonetheless, it is the de facto state of affairs in the hearer’s condemnation before the divine court.

### **Step 1: The External Problem (Initial Diagnosis) – *Losing the Struggle***

Church father Origen claimed of the book of Hebrews, “Who authored the epistle, truly God alone knows.” Others have sardonically used Hebrews own commentary about the ancient Melchizedek as a commentary on the book as a whole: “without father, without mother, without genealogy” (7:3). Besides the author, we also don’t know a great deal about the recipients, the “Hebrews.”

What we do know about the Hebrews from the text itself is that it was easier to give up in the midst of the pressures to conform to society. The problem for the congregation receiving the "Preacher's" message is known: the Hebrews were giving up their struggle for the faith. They were, simply, "tired," "victims of listlessness . . . like runners overcome by exhaustion and loss of willpower a far distance from the finish line (12:1, 3, 12)." Yet another commentator places the problem before the Preacher to the Hebrews as follows: "His congregation is exhausted. They are tired—tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being peculiar and whispered about in society, tired of the spiritual struggle, tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus. Their hands droop and their knees are weak (12:12), attendance is down at church (10:25), and they are losing confidence. The threat to this congregation is not that they are charging off in the wrong direction; they do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere." Sound familiar?

Thomas Long provides this humorous anecdote to characterize the dilemma for the Hebrews and ourselves:

*According to the old tale, on the wall of a city telephone booth was plastered a sticker that read, "If you are tired of sin, read John 3:16." Below this was scribbled a handwritten note: "If you are not tired of sin, call 555-1176. The Preacher's congregation is tired all right, but they are not exactly tired of sin and it is not precisely accurate to say that they are tired of sainthood either. What they are tired of is the struggle between the two, the constant warfare that trying to be faithful entails.*

I am reminded of a recent story told to me by a seminary professor. One of his students, taking the role of spokesperson



for his wayward class, confronted him: "You think that we're nothing but a bunch of heretics!" To which the professor responded, "Oh, no, I would never say that. Would that you had that much conviction!"

In our own late-twentieth century parishes, at least in the U.S.A., there is often the cry for something new, something exciting, something fun. That can be infectious. Even the clergy can get caught up in being a "crowd pleaser," especially when contributions are at stake. Take, for example, the matter of what many call "worship wars." Some contend that what is sometimes described as the need to convert the world includes adopting more worldly standards for liturgy. Others, often more concerned about abandoning the historic practices, argue for a closer preservation of the tradition. While I will not elaborate here on this point, I would cite one of the best lines I have heard (admittedly from the side of a traditionalist): "Who is converting whom?" That question deserves more careful inspection in the midst of the problem facing the Hebrews, and ourselves. In the midst of the struggle for Christian identity, there is a pressure to give up that identity.

In our postmodern world there is also an abhorrence for any kind of discipline. When I shared this Hebrews text with my family at one of our devotions, there was a strange silence. "Gee, dad, that's a real cheery text," my teenage son said sarcastically. What he heard was all the talk about a parent disciplining his child—although I have never really thought that he has been chastised too much under my parenting. Nevertheless, as my wife chimed in, there are feminists (and my wife is one of them) who rightly insist that this text, among others, has been used as an endorsement for abuse. Clearly the feminists are correct on this point; but the "discipline" of Hebrews is not a sanction for abuse. It is challenging Christians to take seriously their struggle, especially in a world which would encourage conceding

that identity because of the stakes involved. There are costs involved in those (perhaps daily) confessional moments of holding to the struggle when it would be easier to make concessions on matters of finances (one's job, one's promotion, one's economic security), one's social circles, one's intellectual or emotional well-being (loving enemies rather than devising ways to get even; looking foolish for faith convictions), or politics (not being popular with the powers that be). You can see how there is struggle, Christian struggle, in these distinctions. Spirituality is strong, but the preferences are for New Age spiritualities, allowing for an eclectic taste of basically what appeals to our aesthetic sensibilities. Freedom is good, but it so often is appropriated as permissiveness and tolerance. Faculties should be sensitive to their students' learning, but grading standards are often "watered down" so as not to offend students.

The solution is not a quick-fix conservative call for being less-conformist. That is just as poorly "old" as are some of our so-called appeals for "newness." The right-wing insistence on "family values" may have more in common with the left-wing insistence on abandoning marriage as an icon of the past. Nonconformity, in-and-of-itself, is not a solution. It is only the flip-side of being caught in the same problem—of wanting to avoid the struggle.

If there is one truth about being a Christian, it means that there is and will always be, this side of the grave, struggle. It is a struggle between what is new and what is old. To give up the struggle and to "conform"—in any direction—does not spell relief for the Christian or the Christian community. It only spells more serious problems: giving in to the "old," and really, having nothing "new" to contribute. But that also means "not keeping up" in the race.

## **Step 2: The Internal Problem (Advanced Diagnosis) – *Losing Heart***

In the Christian community of the Hebrews, as well as our own today, is the weariness that comes from hearts that have given up. We just don't have the heart for fighting it out anymore. "Quitting" seems the acceptable option.

But quitting is a sign of a more serious spiritual problem. As indicated above, resignation or conceding the struggle does not mean that the problem gets any easier. It means that the heart has accepted "the way things are." There is no more newness, only oldness.

When Christians lose heart and give up the struggle, they get just plain sick and "tired,"

tired of fighting the problems in the city, tired of serving the needs of people who turn away without a word of thanks, tired of battling to keep the church school going, tired of making visits to people who are 'Shopping for a church,' tired of battling their own addictions, their own cravings, tired of fighting off their own desire just to put down the plow and rest along the way. Why not let somebody else break up this rocky ground?

The real loss here is hope. No longer is there hope for a new day coming, there is only the old coming again and again. Not faith, but fate rules the heart of the Christian who is no longer struggling.

## **Step 3: The Eternal Problem (Final Diagnosis) – *Illegitimate***

To make matters worse, there is the impending threat that in the midst of a losing struggle that we seem unable to win, there is the divine judgment that would confirm that we are locked into our hopelessness: that we are "illegitimate." On one occasion or another, some of us, maybe all of us, may have been referred to in such a manner by some personage or another. Perhaps someone we cut off on the road to work, or some person we offended by

our shortness of attention to their concern.

Fact is, these persons may actually be mouthpieces for the divine rebuke. But for us, it is a catch-22. It encourages us to struggle less, to seek the “easier” path, in order to be well-liked or better appreciated coram hominibus (before others), perhaps also thinking that such appreciation is so also coram deo (before God). The suggestion, however, may be more ambiguous than that. In any event, it is not promising news for us. We are not worthy to be considered the children of God when we have abandoned the struggle. And trying to pick it up again, on our own, will not free us from the bondage of our wills, nor the suffering. The Preacher has stiffer warnings for those who have fallen away (6:4-6).

## **THE SOLUTION: Achieving Victory**

These three problematic steps above have three corresponding promissory steps (4, 5, and 6) in “the Solution.” The fourth step is the Eternal Solution, picking up where we left off with the Eternal Problem. Here, the emphasis is on how God’s sending of his Son, Jesus the Christ, makes a difference in regard to our status and standing before God. Indeed, that standing is dramatically and really altered in this new creation, as Jesus shares our place before the divine court—on the cross—taking upon himself what we have coming to us (our\_sin, God’s wrath and the judgment of death) and giving to us what He has coming to Him (righteousness, peace, eternal life). Luther called this “the happy exchange” (der gluckliche Wechsel); others today have called it the “sweet swap.” Christ’s “eternal solution” sparks the Internal Solution of our faith that trusts that promise. Our hearts are reborn in the hope that Christ has given. Ultimately, this leads to a change in our outward behavior and practice, the External Solution of the new obedience and truly “good works” we have in Christ. Who says Lutherans weren’t concerned with good

works? Having the works be truly “good” was Luther’s concern—ours too. But ours also to celebrate as we live and revolutionize the world.

#### **Step 4: The Eternal Solution (Initial Prognosis) – *The Pioneer***

Whatever illegitimacy we may have, the promise we get to enjoy comes in the form of a suffering servant, Jesus the Christ, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” To be sure, he was disciplined by the hostility at the hands of sinners (12:3). But what makes him truly a pioneer for us is that he takes the suffering all the way through to his own death on the cross.

His service by way of the cross indicates just how far he is willing to suffer illegitimacy on our behalf. The cross is the vehicle not simply for execution, but execution as a criminal, as one accursed by God. Jesus the Christ does not take the easy way out.

And for what purpose does Jesus take this path of the cross? But “for the sake of the joy that was set before him.” Should we read “instead of the joy,” given the cross’ “degrading shame?” Not necessarily, although that shame does not deter his venture.

And what “joy” might that be? The “joy” for this Pioneer Christ, this “forerunner,” is his braving for us a whole new world, emptying himself ( kenosis) through his own “discipline” of obedience to the Father, in order to open for us the curtain that has kept us separate from the promise of God’s mercy (6:19-20). Simply stated, his joy is us, reclaimed in God’s mercy. This reclaiming he now has the authority to do, as he sits at the right hand of God. And in this way, we are changed from being illegitimate children to being heirs and partners in the heavenly mysteries.

#### **Step 5: The Internal Solution (Advanced Prognosis) – *The Cloud of Witnesses***

How our lives are perfected, in this pioneering Lord, is through our faith, our “endurance,” our trusting that he has gone the path before us. Is there reason to hope? Indeed, there is a salvific reason, a soteriology, that we have in Christ that gives us hope to see the future vision which is shared by a whole “cloud of witnesses” (12:1), in which we are also included.

I recall during my days at Seminex where, in chapel, all the hymn books had a page at the front marked “cloud of witnesses,” to which worshipers would pen in their names along with other witnesses who had gone before. By faith, we have “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” By faith, we see the end of the race through our Lord Jesus Christ who sits at God’s right hand.

By faith we also get to see our struggles as discipline by a loving Parent—to hone our skills, to make us sharper than we were before, but not to exclude us. If God didn’t care, God wouldn’t have anything to do with us. Well, we can see that some of the ways that God deals with us may not be encouraging per se. But when we know by faith, through the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith that (1) we are indeed children who the Father disciplines, like our Lord (12:7), (2) that we “share his holiness” (Whose? The Pioneer and Perfecter of our Faith!), and (3) that waiting for us at the end is the trophy of “the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (again, the reward of our Lord’s company!) the sufferings do not seem all that bad—nor hopeless.

#### **Step 6: The External Solution (Final Prognosis) – *Running with Perseverance***

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a sense for ways to keep at the race, and the struggle, as his poem “Who Am I?” demonstrates:

Who am I? They often tell me  
I would step from my cell's confinement  
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,  
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me  
I would talk to my warders  
freely and friendly and clearly,  
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me  
I would bear the days of misfortune  
equably, smilingly, proudly,  
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?  
Or am I only what I know of myself,  
restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,  
struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my  
throat,  
yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,  
thirsting for words of kindness, for neighbourliness,  
trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation,  
tossing in expectations of great events,  
powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,  
weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,  
faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I really one person today and tomorrow another?  
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,  
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?  
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,  
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.  
Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

So, also, might (the late) Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., liberation theologian from Uruguay, who continued to work for the poor until his dying day. So, might also, the whole “cloud of witnesses” (12:1) who are “sitting in the bleachers watching Christians run their race, keeping their eyes on them” . . . and cheering them all along the way to victory!

In the U.S.A., television has captured the American audience with a certain mundane association of Australia with Foster’s Beer. The ads always start out with a picture of Australia, and an announcer with authentic accent saying, “How to speak Australian.” Then they might show a great white shark, to which the announcer would comment, “Guppy.” Or perhaps they might show a man getting hit in the head with an alarm clock, commented on as “Wake-Up Call.” And my personal favorite, a man is standing under a cliff. A giant boulder is heard falling from the sky until it squashes the man into the ground, with only his shoes sticking out. The man says, “ouch,” to which the commentator adds his own description, “Cry-Baby.”

More to the point of this exercise, the above example demonstrates the ability to laugh at what others might take as very serious problems. Even the common “g’day” to strangers has a way of making the world one’s oyster. But why should you Aussies have all the good lines?

So might we all, knowing that our Lord Jesus, who has undergone the “discipline” before us, have the joy of being the Father’s kids running the race, and have the endurance and strength to finish the race (12:12-13). Then we can have our hands a little more active and a little less droopy; then we can set our feet in the right direction toward the Prize that awaits us.

Michael Hoy  
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