

August 15, 2010

Julia Schmidt

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

As many of you already know, I spent the first six weeks of my summer working at Camp Friedenswald. The theme at Camp Friedenswald this summer was “A Cloud of Witnesses, sharing stories, finding faith.” Our scripture was the same as what I am using today: Hebrews 11-12:3. We would start the week by asking the kids what faith was. We would then share some of the stories of people of faith such as Moses and Dirk Willems. We then encouraged the kids to write down the names of people that they looked to in their own lives who showed them the ways of faith. We told them that these people were their very own cloud of witnesses as is mentioned in Hebrews 12:1. These people were the ones surrounding them and being examples of true faith. For the youngest kids they often wrote down family, friends, God. The older ones would be more specific and mention Sunday School Teachers and one girl in my cabin even wrote down her cat. At the last campfire then, one person would read the scripture verses, then all the counselors would stand around the children and read the names that they had written down so they would in a sense be surrounded by their own cloud of witnesses. We would then encourage them to continue to keep exploring their faith and living it out.

This is the same way that the Scripture verses are set up. We first hear the stories of all those who have gone before us to show us the way of faith. There are many different stories and even the author of Hebrews runs out of time at the end and quickly groups several people and groups together in verses 32-39. So then after we have heard all the stories, we are encouraged to keep running the race. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

What is faith? We hear this word used so much in our worship services without always knowing exactly what it is. According to Webster’s Dictionary it is belief and trust in and loyalty to God or firm belief in something for which there is no proof. This is similar to the definition that the writer of Hebrews gives in 11:1; “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Now I will be the first to admit that having this kind of pure faith is hard. I struggle sometimes in putting all my trust and loyalty to God when sometimes God just feels so far away.

These past few years have been a real struggle for my faith. I finally got the point this last year when I could not even remember why I believed in God in the first place or even wondered if God even existed. This wondering led me to do my Honors research paper first semester on Atheism, and more specifically Humanism, which is essentially religion without God. I read a few books describing it and heard reasoning’s behind

atheism, but then I also conducted interviews with some friends and professors on why they believe in a God. It was very interesting to hear people's stories and what they believe. One person in particular who gave some very sound theological reasoning was Craig Maven who is now the pastor at Harrisonburg Mennonite Church. In the presentation I gave to my class at the end of the semester, I declared that I really did believe in God. As I soon discovered though, this was not true faith. Even then I was not "sure of what I hoped for and certain of what I did not see." At that point I was hitting an emotional and physical low at the end of my first college semester and was not able to find the strength to find the faith that I desperately was searching for.

But as I mentioned the theme at Camp was *Sharing Stories, Finding Faith*. Hebrews 11 does a great job of sharing stories of the people of faith from the Old Testament. It includes a nice little summary of the people and how they lived by faith. We hear about Abel and Enoch and Noah. Then Abraham and Sarah. Abraham traveled toward a land where he believed God would bless him and raise up a people who would be a model for the kingdom of God. Although he never saw the actual city he kept his eye on an unseen city with real eternal foundations. By faith Sarah was able to bear a child as an older woman. She believed the One who made a promise to her that this would happen.

As I have studied these verses this summer, I noticed something about the people. All of them had great faith, but there were also times where they lost it. In verse 23-28, the author of Hebrews commends the Israelites for having faith by walking through the Red Sea on dry ground. This is interesting because earlier they are used as an example of disbelief. In fact as we read the story of the Israelites in Exodus, there are many examples of them turning from God. However, as the author of Hebrews suggests, one's faith is not solidified in a moment, but by a lifetime of endurance. It also shows that one act of faithfulness does not inoculate against all future possibilities of disbelief. Even the hero of the story, Moses, at times forgot his faith and was punished by never seeing the promise land. I think that this is really encouraging to read and to remember that everyone has moments when they do not believe, even the most faithful.

Another thing that I noticed while rereading the story of Exodus is in Exodus 3:6 where God first calls to Moses from within the burning bush. God says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." Now up unto this point, there is no mention of Moses actually worshipping the Hebrew God. He had grown up as an Egyptian then had lived with the Midianites. So God reveals himself, not as Moses's God, but the God of the men whom Moses had most likely revered and looked up to. It was through knowing the faith that these people had, that Moses was also able to put his trust in God.

So like Moses, when we hear stories of the faith of others, we can be encouraged in our own faith journeys. And as we explained to the children at camp, it is not just the

Bible characters that are in our cloud of witnesses. There are millions of people that came after the Bible was written to show us ways of faith; from the early Anabaptists who were martyred for their beliefs, to our parents and friends that help us daily. Indeed right here, right now, we are surrounded by our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ who are all a part of our cloud of witnesses.

So in going back to this last year at college, it was not until the beginning of the second semester that I finally went to talk to someone about the melancholy I was feeling. I ended up going to the office of my Honor's Professor, Judy Mullet, and just falling apart and crying. I admitted to her that I did not know if I believed in God anymore. That in fact all my faith was gone. Now Judy is one of the most amazing people I have ever met. She is a psychology professor who is tremendously smart and caring. She is just so interested in everyone's life and when you talk to her you know for sure that she is truly listening. So after she had listened to all I had to say, she told me that I am not the first to come to her and question their beliefs. She said that it was actually quite common for college students to finally question what they had grown up believing and find out for what was true for them. She then told me something that I will never forget, she said that it was okay to question your beliefs, or even to not have faith; it was then that the church would hold your faith for you. Judy promised me that she and the church, would hold my faith for me, when I did not have the strength to believe.

It was during orientation week at camp as we were talking about a cloud of witnesses, that I realized just how many people were in my own cloud of witnesses, and I thought especially of Judy. She is just one of many who have been there for me to show me what true faith is and to hold my faith for me. As the semester progressed Judy and I entered into a formal mentorship and continued to meet and talk every other week. She has been there for me as I have questioned and found my way in my search for a genuine faith. But it was not only her who showed me the way of faith, but my church family also. It is one of the many reasons that I decided to sign into covenant here at Emmaus Road. You are the ones who have always been there for me and have shown me the way of faith. In the times of struggle, you have always been praying for me, and most importantly, you have been the ones to hold my faith when I do not believe.

We all have times when we struggle, but that is why the church exists; to hold each other up and remind each other of the way of faith. Patrick Morley suggests that human beings are a lot like redwood trees. Redwoods grow for millennia and reach as high as 350 feet (the new clock tower is only 160 feet). Yet their roots run only six to 10 feet below the surface. The only way these monster trees can stand tall and withstand the crazy California weather is to grow close together, intermingling their roots. They make each other strong.

But let us not forget the most important part of the race: Jesus. For Jesus is the ultimate example of faith. Hebrews 12:2 describes Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of

our faith. One of my favorite stories from camp this summer was when we asked the first and second graders what a pioneer was. One little boy raised his hand and said it was a person that rode around on a horse and had a stick that the person would then hit balls with. We all looked a little confused until the worship leader kindly explained to him that he was thinking of a polo player, instead of a pioneer. A pioneer is someone who is the first to do something and goes out and blazes a trail. This is what Jesus did for us; he set a perfect example for us to follow in our walks of faith. As Hebrews 12:2 says, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." As Eugene Peterson writes in his version, the Message, "When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

So as we all run this race together may we find faith by looking to those who have gone before us and looking to our church family to hold our faith for us when we don't have the strength. No one is the perfect example of faith and all have made mistakes, but that is ok. Like the redwoods we hold each other up and make each other strong. And may we always remember to look towards the perfect example we do have, which is Jesus Christ.