

“Faith in Motion”

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First Presbyterian Church
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**Old Testament Lesson: Genesis 17:1-6a
New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16**

Tonight the world will be watching as the closing ceremonies of the 2016 Summer Olympics take place in Rio. Out of all the athletes you might think of – Michael Phelps, gymnast Simone Biles, volleyball’s Kerri Walsh Jennings – did anyone hear about Jack Sock? Yes, no, maybe.

Well, Jack Sock is the comeback kid of the 2016 Rio Olympics, and he’s from right in our back yard. It was just one week ago today that this Overland Park, Blue Valley North graduate competed in the tennis mixed doubles match with partner Bethanie Mattek-Sands.

What you may not know is that just eight days before that, Sock was diagnosed with walking pneumonia. Commentators figured his biggest Olympic moment would be just making an appearance in the Parade of Nations during Opening Ceremonies. But Jack Sock had his sights set on something much greater than that.

Last Sunday, he and his partner took the gold in mixed doubles, his second medal of the Games. What is it that has someone hang in there with hopes of a miraculous turnaround when most of those around him just aren’t seeing it? Jack Sock showed an ability to move forward on nothing more than faith.

As he said in the Kansas City Star, “If you would have told me that – before I came here after I found out I had pneumonia – that I will walk away with two medals in my first Olympics, I would have said you’re crazy.” And yet he kept Moving forward.

Well, people said Abraham was crazy, when he set out into the wilderness not knowing where he would end up. But God said move; So Abe got moving, setting out (quote) “for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.” says Hebrews; setting out “not knowing where he was going.”

Hebrews points to four things we should ask whenever we’re faced with struggle or stagnation in life. The first is, are you moving forward, or are you stuck in the past?

We see this where Hebrews says, “If (the Israelites) had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had the opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.” As it is, they chose to move forward rather than get stuck in the past or return to their old ways.

So ask yourself, when your hopes and dreams seem out of reach, are you committed to moving forward or have you become resigned to how life is. If you are happy with how life is, there's no shame in that. Even those who are struggling can be happy. It's just a matter of embracing "what is" and finding the hidden blessing, a deeper joy, a stronger faith, faith to be happy no matter what, and to praise God doing it.

The second thing to ask yourself when faced with struggle or stagnation is what difference will it make. What difference will it make if you or I push through the struggle and overcome the stagnation; you know, that sense of being stuck.

Hebrews reminds us that Abraham (quote) "stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Abraham and his son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob were "stuck" – stuck in the wilderness from generation to generation to generation. And still they were committed to make a difference. They knew that if they stayed faithful to their shared vision of who God is and what God wants for them, God would see them safely through the wilderness to the land of milk and honey.

When we ask the question what difference will it make, the answer has to do with whose vision we are living into – our own, based on doubt and fear and scarcity – or God's, founded on a faith that stretches all the way back to Abraham, more than 2,000 years before Jesus.

Hebrews relied on our shared faith in Jesus to bridge the gap for the people of its day. And here we are another 2,000 years after that, doing the same thing – bridging the gaps in our faith in order to reach the promises of God, in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter how difficult your struggle or how stuck you feel, Jesus is here for you – for us – to bridge the gap, to shine the light of his presence and promise into our future.

We are not the only ones in history to step out in faith on the promise of an unforeseen future. I mean, think about Noah and the Ark. Think about collecting all those animals, two by two. Think about that one lone hippo that waddled up the plank all by himself and Noah asked, "Where is your mate." And the hippo said, "I'm hoping to meet her on the cruise!" You laugh. Or not. It doesn't matter. The point is, the only way to truly make a positive, a life-changing difference, is by having faith that something can be done, with God's help – that you can make a difference in whatever situation you're facing.

I say this knowing full well how hard it is to be stuck, to be struggling. And yet people do get through hard times, even the most horrific and challenging times imaginable. How do they do it?!?

Well, that has to do with our third question from Hebrews today: Who are you doing it for, in taking up that struggle, in pushing through that difficulty?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew that the promises of God would be realized, if not by them, then by those who came after them.

It's not all about us, my friends. As Christians, we live for the sake of each other, for the benefit of our shared life together, and for a future that we may not personally see or enjoy.

As Hebrews says, "All of (ancient Israel) died in faith without having received the promises (of Jesus), but from a distance they saw and greeted them," not for their benefit, but for the benefit of those who came after them – for us, and for the generations yet to come.

When we realize it's not about us but rather it's about the future we can give to others, well, that's when people rise to greatness, that's when no struggle is too big. This is one of the greatest things about our faith. It calls us to be more than we know ourselves to be.

And finally, how do we know which direction to turn, what steps to take? We know when we ask the following question and search for an authentic, honest answer: Are there signs of God's blessing?

Whenever you make a move or change directions or begin to push through something, there will be signs of God's blessing, or not, at least not signs that can be easily seen.

The signs of God's blessing are hard to see, hard to discern. There are false signs that leading us astray, and there are signs we can't see – at least not from where we are standing. If you don't see any sign in your life of God's blessing, that's a sign. That's a sign you need to shift your perspective. Or it maybe a sign to be patient and trust in God. And there is a way to know which it is – whether God is saying, "No," or God is saying, "Not yet."

The Holy Spirit works through us as a people of faith to guide us forward – as a people. Not as individuals. If you are not sure of the path you're on – in your life, with your family, at your workplace, or even here at church – if your way forward is not certain or if it's full of fear and doubt, reach out to someone. Check to be sure you're on the right path.

By talking with a friend or family member, a coworker or supervisor, a church member or pastor, we can better discern the best path forward. Maybe the signs are all around us and we just can't see them, as individuals. But as a people of faith, God does and will show us the way. Together.

There you have it. Four simple – yet powerful – questions to ask amid any struggle. Are you moving forward or are you happily or unhappily stuck where you are, and committed to that. You can continue to be happy right where you are, not moving forward; there's no shame in that.

But if you are not content, if you are called to make a move, then the second thing to do is get real clear about the difference it will make. The bigger the difference, the better your changes.

Thirdly, ask yourself, who are you doing it for – for yourself or for the sake of others? That makes a difference.

And finally, are there signs of God's blessing, and if not, who do you need to speak with or look to in finding them.

By finding signs that point us beyond ourselves, in order to make a difference in the lives of others, we can be certain of our pathway forward together, not always by what we see around us, but by what we as a people of faith know to be right, with God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

There are times when our hearts ache and our souls wander and we are full of doubts. Even so – or especially so – we turn to you in prayer, God of us all.

We hear of the loss of loved ones, or see the news massive flooding. We read online of unprovoked attacks on the innocent.

We mourn these tragic losses and pray for those who have suffered. We see headlines in the newspapers of bold claims from or about our government leaders and election candidates that make us wonder where this country is headed.

Closer to home, we find ourselves struggling with situations or issues of the day. We are assailed with doubts and have no cause for faith.

And still we pray, and, in this time of silence, we listen for your assurance.
(Pause here.)

In the stillness, we hear only the serenity of silence and the sense that you can handle our doubts and misgivings.

After all, when all else fails, you are still God and our faith has not left us. In a leap of faith, we listen to and pray the prayer of the one who walked this earth and knew desertion and sorrow, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**