WDC conference sermon

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In his poem, “Our children, coming of Age,” Wendell Berry writes:

In the great circle, dancing in

And out of time you move now

Toward your partners, answering

The music suddenly audible to you

That only carried you before

And will carry you again.

While it may seem odd to begin a sermon with a secular poem, about dancing no less, I think the writer of Hebrews would approve. Hebrews 12:1-3 is the climax of a great, rousing summons—to dance. To join a race, yes, to be woven in love, yes, but also to dance. Berry speaks of this decisive moment when a choice must be made, a moment that will decide everything. Like a dance. And to really appreciate this dance, this decisive moment, we need to go back a bit, back to the song from the beginning.

We need to know who our dance partners are.

Hebrews 11:1. The dance starts slowly.

It starts, the opening shuffle, by defining faith. It’s the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. This assurance, this is what faith has. This assurance is a gift. By faith, we already possess what God has promised in the future. So, with this gift, we can swing out on the dance floor of God’s promises, we can dance even though it seems like all hell is breaking loose.

We dance before we hear the music.

Even more, faith is the very being of God’s promises. Faith is the reality of those promises moving, living, dancing—now. The kingdom is in your midst, said Jesus (and of course the disciples think he’s nuts because “Look around, Jesus, the Romans are still in control and they’re killing us with the sword and with such high taxes that our children are starving. Look around, Jesus, we say today—look at the political divisiveness and poverty and climate change and people being shot in the streets—how is the kingdom in our midst? Jesus?”) But faith says—there’s a different reality. Look again.

Faith is the very being of God’s promises. We embody faith. By the help of the Spirit we speak and act the promises into being. Faith is a belief, like when we say, “God will provide for our every need.” Faith is an action, like when we sell our farm and give the money to the church. Faith is saying “We must follow the Bible no matter what the state authorities say” AND faith is walking to the stake to be burned.

We see things others can’t see. Others see a small denomination, a small conference, a couple of small colleges in the middle of Kansas—insignificant, ordinary, no match for the evil of the world. A houseful of Swiss Germans on a cold night in January pouring water on each other’s head in the little town of Zurich? You think that’s gonna change the world?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18: So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

There is a difference between what is seen and what is—real. Faith gives us the eyes to see what’s real. Faith gives us the courage to live what’s real.

From Col. 2:6-7 from The Message: My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you’ve been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You’re deeply rooted in him. You’re well constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you’ve been taught. School’s out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving.

Now—we don’t do this perfectly. Nobody does. The writer of Hebrews surely doesn’t count perfection as one of the requirements for making the list of these great heroes.

Because there’s Noah, surely a righteous man, but he got drunk after disembarking from the boat and, well you know the rest of the story. Gideon makes the list and while he did a great thing when he trusted God to do the fighting against the Midianites and when he refused to be Israel’s king—he also made an ephod that ensnared Israel into idol worship. And Samson? Where do you even start with Samson? He neglects his Nazirite vow, flirts with spiritual danger as he flirts with Delilah and…yet, paying with his own life, he saves the Israelites. He made the list.

Abraham is the perfect example. Oh, did he ever trust God! He leaves his home and starts following an invisible God, not knowing from one day to the next where he’s going. Those steps, that walking—that is faith. But he lied to the Pharaoh about Sarah being his wife to save his own skin, and when the promise of a son didn’t come fast enough, he took matters into his own hands and impregnated Hagar.

But he set out, not knowing where he was going. Does that describe you today? The Western District Conference today?

Abraham offered up the very promise God gave him—Isaac. Oh, how he loved Isaac. Yet, in faith, he gave God what he loved the most. Does that describe you today? This conference, today?

And he died, he and Sarah died, not receiving the promise. Not fully. They died living in tents, aliens and strangers in the very land God promised would be theirs. Verse 13: All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Perhaps we will not see the fruit of our faith. We may not see the promise of God in our time. But that doesn’t mean we’re wrong or that God isn’t faithful. It just means we don’t see it with our physical eyes.

They weren’t perfect, but they were faithful.

And what more should I say? (The writer of Hebrews is just getting started. The music takes it up a notch) Oh brothers and sisters, time would fail me to tell it all. I’d have to tell about Gideon and Barak, Samson, Jephthah, tell of David and Samuel and the prophets.

I’d have to tell about those who by faith conquered kingdoms and shut up lions’ mouths. I’d have to tell about women who were tortured, men who were imprisoned, children of God who were flogged and stoned, refusing to be released. Oh, I tell you, sisters and brothers, the world is not worthy of them, not worthy at all!

I’d have to tell you about Sister Frieda Kaufman, migrating here from Germany who was so positively influenced by Lutheran and Catholic deaconesses and sisters that she became a sister herself. She became a great leader caring for those in need, serving as the Mother Deaconess at the Bethel Deaconess Hospital.

Or what about Lawrence Hart? His Cheyenne people, including his great-grandfather, experienced a brutal, unexpected attack, a horrific massacre, led by General Custer. And yet, when the story was re-enacted 100 years later, and the white people did a surprise attack again, which so angered Lawrence, he responded not with hatred, but with love. And the world began to change.

What about John Schrag, tarred and feathered in Burrton in 1918 for refusing to buy war bonds or Roland and Sophie Brown, missionaries to Taiwan, or David Goerz, founder of Bethel College or Kendal Warkentin, war resister? Or Dorothy Nickel Friesen, (finish)

There are others, sisters and brothers, the LORD knows there are others, in this very room—not perfect but righteous, obedient, tested by suffering, embodying faith and with God’s help bringing this new reality of the Kingdom of God to life.

These are our dance partners.

It’s a complicated dance. All that suffering, endless miles of walking, having your heart broken by the racism of others—and for many, they did not, in this life, receive what was promised.

Earlier you heard Deuteronomy 26:5-10a. Here God acted first and because they remembered the story, it changed who they were and because of the story, they brought the first of the fruit of the ground to God. Not to Baal. But now, in Hebrews, the people did not fully receive the promises. And yet they still acted.

They did not lose heart. They didn’t stop dancing when the music seemed to stop. Oh my brothers and sisters, they heard another song. They were looking for something better. They desired a better country.

And I believe that better country is Jesus. All through Hebrews, Jesus is better. Better than the angels, a better hope than the law could provide, a better covenant, a better promise, a more excellent ministry, better than all the possessions in the world, the sacrifice that ends all sacrifices. He is that better city. What more could we need?

Oh, but there’s more. More than our faithful ancestors, more even than the faithfulness of Jesus? There’s still more. It isn’t finished. The dance is not over.

Hebrews 11:39-40.Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, apart from us, be made perfect.

Without us. What?

What? But what more is needed than Jesus? Isn’t Jesus all we need to make us perfect? This is crazy. It sounds heretical to say there’s another piece needed, another element to this dance—something else besides Jesus.

What’s going on? It’s clear we need our faithful (not perfect) ancestors, Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Moses Rahab, Conrad Grebel, Michael Sattler, Frieda Kaufman, Lawrence Hart! Of course—it’s obvious we need them. And—oh how we need Jesus. His teachings, his love for outsiders, his death on the cross—his resurrection that sealed the victory, the Holy Spirit who empowers ordinary people like us with that same resurrection power. Of course we need Jesus.

But Jesus and our ancestors need us?

The writer of Hebrews says—we’re it. Our heroes will not be made complete, the story will not end well, apart from us.

Apart from us they can’t get the job done, they cannot finish the dance? They can’t, in some sense, come home? It staggers the imagination.

Now the writer here is not saying we redeem Abraham, Moses and all the others. Only Christ does that. No. The writer is saying—Jesus wants…has intended all along, to do this miraculous work of bringing in God’s kingdom through ordinary, broken, faithful, fragile people. Through the Church. Through us. Through you.

And I’m not talking just to the pastors in this room. Everyone is in the dance. Ephesians 4 tells us this. Everyone is to be equipped for ministry. Everyone’s in the race. Remember that faith helps us see a new reality and one of those new realities the Mennonite Church must start seeing is that everyone is a missionary, everyone a disciple who disciples others, every day, everywhere, all the time.

Maybe the greatest risk of faith Jesus is asking you to take is this: to see yourself differently.

The dance is not over. The list is not complete. The story isn’t over. You have to see yourself in this list.

To use another metaphor: the baton. Jesus has put the baton into our hands. It **is** a relay race and the heroes of the faith **are** sitting in the grandstands, watching us. And even though Abraham, Moses and Rahab ran a fast-paced, beautiful race—it’s not done. The finish line has not been crossed. Will Jesus find other people to grab the baton if we refuse to pick it up? Yes, of course. But if that’s the case, it’ll be messier, more complicated, maybe even longer, because Jesus wants to use us too. He’s handing the baton to us.

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, 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.

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

We are the next runners up. Our heroes are in the stands. It’s gotta be more than just telling their stories. It’s acting on the foundation of what God has already done in them.

But how? When we’re so tired. And the evil is so strong.

First, we strip off the encumbrances that weigh us down, especially the sin that binds us. Races in the ancient world featured men running naked, and while I’m not advocating for that literally, this is a great metaphor. One of my old pastors, Elmer Yoder, a great athlete, used to wear heavy sweatshirts and pants when he trained for his marathons. He even put weights on his arms and legs as he ran. He purposefully added weights when he was training, but on the day of the race? He was down to a shirt and shorts. And the freedom, oh the freedom when you run without all that extra weight, it makes you feel like you’re flying!

What are the weights on your arms and legs? What are the extra clothes of the conference? What weighty encumbrances, what sin or needless shame do you carry? We’re not training anymore, this is the race and it’s time to free yourselves.

Maybe it’s not sin or shame, but just the fear that you are not enough, as individuals, as a conference. Friends, you aren’t enough. Not even close. The world looks at us and sees a small denomination, a small conference, and they laugh at our chances against such great evil. And on one hand, they’re right. We’re up against impossible odds. Unspeakable evil. Doesn’t matter. We have God on our side. We see things they can’t see. What can’t be seen is more powerful, a thousand times more powerful than what can be seen. We cannot lose.

Lay aside every weight.

And how will you know where to go? Look to Jesus, who is Pioneer, the front runner, the captain, the lead dancer, the perfecter of our faith. Don’t know where to go, what to do, where to turn, do what the great ones before us did. See that better city. See how he’s taken the hostility thrown at you and put it on himself. Set your eyes on him.

And do it for joy. I don’t know whether or not Abraham and Sarah looked out of their tent and said, “Wow, this is going to be a great land for our kids and grandkids someday. So I don’t mind sleeping on these rocks.” I do know that Lawrence Hart had some struggles with joy, a couple of times. At the centennial celebration of Custer’s massacre on his village, some white people thought it would be great to do a surprise re-enactment of that massacre, so they came screaming in with swords drawn, shooting guns with blanks. But they were still guns and it was still scary—and a surprise. And it hurt. Their dignity got stripped again. I imagine Lawrence was furious. I would be. At a ceremonial reburial of human remains later that day, a blanket was placed on the casket, making that blanket a symbol of honor. The elders could decide who would get the blanket. They chose the captain of the re-enactors who had attacked the village so thoughtlessly. At that moment, Lawrence understood that peace and reconciliation, not hatred and bitterness, had to start in his own heart. It was hard, to let go of legitimate anger—legitimate—but for joy, for freedom to blossom, he learned to let go.

I’m not going to pretend this journey of discipleship is easy. It’s not; it’s the cross. It’s hard. And it’s the most joyous thing you could ever hope to do.

And here’s why it’s a dance, as well as a race. As well as a woven tapestry. I hope the writer of Hebrews, sitting up there in the grandstands watching me, is okay with this. To really dance, you have to watch your dance partners. You have to feel their rhythms as well as your own. You have to cooperate so you don’t bump into each other. You never dance alone, you dance with others. You have to take what they give you, to let go of control so that you dance together and maybe they are supposed to lead sometimes, not you.

More than just handing over a baton, you need to take the best of the dance of the ancestors, and we get this as we tell their stories—and make it your own, new dance. New dancing partners have joined you. As equals. With their own stories. Listen to them. Learn from them. They have much to offer you. Even though their last names aren’t German, they too feel the Anabaptist rhythm. It’s a partnership, dancing is a mutuality and I want you to dance as equals with the best of the past, taking its best footwork and at the same time, by the help of the Spirit, creating new dance steps. For now.

We are at a crucial point in church history. Nobody can sit on the sidelines anymore. If ever there was a time for new heroes of the faith to step up and be brave, it’s now. If ever there were a time to see the world through the eyes of faith, to embody faith so that you see the world into a new reality—it’s now. The dance, begun by Abel, Abraham, Rahab and others—that dance is now yours. The pace has quickened, drawing to a climax. The dance partners of faith extend their hands to you. Tell the stories, yes, tell the stories, but the story is not complete, the story is not over, apart from you.

Will you step on the dance floor? Please step on the dance floor.