

## HEROIC STRUGGLE

### Hebrews 12:1-4, 12-13

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This was delivered at the 8:30 a.m. service as part of the Remembrance Sunday Service.*

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*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, <sup>2</sup>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.*

*<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. <sup>4</sup>In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood...*

*<sup>12</sup> Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, <sup>13</sup>and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

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This is the eighteenth time I have led worship on Remembrance Sunday at Westminster. It is a service, established in the early 1980s, on the Sunday nearest Veterans Day, originally honoring all those who have given their lives in service to our nation, but expanded also to those who have given their lives in other ways as well. It honors the deep heritage of military and public service that exists among many members and families of Westminster.

Sometimes the service as has centered on the sermon, as most of our services do; at other times, our choir has performed a major work, which is the case today at 11:00 a.m. On those Sundays, I have often preached only at 8:30, which is the case today.

Over the course of my ministry, I have had occasion to counsel a handful of people who have been troubled by not only what they *saw* but specifically what they *did* in their military service. The one with whom I was closest over several months' time was a Vietnam Veteran who ultimately took his life. I have also known relatively well two police officers, both of whom were troubled and both of whom got in trouble. But beyond those significant relationships, there are dozens of people in this congregation whose commitment to their vocation of serving our country through civil service or through the branch of the armed services they have entered has been exemplary. There is a quiet dedication and sacrifice that always inspires me.

Whenever I venture forth from this area and people learn where I live, I am often disappointed at how little they seem curious about what life in Washington is like; but whenever I am asked, I always say something like: "No matter what you are hearing in the news, for the most part, most of the people who work in Washington – in or outside government service – are smart, dedicated, conscientious, and honorable. They know the meaning of public service. They know the meaning of sacrificing for our country – with their lives or with their dedication to their work. They are an honor to be around." And they [you] are.

I want to share today a few brief texts and stories from the tradition of our faith that affirm the call to service many of us feel. Whether we hear these texts as praise from the pulpit, as a renewal of a call we may be questioning, or as encouragement which even the most committed among us need from time to time, these texts can remind us of what originally led us to vocations of service and why we remain in them. And by vocations of service, I mean anything we do – public or private, paid or unpaid – in which we seek to help other human beings and make the world more humane, more just, and safer.

The first text is the one we read. It comes from the Letter to the Hebrews, a book at the end of the New Testament whose author and intended recipients are unknown. What we do know is that the recipients “had faced and continued to face *severe persecution* for their faith, with the result they were *tempted* to abandon Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> To their understandably wavering faith, the author writes these stirring words:

...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*.

The writer continues linking the call to us to service with the sacrifice of Christ:

*Consider* him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may *not grow weary* or *lose heart*. In your struggle against sin you have *not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood*...

Finally:

Therefore *lift* your drooping hands and *strengthen* your weak knees, and *make straight* paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be *healed*.

If sacrifice for many involves the willingness to put our *lives* on the line for others, as did our “pioneer” and “author” Christ, a second type of sacrifice comes in the sheer commitment of *life* to a cause, a vocation, a creative expression, even to a singular human being who needs us our care every day the sun comes up.

In Psalm 104, the psalmist is extolling God’s creative powers which draw all entities of nature *out of* their created comfort and *stretches* them to enter the wider world before them.

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
The sun knows its time for setting.  
You make darkness, and it is night,  
When all the animals of the forest come creeping out.  
The young lions roar for their prey,  
Seeking their food from God.  
When the sun rises, they withdraw  
And lie down in their dens.  
People *go out* to their *work*  
And to their *labour* until the evening.<sup>2</sup>

For so many of us, a major way we sacrifice is our *work*. Beyond self-care, beyond work-life balance, beyond “working to live rather than living to work,” the *vocations* to which we have been called through some combination of providence and luck are ways and places that many of us serve and sacrifice.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald A. Hagner, “The Letter to the Hebrews,” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 2151-2152.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 104:19-23,

People *go out* to their work  
And to their labour *until the evening*.

“A sower went out to sow,” Jesus said in his first parable. “A sower *went out* to sow.”<sup>3</sup>

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One of the most significant poems I have encountered was written by Marge Piercy. I have shared it with you before. It is entitled “To Be Of Use.”

The people I love the best  
jump into work head first  
without dallying in the shallows  
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.  
They seem to become natives of that element,  
the black sleek heads of seals  
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,  
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,  
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,  
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge  
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest  
and work in a row and pass the bags along,  
who are not parlor generals and field deserters  
but move in a common rhythm  
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.  
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.  
But the thing worth doing well done  
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.  
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,  
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums  
but you know they were made to be used.  
The pitcher cries for water to carry  
and a person for work that is real.<sup>4</sup>

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One of our cars was in for its annual service this week and with Maggie having the other one in Silver Spring, when the car was ready the dealership sent one of their staff to pick me up at home in a courtesy car. Through

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:1.

<sup>4</sup> Marge Piercy, “To Be of Use,” in *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982). Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57673/to-be-of-use>.

I have been going to that dealership for many years, I had not met the young black man who was driving me. As we pulled away from my house, he asked me what I did for a living, and after telling him I was the minister of the church up the street from where he had picked me up, I felt free to ask him about his own life.

He told me he had graduated from Georgetown Prep in Maryland, gone to college in West Virginia on a sports scholarship, but after his first year his grandmother had become ill. He said he was the only person in the family who could take care of her, so he did not return after his first year, moved in with his grandmother and took care of her for two years until she died. He then started working at the dealership trying to save money to return to college, where he could “walk on” to the team and if he made the team, he would be eligible for a scholarship the second semester and therefore afford to remain in school.

At the end of his eulogy on Friday for General Colin Powell, his son Michael remarked that he frequently hears people refer to his father and ask: “Are we still making his kind?” Michael Powell then said:

I believe the answer to that question is up to us. To honor his legacy, I hope we do more than consign him to the history books. I hope we recommit ourselves to being a nation where we are still making his kind.<sup>5</sup>

In in the young man I met driving the courtesy car to my dealership, I could not help but see evidence that God is still making Colin Powell’s “kind.”

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In the past few weeks I have been serving as one of several readers of applications for a fellowship program that will bring college and graduate students who are planning to enter public service to Washington for a year of mentorship. One of the applications I read this week contained a video essay that a student from one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities in our country had submitted. Using a technology that was new to me but into which he was born, this student said:

When attacking people, you run the risk of them no longer listening, no longer wanting to connect. When attacking a force of evil, people are more inclined to want to help, to want to give themselves for a cause that may damage them but help a greater good and that is what we need now, with racism, sexism, homophobia. We need to come together to attack the *forces* and not the *people*.<sup>6</sup>

I don’t think God ever stops making people who are willing to devote their lives – sacrificially – to causes on which God looks with pleasure and perhaps even with pride. His son, Jesus Christ, is the pioneer and author of our faith. God’s continuing call to service and the way it is answered so well by so many people can give us hope in times which hope is a rare and precious jewel. In seeing many step forward today to answer this call, in remembering the cloud of witnesses who have preceded us, we can, with hope and confidence

*...lift our drooping hands  
and strengthen our weak knees,  
and make straight paths for our feet,  
so that what is lame may not be put out of joint,  
but rather be healed.*

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Washington Post* 11/6/2021.

<sup>6</sup> Confidential interview essay in my possession.