

“Excel in Faith: Believing God”

2 Corinthians 8:1-9

10/11/09

How do we excel in faith? You have to live out what God calls you to do—take those steps into places you cannot see. Don’t hold back or be timid. [children’s ministry]

This is Helfrich’s tandem bike. You’ve probably seen people riding a tandem bike. It certainly gets looks from me when I see one, because it is not your usual sight.

And yes, wisdom kept me from temptation to cruise around the sanctuary this morning. A little voice told me that probably would not be a good thing. But hey, it’s tempting!

Anyway...A tandem bike is a pretty interesting thing. A bike made for two. It’s sole purpose is for two persons to ride together, functioning as one.

The driver gets on the bike first and steadies it for the stoker, the person in the back. Once on and in motion, the driver steers the bike. Obviously the driver needs to know where they are going. The driver needs to be aware of obstacles in the road, of the changing terrain, keeping alert at all times.

The driver also has control over shifting the gears. This is no small thing, since pedaling in the proper gear is vital for power and for ensuring endurance for the ride. If the riders simply try and grind out the entire ride in a big gear, their legs and lungs are going to burn out pretty quickly. But knowing when to shift is critical too. You have to think ahead and shift before you actually hit the big hill so the riders are ready and don’t miss a beat.

The stoker’s job is just that, add his or her power and trust that the driver is going to steer them in the right way. The stoker cannot steer. He or she certainly can shout out their opinion to the driver as to what should happen, but ultimately must trust the driver.

Basically, the stoker needs to pedal and enjoy the ride. If the stoker decides not to pedal, the ride is going to take a lot longer to reach their destination, and with a lot more effort. And if the stoker attempts to steer, it’s just going to throw the bike and riders off balance and put the whole ride at risk.

But when the riders are in sync, working together as one, not only do they reach their destination quicker and smoother, but it makes for an enjoyable experience. You can really cruise with the power of two.

Yes, when you are in sync it really is amazing at how much better the ride goes. We are on the ride of our lives, right here, right now. We might have different sized bikes we’re riding—on back roads, highways, dirt roads and paved. We are all riding at different speeds.

But ultimately we must all head in the same direction—God’s direction. And so when we talk about faith, what faith really means “where the rubber hits the road” as we take this ride with God, we have to ask ourselves the question:

“Which seat are you in?”

Last week we heard the start of this sermon series, that God calls us to excel in everything—in all that we do with the gifts we have been given.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1-9 we hear of the early church, the Macedonians who were under great hardship yet gave themselves to the Lord and thereby gave abundantly beyond their means to help other believers in Jerusalem.

And so Paul encourages the Corinthian church to excel in the same manner.

Verse 7 says...

This week we hear our call to:

Excel in faith.

Faith: Hebrews 11:1 tells us, *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*

There are those who have lived that out under very stressful and challenging situations. And to be sure, faith means that for all of us in our own lives and in our churches where we worship and serve.

The world is a changing place, right now full of fear and uncertainty, violence and great need. And so now is the time to excel in faith—abound in faith, trust God fully.

I received a letter from some of our leaders in the Church of the Brethren, an encouragement in these times, reminding us of who we are as Christ’s Church and the Brethren. Faith. Listen to the first few words.

[please place these on the screen]

“Dear Brethren:

“The economic crisis we are experiencing this year continues to demand attention from all levels of the church. Individuals are losing jobs; congregations are struggling with smaller budgets; community social services are being threatened. The economy dominates our life, and it is easy to succumb to a culture of fear.

“As leaders of the Church of the Brethren agencies, we have been led during this particular crisis to review the bigger issues and to refocus our life and work together to move beyond fear to a renewed emphasis on our spiritual gifts and strengths. We follow a God of abundance and generosity. Our values are not tied to the stock market. Our joy does not come from acquiring more things. Our trust is not in human institutions.

“In the midst of our conversations about how to lead the church through these troubled times, we have been heartened to remember particular gifts that we believe God has given to the Brethren—gifts that may help us move forward with energy, vitality, and vision for our faith and the work of Christ in the world. Join us in considering how to use these gifts today:

“Courage, and a radical commitment to Jesus Christ.

“In 1708, the act of believer’s baptism was in contradiction to the laws of church and state, so the actions of the very first Brethren were illegal and dangerous. Only their commitment to the Jesus they met in study of the New Testament allowed them to take that radical step of faith.

“May we be unafraid to follow Jesus into uncharted territory.”

Just a side note, the rest of this letter you can read as copies are out at the welcome center and will be in next month’s newsletter.

You have to let God be the driver.

Back to the question: Which seat are you in? Is God truly in the driver’s seat? Yes, it takes trusting Him that He knows where you need to go. It may be to somewhere totally different than what you thought. Uncharted territory. Actually, it will be when we let God lead us. But how much better it is!

It’s trusting God that He will not lead you into potholes and is always alert. Trusting that God will keep you in the right gear for where you are at the moment to enable you to keep pedaling.

That is faith. As I thought and prayed about what it means to excel in faith, it becomes very clear that with faith there is action. It may sound funny to say, “Of course it means that,” we think. But it’s not always what we do.

You have to get on the bike and pedal.

It’s no accident that James reminds us that works, action, must accompany faith, or else it is not faith but empty words.

James 2:19-26

Did you hear it? Many people in the world will say they believe in God—that God exists or something to that effect. And that is good. That is a vital first step in talking about faith.

But:

There is a vast difference between believing *in* God and *believing* God.

Faith is believing God.

God tells us here that even the demons believe in God and shudder.

Abraham believed God. He believed God when God said leave your homeland and go, to where Abraham had no idea. He believed God that He had a purpose when He told Abraham to sacrifice his son on the altar.

Do we believe God when He says give to me your life and I will make it abundant? Do we believe God enough to give our time, talent, resources to the church for the common good, believing that God really will do great things through us for the world around us?

I couldn’t really think of a better ministry to share this morning than children. Because when we talk about faith, a child is often what comes to mind for me.

To completely trust. To believe. When you tell a child something, they believe it.

This is not childish faith, but childlike faith.

We heard last week to excel in everything. Well, this message is critical for us this morning, because:

Faith is the foundation of everything.

We are to plan and take care of our responsibilities. But we cannot get too wrapped up in our plan. We must be willing for the plan to change. I get in my head where I think things should go and can sometimes force God out of the process.

I need to get on the bike with God and do my part, pedal and enjoy the rest of the ride. But I know there are many reasons we can name why that is so difficult to do. Yes, real things that are not always small things.

And so I want us to think about those for a few minutes this morning.

Philippians 3:13-14: *“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”*

What do you need to let go of from the past?

Many of you know of the Footprints story, where the person sees his footprints in the sand as he walks along in life, a second set alongside his which is Jesus’ footprints, walking along with him. And when he sees only one set of footprints Jesus says that is when I carried you.

My family and I just spent a week at the beach and made a lot of footprints in the sand. And it is a comforting image to think of Jesus carrying me when I struggle.

But something else that is a comfort too, is that the great and beautiful ocean never stops washing clean the shore. All my footprints I leave behind me are washed away.

The track you leave as you ride by eventually disappears. I say that as encouragement this morning to let go of those things from your past that hold you back. It's like a huge bungee cord attached to the seat of the bike. You can get pretty far for a while and then it snaps you back where you were.

Forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead.

That is faith.

Luke 10:41-42: *“Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. ³⁹She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, ‘Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.’ ⁴¹But the Lord answered her, ‘Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; ⁴²there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.’”*

What distracts you today?

There are a lot of things we focus on. Name them for yourselves. They are called distractions. Distractions from what? From the one and only thing we truly need: Jesus.

I confess right now, I have been Martha lately. Of course I always have a lot to do, as I know all of us do. We all have a lot of responsibilities. And so this isn't about letting those go and getting into a deeper pit of stress. Jesus wasn't telling Martha to become a slacker and just hang out.

No, Martha's tasks become her priority, not Jesus. My tasks become my priority at times, and I know when they do. Because I can't manage them well at all. Sermon writing is a good thing. But if I put that before spending time with God, how will I say what He wants?

Let go of your distractions and look at Jesus.

That will not be taken away from you. Jesus knows where to steer the bike. Focus on where you are with Him.

Ephesians 2:19-21: *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”*

Where are you in the Body to build the church for tomorrow?

I don't know what you call a bike that seats 400, but we are all in this together, pedaling for a purpose as Christ's Church. God is moving us on. Faith says “Steer the way God. We'll pedal with You. We believe you!” Amen.