

One of Janice and I's favorite shows on TV is the Masterpiece Mystery series on Public Television. I guess because we like seeing some of those British shows that we would otherwise miss and we both enjoy a good mystery – Miss Marple, Poirot, Inspector Alleyn, Inspector Morse, and now of course, Inspector Lewis. No matter the complexities of the mystery it is very reassuring when the mystery is solved...

You may not realize it but there was a big mystery around our church in the first part of the summer. The summer mystery here at Oakland Avenue was who exactly was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Following the appearance of a brief, unsigned, unattributed article in the summer Oakleaf, I had several people ask me when I was leaving for my hike, how many days would I be on the AT, how many miles I was hoping to hike in total. After a few of these conversations I had my answer ready – “Do I look like I could hike the Appalachian Trail?” I can solve this mystery, it was Tim Moe, our Director of Music, who was and is our AT hiker. He hiked more than seventy miles and he had a great time, he lived to tell the tale .... and he can confirm, you can ask him yourself, he never saw me anywhere on the trail!

Often times the hikers who set out to walk the entire 2,179 miles of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine start out with too much stuff! They have large backpacks filled and over-filled with supplies for every possible contingency. After some days, many of these through hikers come to their senses, they leave their excess supplies at a checkpoint or camping store and arrange to have their stuff shipped home. In their own way these hikers, practice the truth that we heard in our reading from Hebrews today. They learn to “Lay aside every weight and sin” in order that they can complete their journey.

Last week in the Letter to the Hebrews we heard that faith, our response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Today we hear the expressing, the living of this faith likened to the running of a race, the making of a journey.

If you and I are to best run the race of faith we need to follow the example of the hikers on the AT. We need to lay down, put aside, discard, throw away, get rid off, toss away, dispose of, free ourselves from some stuff. Hebrews says, “Lay aside every weight and sin.” No point trying a two thousand plus mile hike with too much on our backs. No point trying to run the fastest ever 100 meters with our golf bag or our shopping bag over our shoulder! Not best to seek to walk the walk of faith carrying unnecessary burdens.

The start of a new school year and a new program year in the church is a great time, a marvelous opportunity to ask ourselves, what burdens am I carrying on my spiritual journey? What is it we need to be ready and willing to leave behind at the next checkpoint? Are we carrying old hurts, guilt, and regrets? Are we weighed down by guilt and fear? Are we burdened with trying to be all things to all people instead of being all for the one who is all for us? Are we clinging to ways of thinking, acting, living, and behaving that can only slow down our progress with and to God? Are we in danger of stopping all together because we have too much stuff which we are unwilling to renounce?

That great cloud of witnesses to our faith affirms that we don't need much baggage for this particular trip. Our great crowd of witnesses, our spiritual ancestors, are not only there to inspire us because of

their heroic example, they are also with us and for us to encourage us in the race of faith. Like spectators lining the route of a Marathon, they are with us, witnessing our struggle, and they are cheering us on toward the finish line – if we will quiet our lives, we will hear them cheering us on along the road of faith!

If you and I are to best run the race of faith, we need to run with perseverance. Jesus didn't ask those first Twelve disciples to "Come in and relax!" He didn't invite them to drop out, or goof off. Jesus didn't tell them to stop using their minds. Jesus asked them to come together to and with Him, Jesus called them to be partners - learning, sharing with Jesus was the very center of all their activity and at the same time Jesus called the Twelve **to go out** to share the love of Jesus with others.

Just as Jesus did all those years ago, today, now, tomorrow and always Jesus calls you to be disciples, you are invited to be with Jesus, and to go out in Jesus' name. Being with Jesus, going out in Jesus' name is not all about church and churchy things. Being with Jesus, going out in Jesus' name is not all about conferences you attend, the Bible Study Groups to which you belong, the magazines you read, being able to recite a creed or use churchy language. Being with Jesus, going out in Jesus' name is about the totality of your life. Being with Jesus, going out in Jesus' name, means connecting with the reality of the lives and the needs of others and the world.

If you and I are to best run the race of faith, we need to be looking in only one direction, at only one person – looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The great thing about looking to Jesus in such a way is that we will inevitably see each other, we will inevitably become aware of the needs of all our neighbors. Looking to Jesus asks us to be devoted to the central and lasting purpose of our life... A story....

John Sculley was the president of Pepsi-Cola and was being recruited by Steve Jobs to become the president of Apple. This was when Apple was in its infancy. Jobs made many trips from Silicon Valley to New York to meet with John.

What would it take? Sculley said, attempting to discourage Jobs, "A million annually, a million for a signing bonus, and the promise of another million in severance pay, if it did not work out." Jobs was incredulous. But then he said, "OK". It was in Sculley's court once again. Sculley demurred.

Jobs asked one more question and sealed the deal, "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"

Sculley writes, "It was as if someone reached up and delivered a stiff blow to my stomach." The reasons for saying no had to do with preoccupation with the potential loss of pensions and deferred compensation, and other items that preoccupy the value systems of middle-aged people. The reasons to say yes were all life giving and not safe.

As a church family we have four life-giving goals for the year ahead. Our goals are to CONNECT to God, to one another, to the needs of all our neighbors and to the future. These goals can and will help us change the world, at least that part of the world in which we live and where we can share the faith of Jesus Christ.

Maybe we hear of the CONNECTING goals and maybe we wonder how we will ever be able to do all we can, maybe we wonder how will it be possible for us to change the world because while we celebrate the life and work of our church, while we rejoice in the range and depth of our programs and

activities, we know at times how tight things are, because of space restrictions, because of budgetary pressures, because of the range of need we encounter around us....Which brings us to the value of steel.

A plain bar of steel – might be valued at \$5.00.

That same bar of steel, fashioned into a pair of horseshoes maybe worth \$50.

Refined into as sewing needles it is worth \$5,000.

Finally, as balance springs for handmade watches or scientific instruments, that \$5 steel bar is now worth \$500,000.

Each time the steel bar is refined it endured processes, of "cutting," and "rolling" and "firing", and each time it becomes more valuable. The raw material is not what is important. What's important is how we allow the raw material to be developed and used by God, so that we can bring to God a great response that will far exceed what our human imagination might see.

**Within this congregation God** has placed hundreds of people who are steel bars by virtue of their time and energy and abilities!

People of great faith and commitment, people of compassion and prayer, people who have known both some struggles, and the relative ease of better days, people who have endured pain and hurt and rejoiced in God's comfort, people who have turned from going the way of the world and stepped onto a different track, people who offer their time to teaching our children partnering with our youth, journeying with our adults, people who willingly give their time and energy to people who are in need. **As we run the race of faith we will discover the real and lasting and enormous value that we have received from God, and which we are asked to share with God and others as we go about living the Christian life.**

**Within this congregation God** has placed hundreds of people who are steel bars by virtue of the material and financial resources with which they have been blessed!

People who have worked hard and been compensated generously, people who have inherited from their parents and grandparents, people who have rejected the advice to look out for only Number 1, people who seek mercy and pursues justice, people who already commit a goodly and a godly proportion of their time, talent and treasure towards God's work through our church family.

**As we run the race of faith we will discover the real and lasting and enormous value that we have received from God, and which we are called upon to offer and give to God as we go about living the Christian life.**

**Within this congregation God** has placed hundreds of us, all of us, people who are steel bars by virtue of our stated committed to caring and connecting with what God is and can do through this family that is Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church!

**As we run the race of faith we will discover the real and lasting and enormous value that we have received from God, which motivates us to be a people of faith, a community of hope, a place of healing, a presence of hope, a church of Jesus Christ with time and space for all the people Jesus loves.**

Today, not me, but our Savior, and our Master, Jesus, reminds you that you have enormous potential even if you see yourself as a \$5 steel bar. For when you and we and all of us place our lives into the

hands of God, when we give over our lives to serving God, when we let God's life and God's love be seen in and through us, as we run the race of faith, what we offer, our time, our talent, our treasure, our lives will be multiplied many times over, meaning that we will be ever more able to grasp every opportunity for faithful and joyful service, meaning we will release and share resources for every godly purpose under heaven.

Our Lord needs us, the world Jesus loves needs us. Our Lord needs us all, and needs all who we are, who we are, what we do, what we own, what we can imagine and what we can yet do and give and share. Our calling is to run the race of faith that is set before us. To persevere, to encourage and support one another, to allow God to refine and multiply us, we will not be \$5 steel bars any more for our effectiveness, our passion, our shared ministry will be multiplied many, many times over enabling us to do yet greater things enabling Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church to connect – to God, to each other, with all those who are in need thus ensuring that we seek to identify and work towards God's future, our vision and calling. So help us God this is who we are and what we will always be!  
Amen.