

I faced a bit of a dilemma with our topic for this Sunday. In many ways, the topic was chosen for me by our "Forty days of Community" series; but I woke up one night a week or so ago with quite a strong impression that I should speak to you this morning from the start of Hebrews 12.

Now, I don't blame God for everything that runs through my head in the early hours of the morning! But this one didn't go away; and as I considered our topic from "Forty Days" – "Serving Together" – and the message of Hebrews 12, there is a strong connection.

This is a vital time in the life of our church. After our service this morning we vote on Ange's nomination for the senior pastor role, and that's a major decision. I see that, too, very much linked to our topic. As Jesus taught us, and modelled in his own life, leadership is service. He said, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."¹ We'll pick this up a little later.

I've never read Bryce Courtney's "The Power of One", or seen the movie. I understand its theme. One person can make a difference. Look at the life of Jesus and the difference he made. I want to borrow the title and change just one word, so my title this morning becomes, "The Power of Us"; the power of community; noting especially that it is power to serve.

Reading through the book of Hebrews, you find a lot of "Let Us"! While Paul sometimes writes of his own, personal motivations: "This one thing I do ... I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." – the book of Hebrews, and chapter 12 especially changes the pronouns from singular to plural. The writer addresses not me, but us. Let's look at our reading again, and if you have your Grapevine and a pen, you might like to circle these first person plural pronouns:

Therefore, since **we** are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let **us** throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let **us** run with perseverance the race marked out for **us**. Let **us** fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of **our** faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that **you** will not grow weary and lose heart.

Only in that last sentence does our writer switch to the second person, and this too, in context, is plural. This is a message for the church.

Let's consider some of the "Let Us"! And I want to start with verse 3 as the conclusion to which our writer is heading, then go back over his rationale and the steps he urges us to take. Are you ready for some Let Us? Firstly,

¹ Mark 10:43, 44

1. Let us not grow weary and lose heart.

Is that a timely exhortation for us this morning? Do you know what the writer is talking about here? Do you know personally what it's like to feel weary, and then start to lose heart? Can a church do that, too?

It's not only possible, I think we've experienced some of this ourselves, lately. All kinds of things make us tired. But difficult decisions, strained relationships, unresolved tensions; these things can make us weary and threaten our morale.

I'm sure it's possible to grow weary, and not lose heart. When the two combine; then energy and motivation quickly drain away. We may not always agree on which issues or decisions lead to weariness and losing heart; but can we agree this morning that this is not a good thing? Let's work through our writer's steps to preventing this. From verse 1,

2. Let us take heart from those who have gone before us.

The "therefore" at the start of chapter 12 points us back to the previous chapter where the author summarises the faith and faithfulness of the Old Testament heroes. Men like Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David. Women too. Rahab is mentioned by name, other women are simply noted for their faith.

There is an athletics metaphor through this exhortation which takes its imagery from the games of the time; probably the forerunner of our modern Olympics. Others before us have competed, and completed their time of competition. They haven't just bowed out and gone away. They've moved to the grandstand, where they watch, and cheer on those in the arena. I always picture my grandfather as I read these words; a man of faith I loved and looked up to. I like to think of him in the grandstand, cheering for me. Who's cheering you on, as you run your race?

As a church, we have quite a crowd in the grandstand, supporting us; and I've been remembering some of them this week.

There's Lindsay Thomas, whose vision was instrumental in forming our church. He was a great encourager while he was with us; I'm sure he's looking on and cheering. Mrs Gibb and Iris Nichols are legends among us for their dedicated work with children. Norm Freemantle was a quiet achiever; Ian & Marie Rendell were like godparents to us all. We have fond memories of Rod & Glenda Hawkins, Alan Joyce, Stewart Barling, Gaylene Knox, Thelma Ninnett; all contributors to the life of our church. They're still part of our church community. Their roles have changed; but if you've ever competed on a sporting field, you'll know the importance of support from the grandstand.

We'll never forget the role Baris Walker played among us, in constructing our facilities here, but in other ways, too. We still miss Barb Detlefsen, her kindness and compassion, expressed in so many practical ways; and her gentle wisdom. Rex & Joan Moon touched so many of us deeply; as did Ian Barker, especially among his peers. And now Grace Bradbury has taken her place in the grandstand, alongside these other great servants of our church, cheering for us, as we continue the race.

In the light of their witness and support, our author writes:

3. Let us throw off every hindrance.

The athletics metaphor is obvious here. I believe athletes back in those times ran in not very much at all! The legendary Cliff Young is said to have trained in gumboots as he ran around the farm. He exchanged them for proper running shoes when he competed in those ultra marathons.

"Everything that hinders." Our modern Olympics are so competitive, the difference between winning and missing out so fine, every possible advantage is looked for; and every possible disadvantage is discarded or minimised.

We get the point. If Olympic gold is so highly prized, how do we value eternity with Jesus? Nothing should be allowed to hinder us. What does this say to a church? Nothing should be allowed to hinder us. Our writer mentions sin as the obvious big one. Let's throw off anything that would hold us back. Any sin, any hindrance, any distraction.

Do we need to repent, do we need to forgive, can we pick up our level of commitment, can we build on the good things taking place among us? Are we ready to move on to where God wants to take us?

4. Let us run with perseverance.

There's something ominous about the word "perseverance", isn't there? We just know there's a warning there that this isn't going to be easy. I've sometimes said the race of life isn't a sprint; it's more like a marathon. I actually think it's more like a steeple chase! I didn't see the steeple chase these Olympics, but I've watched it in the past. It seems tough enough that the athletes have to run so far, competing against the best in the world. Then someone puts those fences, and mini lakes and other obstacles in the way for them to negotiate! I like to watch the athletes' faces as they compete. I'm not sure they're actually enjoying themselves!

We see some obvious parallels with the Christian life, and church life. Did we think this was going to be easy? Did we think we could take growth and change in our stride, with

little planning and preparation? Somebody else has marked out the course before us.

Our task is to run, and keep on running, in spite of the difficulties; when every fibre of our being tells us this is too hard, why don't you just stop!

5. Let us run as a team.

While I admire the individual efforts we see in some Olympic events – Usain Bolt and Michael Phelps are unbelievable – I love the team sports. A team, rather than restricting someone's talent, allows him or her to express that talent in a wider setting that taps into and enhances the talent of other team members.

Synchronised swimming and diving will probably never rate on my list of must-see events; but the cooperation and coordination required is amazing. I'll probably choose to watch football instead, where the team that plays together well as a team will always beat a team of brilliant individuals. In this context, I want to leave Hebrews 12 for a moment, but staying with our theme, turn to Judges 6, and

A. A call to leadership.

Israel as a team was in the doldrums. Their rivals, the Midianites, were stronger than them in battle. They would largely leave the Israelites alone until harvest time; then they would attack, and make off with their harvest. Much easier than growing your own!

Now Israel had resources. They had men who could fight and form an army. More importantly, they had God on their side. All they needed was someone who could inspire and encourage them to run the race God had set before them.

Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press! I don't know much about growing wheat, or winepresses; but I would have thought you'd press grapes in a winepress, and thresh wheat... somewhere else! Gideon was hiding, in fear of the Midianites.

He looked over his shoulder when God's angel spoke to him. He thought he was all alone, but the angel addressed a "mighty warrior", so there had to be someone else! It's safe to say that the thought of leading his people into battle had never occurred to Gideon! I'm sure it hadn't occurred to others, either. There's often a gap between our ideas on leadership, and God's. Moses was a reluctant starter too; he stuttered, and took some convincing. Saul looked the goods, but he turned out to be a dud. David's own father didn't consider him a candidate to become king.

I want to thank Ange for her willingness to listen to God's call. It's a call she first heard some years ago; a call that has taken real commitment as she completed her BTh part time,

while working two part time jobs; and being a full time mother and grandmother. If you've ever studied part time, you'll know something of Ange's commitment and perseverance.

That call to serve God in ministry – somewhere – led Ange to test that call specifically in ministry here, among the people she loves. This was affirmed by others who saw her gifts and encouraged her to put her hand up; it was affirmed by the search committee who were touched as they saw what Ange would bring to the role; and by our church board which unanimously endorsed Ange's nomination.

Thank you Ange, for your willingness to listen and respond. I'm sorry the process has been such an arduous one for you.

How did Gideon go? He looked at the resources at hand, and he knew it could never work. God looked at the resources at hand, and said, “You have way too much! When you defeat the Midianites, you'll think you did it in your own strength!” So he reduced the size of Gideon's army. Twice! From around 32,000 to just 300 men. And God promised to be with them.

As captain of a dedicated, fully committed team, with God on their side, how could Gideon and his army lose? Well they didn't, of course. And Gideon became that mighty warrior God always knew he could be.

Did he do it all on his own? Of course not! That has never been God's way, and in his kingdom and on his team, there is

B. A role for everyone.

We run the race together. We support each other along the way. We serve each other as we share the workload. This is Rick Warren's theme for this week of “Forty Days of Community.” Not all roles are the same, but every role is important. And every role is a serving role, including roles in leadership; especially roles in leadership. We need look no further than Jesus to hear this taught and see this exemplified. See him take time to feed a hungry crowd, to teach a crowd starving for spiritual truth, to wash his disciples' dirty feet. I love Ange's opening song this morning. Jesus came to be our king; but he came as our servant king, and he calls us to follow him.

6. Let us serve with all our hearts.

As we run the race marked out for us, and run it together, let's give it our absolute best shot. We can deliberately throw off every sin that entangles, and still succumb to distraction. The effective lifespan of an Olympic athlete – Michael Phelps is something of an exception – is comparatively short. They know that success only comes with total

commitment.

We're destined to eternity in the grandstand. By comparison, our time on the running track is comparatively short. Can we watch where we allow our hearts to wander?

Early in our "Forty Days" series Rick Warren urged us to look outwards; to always be ready to welcome others, and draw them into the fellowship of our church; to deliberately plan an opportunity to serve those outside our church.

This week, the emphasis is on serving each other within the church. And it's never one or the other; we need to keep both aspects of service in focus and in balance. I love the way Paul encourages the church in Rome in this. "You all have different gifts," he tells them. "This is good! This is the way God planned it." And he summarises this in Colossians 3: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your hearts, as working for the Lord."²

God does amazing things with small numbers of people who are committed to him and each other.

7. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.

In many ways, I've saved the best to last! While we keep our focus on Jesus, the true and only head of the church; all will be well. If we move our focus away from him, and onto anything else, we're sunk! Peter proved that, didn't he, out on the Sea of Galilee?

Returning to Hebrews 12, we note Jesus is called the "author and perfecter of our faith". It all started and ends with him. We note that his focus on the "joy that was before him" allowed him to endure the toughest of present circumstances, without wavering or hesitation. The Son of God gave his life on the cross for you and me; the ultimate act of humble service. And in placing his rights, his dignity and his life into the hands of sinners, he won for us firstly our eternal salvation, and then a power we've scarcely begun to tap as we follow him into serving together.

I guess some level of apprehension is natural as we look to a future with many unknowns. Is that a bad thing? Gideon faced the challenges ahead of him with some trepidation. God told him, "Go in the strength you have... Am I not sending you?"

Gideon's personal strength was minimal. His army was vastly outnumbered. God was with him! And he will do for us what he did for Gideon!

² Colossians 3:23a

BETTER TOGETHER 5. The Power of "Us" – serving together
Hebrews 12:1-3; Judges 6:11-16; Romans 12:4-8

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