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St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
Year C, Proper 15 - Hebrews 11  
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In our Epistle reading this morning, the anonymous author of the book of Hebrews is addressing a Christian community that is going through a difficult time. The author is both an evangelist and a bit of a loving cheerleader, encouraging the church and reminding them of what God has done through Christ. In the passage we just heard, he recounts our sacred stories of times when God's people have overcome enormous obstacles through faith. By faith, he says, the Israelites passed through the Red Sea. By faith, the walls of Jericho fell. By faith, Rahab was spared from death. And then he sums it up saying, "There are many more examples that I just don't have time to tell you!"

This letter to the Hebrews is marked by three important themes: a deep love for the community of faith, gratitude for what God has done, and encouragement for the future in an uncertain time. I must say that these themes are most convenient today as I offer my last sermon to you. I'll begin with the love part... I want to thank you for the way that you have loved our family. When John, Anna, and I moved here almost exactly thirteen years ago, I couldn't have imagined the deep bonds we would form with this congregation. You helped us to build a new life here. You held and cared for us when we suddenly went from one toddler to 3 kids under the age of 3... and then you helped us raise them. You tolerated their wiggles and noise in church, you poured their juice at coffee hour, and you watched as they progressed up the ranks in the Christmas pageant. You've been our village - loving us and sustaining us through these pivotal years in the life of our family. I hope that you know that we have loved you deeply in return.

Some of you may not know that when I was ready to return to work in a church several years after our boys were born, John and I went to talk to the bishop at the time, Bishop Hollerith. We couldn't figure out how to balance two different congregations, and St. Andrew's had become my church home, but we didn't know if it was right for us to try to work together. The Bishop talked it through with us, and then he said, "If any congregation can handle it, it's St. Andrew's." With the vestry's blessing, we began a six month trial. That turned into 9 years of my time as the associate rector. I will always be grateful for the way that you welcomed me first as John's spouse and then allowed me to become your priest. The openness and vitality of this congregation and our fantastic staff made it possible for us to serve together and remain married.

And that brings me to the theme of gratitude for what God has done in our ministry together. Together we've prayed and sung and broken bread week after week. Together we've celebrated births and baptisms, confirmations, graduations, and weddings. Together we've cried

for beloved members we've lost, and together we've cared for their loved ones. Together we've studied the Bible and discussed interesting books and wrestled with hard issues facing our society.. Together we've reached out to those in need to do our small part to make the world a better place. Together, we have welcomed newcomers who have found a home here at St. Andrew's and enriched the life of our congregation. And together, we've had more fun fellowship times than I can count - from picnics to receptions to art shows to oyster roasts. It has been my deepest privilege to be with you in the joyful moments and the heartbreaking ones and everything in between. And it has been a blessing to work with our fantastic staff, past and present, who have helped to make all of these things happen.

The final theme that I mentioned from the letter to the Hebrews is one of encouragement for the future. This morning's passage concludes with these uplifting words for the anxious community: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.... Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."* Perhaps this race metaphor is a helpful one for all of us this morning. While this move to Richmond feels like the right next step for our family, we are grieving the loss of our cloud of witnesses here. We're not sure what our new life will be like, and the process of making it our home will be a marathon, not a sprint.

St. Andrew's has a race ahead as well. Uncertainty is especially hard when it involves church, which we count on to feel familiar and predictable. There will inevitably be some bumps in the road during this time of transition, and like our family, you'll need perseverance. But as the verse says, you will look to Jesus, and the important and wonderful work that God is doing here will continue. Newcomers, I know you've landed here at a funny time, but this congregation is one of a kind. John and I are leaving, but the spirit and people that make it so special will remain. All of you will be a great cloud of witnesses to one another and to your next priests, just as you have been to us. I have no doubt that there is a great new chapter ahead for St. Andrew's. Please know how thankful I am that I got to be a part of this one.

And now it is time to put aside our goodbyes because this week and next, we are doing something even more important, which is to baptize some precious babies. Today, Robin Stedfast Wilson and Jude Reynard Peirsol will become our newest Christians. We pray that they will grow up knowing the love of God and their community of faith. And we pray for God's guidance and blessing for all of us as we run the race ahead. Amen.