
Jesus The Pioneer and Perfecter of Our Faith

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15, Year C
Homecoming Sunday**

*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. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

My wife learned, again this summer, what a nerd I am; and she sure is patient with me about it. I have always been interested in stars and skies, and space and rockets. As a boy building model rockets, I eagerly awaited packages and engines from the Estes Company, in Colorado. And I remember so vividly my fascination, when I set my first rocket, with carefully carved balsa fins, upon the metal launching rod. It was the entry level model, the Alpha rocket.

The big test was whether the rocket would achieve enough power and velocity to rise, to defeat gravity, and soar into the blue sky. It did! And I was hooked forever. Now, every summer, my wife sees the nerd in me set up telescopes on our terrace, telescopes to transport my gaze into outer space.

I remember that the early space rockets of the NASA program were part of a series named, "Pioneer." In 1958, they were the first rockets to test whether something could actually defeat gravity, overcome earth's escape velocity, and speed out to explore the moon and the inner solar system. Later probes would investigate Jupiter and Saturn. Finally, you may remember, Pioneer 10 and Pioneer 11 would venture beyond the solar system, each carrying a famous golden plaque depicting a man and a woman and information about us human beings, the creators of the Pioneer space probes.

Pioneers fascinate me. What do you think of when you hear the word, "pioneer?" The word means something like "foot-soldier," a foot-soldier who explored and prepared the way. Maybe you remember the renowned pioneers of the American west, who knew how to rough it, how to improvise, how to survive. Maybe you appreciate the good ones, like Lewis and Clark.

Or, maybe you remember someone in your field who pioneered a new invention, a new design, even a new business. Early inventors of the computer were Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace, and Grace Hopper, known now with Steve Jobs as pioneers of the computer. I hope we all respect the scientists who pioneered vaccines, Louis Pasteur and Jonas Salk. Our world, our civilization, needs such creative and bold pioneers, people who are willing to go where no one else seems yet to have been. To discover and to create.

Today, we come to the use of the word, "pioneer," in the bible. It is not used much in the bible, only here in the Letter to the Hebrews. Somehow, it is the word used to translate verse 12:2, which urges us to look to Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Jesus the Pioneer!

If science and astronomy and medicine have pioneers, then so does spirituality. People who go where no one else has been before. Bold people of prayer who have the courage to learn, to serve, to teach, to love.

There is a world of natural science and geographical discovery, a world which has appreciated pioneers like Jonas Salk and Lewis and Clark. And there is also a spiritual world! Have no doubt about the existence of a spiritual world! It is that world, the spiritual world, that we come to explore every Sunday. That world, too, has

its pioneers and explorers. It is that world that we baptize these children into today, to become pioneers and explorers!

We gather on Sundays to look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We gather to appreciate, to love, and to learn from Jesus.

One thing that Jesus teaches us about the spiritual world, is that it does not ignore the physical world! The spiritual world is not naïve about the physical world; it does not avoid the physical world with its challenges. The spiritual pioneer, Jesus, does not ignore the material world's challenges and sufferings. Jesus cares for the sick and lost, the lonely and the least. Jesus touches suffering, and Jesus heals suffering. Good spirituality means good care of natural and worldly things, like people! Like earth!

Jesus the pioneer also reminds us that pioneers do not just appear by magic. They train and learn and study; and they pay their dues. It is one thing to dream of re-inventing something, or doing a new thing. But a pioneer cannot invent something new unless he or she has learned the old thing well. We can't develop vaccines from scratch and ignorance. We can't go up rivers and up mountains and into outer space without learning and education and training.

Jesus knows his spiritual tradition. He knows scripture and prayer. And Jesus knows love. If we are to look to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we too will look to tradition and scripture and prayer. We will learn how people of good faith, before us, have interpreted scripture and prayer. We will not just make it up ourselves and call it a discovery.

Today at the Cathedral of St. Philip we gather for Homecoming Sunday. We baptize new Christians, and we resume so many programs of study and service and prayer. These are our deep and blessed traditions! And they are part of a spiritual world that is deeper than the passing fads of the political and cultural world. The Cathedral of St. Philip is a laboratory for the study of healthy spirituality!

Of course, the political and cultural world do have things to teach us, and they have challenges we are to meet. But our deeper identity is that of another world, a spiritual world, a world of faith, where we look to Jesus. We look to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of that faith.

What does it mean to be a "pioneer of faith?" To be a pioneer of faith is to take love into new and challenging places. To be a person of faith is to be a person who knows how to love, even in in unsettled and challenging places. Just as early sailors and explorers and astronauts travelled into the unsettled and challenging places of the natural world, spiritual pioneers lead the way into unsettled and challenging places, with love.

Our faith is what compels us take love into new places. We who look to Jesus as the pioneer of faith—we—will be pioneers of love.

And one day, one day, we will come to the second part of this beautiful verse from Hebrews, chapter twelve, verse two, which says that Jesus is not only the "pioneer" of faith, but also the "perfecter" of faith. One day, one day, we will see Jesus in perfection.

In the bible, and especially with Jesus, "perfection" does not mean scoring one hundred on a test, or completely satisfying every obligation, of being without any error whatsoever. Such legalistic perfection is impossible, anywhere.

In the bible, the word for "perfection" does not mean "without error." The word for "perfection" comes from the Greek word, "telos," which means "the end." In the bible, "perfection" means having reached the end. It means having come to the conclusion of what we set out to do. A painter perfects her masterpiece. A machinist perfects his new engine.

A person interested in spiritual perfection knows how to keep discovering and exploring and learning, even in the midst of mistakes. Again, "perfection" in the sense of "without error" is not achievable anywhere. Beware the person who claims never to make mistakes. Beware the man who never apologizes, who doesn't know how to apologize, or who feels it is a weakness to apologize. The perfect church, the church with no errors or blemishes, does not exist!

The perfect church is only that church which has finally reached its conclusion, its desired end. The perfect church occurs when all of us have reached Jesus.

Thus, as "pioneer" of our faith, Jesus shows us the beginning. And, as "perfecter" of our faith, Jesus shows us

the end. So it is that Jesus is the beginning and the end! The pioneer and the perfecter! The alpha and the omega! My first little rocket, the Alpha, and my spiritual heaven one day, my Omega.

“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” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

AMEN.

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