

Sermon Proper 15 Year C

[RCL] Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

Great Cloud of Witnesses

In today's Epistle lesson, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourages us to persevere in our life of faith, no matter what difficulties we face. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The writer says, you have begun a good thing in becoming Christians. I want you to finish strong in what has been started in you.

A priest from the diocese of Maryland says, "I like to run. I'm not fast, but I enjoy running. Participating in marathons has given me an experience I have enjoyed about running. In marathons, the best runners in the world and normal mortals like myself get to compete in the very same race. I think that's neat. I will never find myself on the same tennis court with Serena Williams. If I were ever to toss a football, none of the Green Bay Packers would be there to receive it. But, when I ran the Chicago marathon, I (and 25,000 other runners) lined up at the same starting line as runners who held the best marathon times in the world. We ran the same course. We passed the same cheering crowds."

"But I suppose it's the finishing that really makes the difference. The elite runners were crossing the finish line when I was about half way through the course. They had about two hours to enjoy refreshments and rest, while I still had about thirteen miles of one foot in front of the other to reach my goal, and was wondering if I would really make it. But the beauty of the event is that for many of us, just finishing the race is the accomplishment, the goal."

Very few have to run a marathon — participation is for fun. But the author of the letter to the Hebrews asks us a similar question: Will we finish the race that is our life with faith? Will we persevere? Or will we run off course, or give up? And the race is hard. In today's gospel, Jesus tells us, if we follow him, if we stand up for

what is right, we will experience conflict.

The writer of Hebrews, like a good coach, gives four pieces of advice about how to finish the race. To finish the race: recall who surrounds us. Remove what ways down on us. Rely on strength within us. Remember who goes before us. Recall who surrounds us: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The epistle writer wants us to picture ourselves as athletes in an arena. As we strive toward our goal, to finish with faith, in peace and holiness, we run surrounded by people. The people in the stands are people who have demonstrated faith — faith that persevered, people who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race. These are people of the Bible, the men and women of the Church throughout the ages, people known personally by you and by me whose witness encourages us.

They are witnesses, not just spectators. There is a huge difference. A spectator watches you go through something. A witness is someone who has gone through something herself, and the root meaning of the word witness, from which we get the word "martyr," is someone who may have given his life going through it. We have witnesses cheering us on, not just spectators, people who have gone through what we struggle with, people whose testimonies of the strength God gave them can, in turn, give us strength and courage. We have witnesses rooting for us, weeping with us when we stumble, calling to us when we wander, urging us to finish the race.

Our coach tells us also to remove what weighs down on us. Have you ever seen a track star running a race wearing winter parkas, or with weights tied to their ankles, or carrying a backpack full of bricks? "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely," says our coach. What attitudes and actions, what past behavior and present entanglements weigh us down? What weights of sin and brokenness do we carry that cause us to stumble rather than sprint? We can set those weights down. God is ready to take them from us. God is ready to forgive and heal whatever we let get between us and God, whatever has come between us and other people, whatever wrongs we do to ourselves.

Our coach also tells us to rely on the strength within us. We are told to "run with

perseverance the race that is set before us." When the going gets tough, when the road is difficult, when the miles drag on, obstacles come up around every bend, when every stretch of the road seems like another steep hill to climb, we can rely on spiritual resources within us — spiritual resources we develop in training: in gathering with other Christians, in hearing and reading God's word, in participating in the sacramental life of the church.

The word “perseverance” can also be translated as “patient endurance.” Endurance is one thing. We can endure and whine and complain all at the same time. Patient endurance looks like praying without ceasing for ourselves and others. It looks like encouraging others even in the midst of difficulty. It looks like saying something kind, or saying nothing at all when something unkind comes more readily to mind. It looks like giving of ourselves generously, even when we're not sure what's ahead of us and our inclination may be to think of ourselves first.

Most important of all, remember who goes before us. We can look "to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

We can and will finish the race strong in faith if we look to Jesus, if we keep our eyes focused on him, not being distracted by other things along the way that can cause us to lose our direction or footing and stumble. Jesus has gone before us, has shown us the way that leads to victory. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and follow him, we will not only make a good beginning in faith we too will finish and win the race.

In the race of our life, we have people cheering us on. We have someone willing to take on our burdens. We can train for patient endurance. We have a guide who leads us and will not leave us. Let us keep running until the prize is ours and we hear God say to us, "Well done!"

Amen.

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