

“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”
Hebrews 11:1-12:2
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Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

I am not a runner. I'm not much of an athlete at all. So I was curious and more than a little awed at a staff meeting a few weeks ago when, as we shared prayer concerns, Children's Ministry Director Cathy Dohnalek modestly acknowledged her joy at completing the Chicago marathon that weekend. When pressed, she shared more: How before the race they sing the national anthem, followed, of course, by Bruce Springsteen's "Born to Run," which, she confesses, "always leaves you in tears." How you step out feeling afraid and overwhelmed, not at all sure you're prepared enough to finish. How at times in the race you find yourself laughing for the audacity of running ... and at times you find yourself crying for the joy of pushing yourself so hard ... and then you find yourself weeping for the pain, the sheer pain of putting one foot in front of the other. How it is to hit the midway point and realize there are people who have already finished the race, and you still have hours to go, and you're not convinced you're really going to make it.

What keeps you going, Cathy said, is only this: first, the relief and confidence that the lead runner has made it, and if he can, you can too. And second, the thousands and thousands of people cheering you on. The Chicago marathon is especially astonishing – it has an international reputation – for mile after mile, all the way along the 26 mile route, there are crowds five and ten people deep cheering you on. Children holding up signs; girls and guys dressed up like cheerleaders; teenage rock bands; former runners; family members and countless total strangers. And there are your fellow runners too – thousands of them – and as you fall in to your rhythm next to strangers, you get to talking on the way, and when they get to a bad stretch you cheer them on as if they were your own brother or sister or child, and when you find yourself struggling in your own deep exhaustion, they shore you up in turn. The marathon – it presses you to your physical limits, Cathy said. And you really can't do it alone.

It is All Saints Day, and this is the scene the book of Hebrews invites us to join: the throng of runners, all of us, in the long and worthy race of our very lives.

Life's long run ... it is a mixed experience. There are times when the sheer joy of being alive is so stunning that it makes us weep; when we step out into love with the one who knows us thoroughly and loves us anyway ... or when we watch our children grow and thrive into wise and happy human beings. There are times when the challenge of life – good hard work you can sink your teeth into, or a relationship snatched from the precipice of boredom or betrayal – there are times when the challenge is so breathtaking and honorable, and you just want to keep going for the drive of it, and it is exhilarating when you break through. And there are times of simple, deep and humble inspiration, when you take a breath and notice what the world is always offering – the lap of the water on the shoreline ... the intense splendor of the leaves, of reds and golds, with no utilitarian value but the glimpse of the divine imagination. So much of life is rich and beautiful and terribly worthwhile.

But life is also hard, and sometimes even grueling, and if we are honest, we will all confront those times that we don't think we will make it. We stumble over uneven ground: an unexpected failure, a hard rebuff, a stupid, unethical decision, and we lose respect for ourselves, and our confidence fails us. Or we hit the wall of pain: someone we trust rejects us, and our hearts break; a loved one dies and we are stunned by the keening wail of grief in us, a grief we fear we can't endure. Or we simply grow tired: exhausted by the knowledge that there's so much more ahead, that our ill and aging parent is going to need us for years, not months; that our financial troubles are not a temporary blip but a way of life; that our own wrestling match with addiction or depression is never going to go away; that the chronic, wasting diseases of war and intractable poverty and African children dying of AIDS are overwhelming; and all we want to do is lay down where we are and rest. Even in the shelter of this affluent suburb, where on the surface everything is beautiful and right, even here we taste the bitter tears of sorrow, and disappointment, and grief, for this is inevitably part of the path of life, and no amount of money or shelter or amusing diversions can protect us from them.

What is it that keeps us from losing heart? What is it that keeps us in that great and noble race that faith has set before us?

What keeps you going, Scripture says, is only this: first, the relief and confidence we find that the lead runner, Christ himself, has finished the race, and won the crown, and he has gone before us so that we can make it too. And second, if we will only look up from the road in front of us, we will see what has been with us all along: the thousands and thousands of saints cheering us on, indeed, a cloud of witnesses, strangers and loved ones, living and dead,

surrounding us, supporting us, celebrating every step we take, infusing us with courage that we could not summon on our own.

Today, All Saints Day, is a day for each of us to look up from the path. To see them surrounding you. To hear them cheering you. Saints still in the land of the living; and saints who abide now on that farther shore. Saints who are total strangers, and mixed in among them, saints you recognize: a grandparent or parent, who expected much of you once and still hopes for you now. A teacher who believed in you when nobody else did. Your first best friend; your scout leader or camp advisor. The “giants of your childhood.” And the famous saints, they are there too – the pioneers who once blazed trails in your field – as I myself celebrate today, as we honor the first women deacons and elders and pastors ordained in our denomination.

Who are the saints who line your path, five and ten and tens of thousands deep? For they are cheering for you, even now, to stay the course, to lift your eyes, to keep on the path of life. They are so proud of you, so very, very proud.

The marathon – it presses you to your physical limits, Cathy said. Faith’s noble race – it presses you too. You really can’t do it alone. You really don’t need to.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ... who has finished the race, and won the crown, that we might win with him.

Amen.