

Oh – That Crowd
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Hebrews 12: 1-2 (NEB)

And what of ourselves? With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish: Jesus who, for the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, endured the cross, making light of its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Believe it or not, when I was in the ninth grade I was the distance runner for my junior high school. I ran the 440 and the 880. It was a brand new school. If I bested my time in any previous race it became the school record. Without a doubt those records were easily knocked down the next year when I entered high school.

The man to beat in those days was Jim Palmer. Jim was the fastest distance runner in the city and competed in several other events. I knew Jim, as did all the other runners and judges. My problem was not knowing that Jim was the better runner. My problem was the fact that every time we lined up the judge would check our position to make sure we would not scratch. Inevitably the judge would make a comment like, “You’re lucky to be lined up behind Mr. Palmer. His draft will pull you along.” Or, “Good luck, men. You’re going to need it against Jim Palmer.” All the other runners, including myself, looked downcast, and wondered if this might be the race when Jim would trip or stumble. That never happened, of course. Jim was a highly disciplined athlete. To his credit he never bragged or teased the rest of us. In fact, I don’t remember that he ever said a word. He just walked off to the next competition.

The idea of running the race is an ancient Greco-Roman metaphor. Athletic metaphors are found in the New Testament such as Hebrews, Philippians, and Galatians. In II Timothy Paul wrote (4:7-8):

“I have run the great race. I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. And now the prize awaits me, the garland of righteousness which the Lord, the all-just Judge, will award me on that great Day;”

The metaphor of the race is also found in Paul’s contemporary philosophers, Epictetus and Philo. The Greek Olympic games are the backdrop of this image. Whether in athletics, philosophy, or theology, life is a race. You hear that today when we speak of someone who has died and say, “She ran a good race.” Or, “He fought to the very end.” Indeed, we will run, fight, climb, wrestle and even crawl to the finish line. Our bodies will often collapse long before the will to live is extinguished.

We are like the man who had just spent megabucks on a skydiving class, dove out of the airplane and pulled the ripcord. The chute emerged, tangled, and he cut it free. He then pulled the cord on the reserve chute, and it also was tangled. He prayed fervently as he looked at the quickly approaching ground below. To his amazement, a woman was coming up with equal velocity.

"Hey, you know anything about parachutes?" he shouted to her, as they passed by.

"No!" she replied. "Do you know anything about gas stoves?"¹

The emphasis of the metaphor is placed on the fact that we run the race with an eye on the prize awarded by the judges. We read in II Timothy that the prize of faith is the garland of righteousness. The garland, of course, was the trophy that the

¹ My Humor, www.myhumor.org/clean-jokes/sports-jokes.asap, 8/13/2010.

Olympic champion bore. The prize is the promise fulfilled that we enter the Kingdom of God where just and right relationships are ours eternally. The winner is elevated to the awards platform of God's peace and fellowship.

When we think of an athlete we think of the importance of both natural skill and discipline. No one enters the playing field or court who has not worked hard to learn the skills of the game. We think of the daily routines of body strengthening, play patterns, the finesse of foot placement, stride, or ball handling. Practice and more practice are required to command fundamental skills and the maturity of technique.

Physical skill is absolutely necessary for the athlete to compete. And those skills are played within the rules of the game. With out rules the game degenerates into chaos and a melee inevitably ensues. Sometimes the rules are fixed and sometimes they are fluid. Whether one is playing by the rules is often a matter of interpretation to be determined by the referees. The point is that an effective athlete must know and play by the rules or suffer the consequences of penalties or even expulsion from the game.

In team sports the quality of the squad is determined by the willingness to rely on each other's strengths and compensate for weaknesses. There is little room for self-centeredness. The co-ordination of plays and prowess within the team determines its effectiveness and ability to win the game. The game is won or lost within the team before it ever enters the field.

I am guessing that Paul and just about anyone who reads his letters understands these elements of sportsmanship. But in the book of Hebrews Paul inserts an interesting component. He has placed the race within the larger context of the crowd –

the cloud of witnesses. And these are not just any spectators. They are the mothers and fathers of the faith tradition. In chapter eleven he lifts up the competitors of the Jewish tradition beginning with Abel. He wrote of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and Moses. He lifts up Gideon, Samson, David, and Samuel. He declares that through their faith kingdoms were overthrown and justice established. Each faced hardship and trial. Often they became refugees who endured poverty, misery, and distress.

In the race for faith, these are the witnesses that gather to watch us run. Think about that. In most sporting events the crowd is made up of people who gather for the purpose of entertainment. There are probably mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends packing the grandstands. There are paid cheerleaders. Many have gathered who always wanted to enter the field but never acquired the skills, the rules, or the team that would bring them to competition. Paul writes about different kind of crowd made up of former athletes. Imagine all of the retired football players, coaches, and referees of the NFL making up the crowd of the Super bowl. I can tell you that one of the hardest things for a preacher to do is sermonize to a congregation made up of clergy. Every one is a critic who will only be too happy to tell you what you should have said. And you know in your heart there are better preachers in the audience.

So Paul sets our race in the context of “these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud.” We do not play or run the race without this cloud of witnesses. Again, these are not just idle spectators, these of women and men who have run the race before us. They know the challenges and the hardships that faith requires. They are the examples to whom we turn. They have set records by which we measure ourselves. They are

models by which we can shape our own strategies for winning. And they even serve us when they have lost, teaching us the dignity that sacrifice requires. Paul even goes so far to say that often they never wear the garland. They never get the gold medal, or silver, or bronze.

The examples that Paul used are the great heroes and heroines of the Hebrew Bible. They are the women and men of yore. I am wondering if you could imagine the women and men of University Congregational Church as the great cloud of witnesses in which we run the race of faith. Shouldn't the church give every one of us the home field advantage? You know what I am talking about. The home field advantage is not just familiarity with the turf or the surface of the court. The home field advantage is the crowd that gathers to cheer on the team, challenges the umpire on a bad call, and applauds the player who is carried off the field. I had the joy of attending several WSU Shockers basketball games last season. In closely contested games the roar of the crowd is often deafening. I think there was one game where I suffered a 30% hearing loss. Shouldn't the church be the place where we run the race of faith with so great a crowd of witnesses? Shouldn't the church be the place where we are encouraged, celebrated, and cheered on?

Now think about that! Can you imagine a football game, or a golf competition, or a track and field contest with no spectators? Are salaries and trophies enough for the average athlete? I don't think so. They love the sport because they are loved, supported, and cheered by their fans. No one knows the thrill of victory in isolation. I think the same thing applies to Christian maturation. I do not think that people enter faith or grow in faith by themselves. People grow up in Christ by families and

congregations that encourage and guide them. Yes, they need the examples of Moses, Ruth, David, Mary, Jesus, and Paul. **And** they also need the examples of Jim and Susan, Don and Harold, and you. Yes, the minister is called to be the spiritual leader of his or her congregation. But that is anemic compared to those who run with the cloud of witnesses.

Perhaps the best example is the Special Olympics. You know that in the Special Olympics the athletes have some ability challenge. Some have lost limbs; some are born with minds or bodies that do not function well. In the Special Olympics every contestant is encouraged and cheered on. It has often been the case that when a runner falls down on the track all of the other runners stop, turn around, and run back to their fallen competitor. They will pick him or her up, dust them off and head back to the finish line in mass. At that point no one is quite sure who placed “first,” but everyone is safe and clapping and celebrating. Every one is a winner.

I think of 28-year-old Olympian Mike Bailey. Mike was born with Down syndrome and began competing in the Special Olympics when he was seven years old. Mike’s specialty is power lifting. His personal best in competition is the bench press at 155 pounds and the dead lift at 260 pounds. Mike is also kept busy with work and college studies. Mike has shown great determination to run the race of life with every ounce of his being. He has done so in the presence of his family, neighbors, and the Special Olympics community. Mike could never have done this alone.

So it is with faith. We are called to be the kind of community where everyone competes. We all compete with differing strengths. We are all handicapped. But we can only run the race if we are surrounded by the cloud of the faithful. And I am

appealing to you – this very crowd of faith – to think of yourselves as the witnesses that make faith possible. Now you would quickly imagine that a faithful witness would be a man or woman of integrity. Christian witnesses are moral agents who struggle with making right relationships a reality in their families, businesses and communities. You would also assume that a faithful witness is one who seeks to understand the life and spirit of Jesus and live accordingly. Those are givens. Allow me to offer two other specific qualities of faith I believe are essential.

The cloud of witnesses is a crowd of dignity. In the Special Olympics no one is ever booed or heckled. There is no name-calling or finger pointing. There are no losers. Would that the church treat every member with such respect. Now I realize that we are human beings and one of our favorite pastimes is to talk about others. But it breaks my heart when members of my congregation speak of others with disdain, marring their characters with distortion and bile. Nothing can tear up a church more forcefully than a whispering campaign – I guess today I should say an email campaign – of vitriol and character denigration. Smug and self-righteous gossip will tear apart the body of Christ that only a shark could envy.

When I was a counselor at the Methodist Youth Camp we often sang, Peter Scholte's song, "We Are One in the Spirit." The lyrics went like this:

We are one in the Spirit, we are One in the Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

We will work with each other, we will work side by side.
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride.

We will walk with each other, we will walk side by side.
And together we'll spread the News
That God is in our land.

(Chorus)

And they'll know we are Christians by our Love

By our love.

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our Love.²

As simple as the lyrics may be the words speak truth about what it means to be a Christian congregation. We encourage the runners of faith when we guard human dignity with the very people we declare to be in covenant with. It is not great preaching or a sterling music program that makes for a vital congregation. The real measure of our health is the weight we give to the dignity of every person who sits in this sanctuary. I mean every person, regardless of his or her age, gender, gender orientation, ability, race, nationality, ethnicity, or citizenship.

I think of Mother Theresa of Calcutta who heard a voice from God calling her to care for the dying poor in the slums of that tired old city. She did not care if they were Untouchables or what diseases they bore or their religious preference. None could ever repay her. But each was fed, bathed, and comforted with the utmost respect.

The great witnesses that sustain the race of faith give us courage. They are the people who stand along the road of life throwing praise and serving water to all of the runners. And when one falls they lift him or her up and send them on the way. When the racers collapse at the finish line they resuscitate them. It takes real courage to step into the arena or onto the field. Much of that must come from within. But not all courage is self-generated, especially if we are losing or we are wounded. There are

² Peter Scholte, F.E.L., "We Are One in the Spirit," found at <http://www.unitedmusic.com/ezekiel/onespirit.html>. Downloaded, 8/14/10.

times when the player must retire from the sport, and that takes a special kind of courage.

I have been your pastor for three years now, beginning my fourth year this month. I have officiated at about 75 weddings, dozens of memorial services, several baptisms and confirmations. I have seen families struggle with grief, not only with death, but also with the demise of physical health, divorce, and unemployment. From weddings to baptisms to interments courage is required for every one. To the extent that the congregation lavishes encouragement on each and every one of these people and their families they are strengthened for the next step. There is plenty of bad news out there for every one of us: the economy, civil discord, racism, and war. What we are hungry for is the valor to press ahead – with the chemotherapy or hospice, reconciliation or divorce, loss of job or out-of-state transfer.

Every race of faith requires a lion-hearted congregation. Every runner needs the phone call, the visit, the email, and the card from one another. Now some people say that is the minister's job. Yes it is. And it is your job. In case you have not noticed I do not make a crowd. I'm just one guy – not a cloud that can wrap itself around a grieving family, or a struggling retiree, or a new mom. In fact, sometimes I am exactly the wrong person to meet the needs of some people. Yes, they want to hear from me. And yes, there are other voices of comfort and courage that only you can give them. I think of the story of Jenny Lewis of Charleston, South Carolina.

Jenny was born with Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis. She could not put pressure on her heels and had to walk on tiptoes. There were times when the pain was so intense she had to be carried. Jenny took pain medication, of course, and her family

would have to wrap her feet in hot towels until the pain subsided and she could go back to her normal activities.

Bill Greer wrote that Jenny was a beautiful girl. “She wore a smile on her face, a song on her lips, and a love and acceptance of others, that was, simply, amazing.”³ This was her witness, despite the fact that she endured multiple surgeries. She carried a pillow all through high school to soften her body against the hard chairs. There were times when her pain was so crippling that her friends would have to scoop her up and carry her from class to class.

In her senior year Jenny decided that she wanted to get on the football team to strengthen her college application. She begged the coach for any kind of position with phone calls, notes, and cards. Finally he relented and made her the manager of the Garrett High School Football Team. He yelled at her, “If you miss ONE game, you’re out!”

At every single game of the season Jenny Lewis carried buckets of water to her teammates, bandaged knees and ankles, massaged necks and backs. She whispered words of encouragement and gave pep talks. It turned out that this became one of the best football seasons in Garrett’s twenty-five year history.

One of the football players was asked why he thought the team had such a winning season. He replied, “Well, when you’ve been knocked down, and you can’t seem to move, you look up and see Jenny Lewis, limping across the field, dragging

³ Bill Greer, *Chicken Soup for the Veteran’s Soul*, as published in “Afterhours Inspirational Stores,” at <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/cgi-gin>, copyright 1998-2008, downloaded 8/14/10.

her buckets and carrying her pillow. It makes anything the rest of us suffer seem pretty insignificant.”⁴

You see, that was Jenny Lewis’ story, a story of courage. And I know that there are all kinds of stories in this congregation that can give others the courage to get back in the game and struggle to the very end. There are lion-hearts in this church and there are women and men and children who need the tenacity of your witness.

I know that faith in Christ means different things to different people. That is the Way of Congregationalism. There are some who are evangelical in their faith stance and those who are agnostics. I constantly struggle with the meaning of faith in Jesus and own a broad swath of skepticism. Respect and courage are the offices of every stripe of faith as far as I am concerned. Everyone needs dignity and courage. I do not think it matters much how we define ourselves theologically. I think it is vitally important that we be a faith community that envelopes people like a cloud, a cloud of bold-spirited people ennobling every child, man, and woman who enters this place.

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⁴ Ibid.