

“A Great Cloud of Witnesses”
Hebrews 11: 1-12; 12: 1-2
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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.”¹

The fall running season is upon us. On Sunday October 9 (three weeks ago) over 40,000 runners lined up to run the Chicago Marathon. Our own Michelle Johns has run the Chicago Marathon twice, most recently last year on 10-10-10. Mark Wendleton ran the Rock and Roll Marathon last week in St. Louis, and the NYC Marathon with over 40,000 entrants is next Sunday.

In 1977 along with many others I bought and read Jim Fixx’s book, “The Complete Book of Running.” I was very athletic growing up and I always loved to run, so at 34 years old, running was the perfect opportunity for me to get back in shape.

I started out running a quarter mile around a local track and quickly graduated to a half mile, and soon a mile. I then headed out to the local streets and each week I was running more and more. By six months I was running three miles a day, five days a week. Somewhere along the line, I decided that someday I wanted to run and complete a marathon.

I started my marathon training in January of 1981 deciding that I was going to prepare for Grandma’s Marathon in Duluth, MN.

I picked Grandma’s because it was sponsored by “Grandma’s Solon and Deli,” no, that’s not the reason, it was because it “guaranteed” cool temperatures in early June as you ran along the shore of Lake Superior.

¹ Hebrews 12: 1-2

It did turn out to be a perfect day to run: cool, cloudy, with periods of light rain. I had a great following, along with Meg and our two children; Meg's two sisters and their husbands along with Meg's Mom and Dad, they all came up from the Twin Cities to cheer me on. Scott, one of my brother-in-law's, drove his car along the route and stopped and met me at most every rest stop to encourage me and to take pictures.

I started the race with great anticipation, feeling confident, but also feeling some doubt, did I prepare adequately enough to finish?

Early in the race you find yourself talking and laughing with your fellow runners; as a first time marathoner, you can't believe that you are actually setting out to run 26.2 miles ... and then at times you find yourself almost in tears, tears of joy as you push yourself and you pass the mile markers ... 10, 12, 14 miles; as the miles roll on, you begin be in more pain, but you just keep putting one foot in front of the other.

After we had passed the midway point, we heard that the front runner had finished setting a new course record with a time of 2:09.36; that time is still the course record.

The front runners had finished and I still had 12 miles to go. At that point I began to think, "will I make it?"

At mile 23, as I entered the outskirts of Duluth, I saw my family. They were all yelling and cheering me on. I remember saying to them with confidence, "I am going to make it!"

What keeps you going?

First, the knowledge that the lead runners made it, if they can, you can too;

Second, I knew Scott would be at the next rest stop to urge me on and I didn't want to disappoint him and then there were the hundreds of people I was running with and of course the thousands of people cheering us all on.

Grandma's marathon was a festive atmosphere, as are most all marathons; there were the scenic views along Lake Superior that even on a cloudy day were inspiring, but most of all mile after mile, all the way along the 26 mile route people were cheering us on; children holding up signs; bands playing, everyone encouraging us on.

Early on you talk some with those around you, and when you get to a bad stretch you cheer each other on as if all those who were running alongside you were your brothers and sisters.

I had three goals;

1. To finish,
2. To finish without walking, and
3. To have a time under 4 hours.

As I approached the finished line I saw Meg and the kids and as I crossed under the finish line the clock read 3 hours; 59 minutes; and 08 seconds. What a thrill – I HAD DONE IT!

It was sheer joy to finish and meet my goals and have my family there to share in that joy! What a sense of accomplishment. I had just run a marathon – it had pressed me to my physical limits, but I realized that I didn't do it alone.

Tuesday is All Saints Day, and our scripture lesson of the day from the book of Hebrews, invites us to join the multitude of runners, past and present, and "run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

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 challenges of life that come with meaningful work, or the challenges of life that come with a difficult relationship, when those challenges are met and things get turned around –

Our breath is taken away and we are encouraged and cheered on to keep going toward the finish line, to get to the other side; it is those times that life is so exhilarating when you break through the wall.

Those times are times of simple, deep and humble inspiration, when you notice what the world is always offering

The constant lapping of the water on the shoreline ...

The intense splendor of the leaves, of red and gold, with no utilitarian value but the glimpse of the divine imagination...

So much of life is rich and beautiful and so worthwhile.

But life is also hard, and sometimes even grueling, and if we are honest, we have all had times when we were not sure we could make it.

We stumble over the uneven ground:

An unexpected failure,
A hard snub,
A bad decision, and
We lose respect for ourselves and others, and
Our confidence fails us.

Or we hit the wall of pain:

Someone we trust rejects us, and our hearts are broken;
A loved one dies and we are stunned by the wail of grief in us,
A grief we fear we cannot endure.

Or we simply grow tired, exhausted by the knowledge:

That there's so much more ahead of us,

That our ill and aging parents are going to need us not just for months, but maybe years;

That our financial troubles are not a temporary blip, but may very well be a way of life;

That our own wrestling match with depression or addiction is not easily going away;

That the chronic, wasting diseases of war, violence, and poverty are overwhelming;

And all that we want to do is lie down and pull the covers over our heads and rest.

Even in the shelter of our comfortable homes, 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 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 us going, Scripture says, it is:

First, the relief and confidence we find in that the lead runner, Christ himself, who has finished the race, and won the crown; 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 that he has been with us all along, along with the:

Thousands and 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.

Tuesday, November 1st, is “All Saints Day,” the day for each of us to look up from the path; to see the saints that surround us; to hear them cheering us on.

- Saints still in the land of the living;
- Saints who abide now on that farther shore;
- Saints who are total strangers,

Saints you recognize:

- Grandparents and parents, who expected much of you once and still have high hopes for you now;
- An aunt or uncle;
- A teacher who believed in you when nobody else did;
- Your best friends;
- A Sunday school teacher
- Your scout leader,
- A coach, or
- A camp counselor;

Those “giants of your childhood” who loved and encouraged you.

And then there are the famous saints, they are there too – the pioneers who once blazed trails for you in your field, in your profession.

These are the saints who line your path, five, ten, twenty rows deep?

They are cheering for you;
They are urging you to lift up your eyes;
They are cheering you on to stay the course,
They are cheering you to faithfully keep on the path of life,

They are so proud of you, so very, very proud.

We have all run difficult races in our life, races that have pressed not only our physical, but also our mental and spiritual limits.

The journey of our life, faith’s noble race – it presses us to our limits.

And today we remember that we don't run our race alone.

“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 ...”

It is Jesus, the Christ, the one who has finished the race, and won the crown, he sets the pace, he leads us on;

He loves us, he encourages us, and he cheers us on so that we might finish the race that is before us;

Knowing, believing that we win the ultimate race with him;

Knowing, believing that at the finish line;

We will be joined with all the saints, that great cloud of witnesses, and with Christ himself, as we are received and forever held in God's everlasting arms.

Amen!