

11-1-2020 SERMON CCI Hebrews 12: 1-3 The Cloud of Witnesses

About 10 years ago Rob and I set a summer goal to walk 2-3 miles 4-5 evenings a week trying out walking trails and parks we had never been to before. We started out walking, but after a couple weeks, I added jogging because I had enjoyed it in the past. But jogging made me out of breath and I went back to walking.

This memory came to me as I read today's scripture reading about running the race of faith we're on. It's not a 100-yard sprint, that you run as fast and hard as you can and then it's over. This race is a lifelong marathon. I've never run a marathon. A marathon is 26 miles long, some of the path is on flat city streets, other parts are uphill and downhill, around corners, and uphill again, running, jogging, walking and running again, pushing through the fatigue, sore muscles, until you finally cross the finish line. The race of faith is like that.

Marathon runners wear lightweight clothes and lightweight running shoes in good shape. They carry no baggage to slow them down. Today's scripture says the same about this race of faith- we're to *"throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."* Baggage hinders our progress on this race- baggage like believing faith is supposed to make life easier, or jealousy when someone else's race looks easier, sometimes belongings get in our way, or old hurts or failures weigh us down, or sins we think we can handle while running keep entangling our feet. Carrying this useless stuff makes as much sense on our race of faith as running a marathon in 3 layers of clothes, a heavy coat, and stumbling because our shoes are untied. It may work on the easy parts of the race where the ground is level and the sun isn't too hot, but when the path starts a steep uphill climb that seems to never end, we will find ourselves huffing and puffing wondering where God is. Throw it off, Hebrews says, so we can run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

One of the challenges I had jogging any distance that summer was what to do with my mind. If I didn't have something to think about, I paid attention to how tired I was, how out of breath, that I was too hot, or too sweaty. What helped was walking 300 steps and jogging 300 steps back and forth. As I concentrated on counting each step instead of on how I felt, I gradually jogged more than I walked. Our text says something similar: we're to run, "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Keeping our eyes on Jesus, rather than on ourselves, other runners, or distractions, we find the strength we need to finish strong. Jesus ran this race before us, he knows what this race is like, on the easy parts, and also up the steep uphill parts of hardship and opposition, all the way up the road to Calvary. How? He saw the joy that was ahead. Keeping our eyes on Jesus is the key to persevering when what we feel like doing is quitting, or sitting on the sidelines watching others run.

Verse 1 tells us that there is a great cloud of witnesses who cheer us on from heaven. Witnesses tell what they know, what they've seen God do. This cloud of witnesses has many well-known people, like Moses, and Abraham, and Rahab, Mary, Peter and Paul, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, John Lewis, and thousands more. But today I hear the CCI cloud of witnesses we've remembered this morning. I hear Roma, probably standing behind some heavenly kitchen counter saying, "CCI friends, keep running, God will give you the strength. God gave me the strength after I broke my neck. Even on my hardest days, God was with me; he's with you too. Would you like a cookie?" Or I hear Robert saying, "God was with me when I almost died being electrocuted, then when I lost my hand, and when dementia fogged my mind. Even then, God was with me every step. So keep running." Or Dodie, I see her smiling in her bed, singing hymns with all her heart, and saying, "Don't be discouraged, God got me through after my stroke, and gave me joy unspeakable even when I could no longer move without help. Sing

while you run!” And Daisy with her huge, sweet smile, putting her hand out to touch us and say, “God gave me everything I needed, I **know** how faithful God is, he’s got you covered too.” And Marilyn with her contagious laugh saying, “Friends, I thought the most beautiful place in the world was at my cabin, but I hadn’t seen anything before I got to heaven and saw Jesus! Keep running the race, it will be worth it all.” The message from our cloud of witnesses is, “God is faithful, so persevere, stop looking down or sideways at others, keep your eyes on Jesus, and run your race. What’s ahead is worth every step!”