



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Cloud of Witnesses” **Sermon on Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2**

Stephanie Boaz

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The passage from Luke this morning is a challenging passage. Jesus says that he came to bring division. I wonder how his followers heard this. Were they confused? Or surprised? Maybe they just rolled with it. Or maybe they found themselves wondering, “What division?”

What division? We know division. In this day and age division seems like one of the easiest things to talk about. We. They. Us. Them. Democrat. Republican. Pro and Pro—just different pros. We talk about divisions all the time. We snarl, “Liberal Left” or “Radical Right.” Some divisions we speak under our breath—or not. Like: Racial division. Gender division. Socioeconomic division. International divisions. We are very aware of divisions. It’s almost as if we wear our divisions like a badge. Like a jersey for the team we are on. And I wonder if we have become too comfortable with our divisions?

Jesus: He was talking about divisions that would occur because of following him. Because of having faith in Him.

So, it seems we better be mindful of any side we take. Is it a side we take because of our faith? If not, then why be on that side? And, as we find ourselves along a divide—we better be standing in faith. And, that faith better be what guides our thoughts—our words—our deeds. Because, like Bette Midler said in one of her hit songs: “God is watching us...from a distance.” Or maybe the Prophet Jeremiah said it better in chapter 23: “Am I a God nearby,” says the Lord, “and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?” says the Lord. “Do I not fill heaven and earth?”

God is watching us. God is with us. And thank God!

Because the life of faith is not an easy life. Full of blessings. Full of purpose. Full of grace and love. YES! But, the life of faith is challenging, nonetheless. We need help. So, the writer of Hebrews has Good News for us.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2.

²⁹By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

³²And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented—³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground.

³⁹Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of 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.

Chicago has a Scream club. It is exactly what it sounds like. It is a club of people who come together to scream. It all started when Manny Hernandez and his girlfriend Elena Soboleva were having a really hard day together. They had some life issues that were stressing them out. They happened to be walking near Lake Michigan when, suddenly, Manny just felt like going over and screaming into the lake. He told Elena, and she thought it was a great idea. When they got to the shore, there were others who were just hanging out by the lake. So as not to freak anybody out, Manny told them what they were about to do. Suddenly, there were six people standing at the edge of the water just screaming. It was such a release for all of them. There were some tears, and there was some laughter. And they all felt a little better after screaming. So, Manny and Elena decided to start the Scream Club.

The result: Every Sunday evening, members of the club show up at the North Avenue beach in Chicago and make 3 cathartic screams at the same time. The club has grown to over 200 members and there is potential for the Scream Club to spread beyond Chicago.

This story was picked up, just a few weeks ago, by a variety of news outlets in Chicago and beyond. Fox, NBC, CBS, CNN, People magazine. The story had pretty broad appeal. It seems that we live in times that make one want to Scream!

Of course, this is not unique to our time. Life is challenging, and it always has been. We need look no further than the biblical witness to see that life is hard. From the Fall of Adam and Eve in the 3rd chapter of Genesis—to significant family conflicts in the human family tree and in Israel's lineage. There was slavery in Egypt followed by desert wanderings. Unfaithful kings—and the loss of the promised land. There was death on a cross—and the sacrifice of Christian martyrs. Life was hard. And all of that was before cars and microwaves and Medicare and grocery stores and investment portfolios. Of course, even with all these creature comforts and supports, we still have sin and family conflict and people being oppressed. We still have those wandering in the hope of finding peace, acceptance, a better life. And, of course, we have leaders. Some of us are leaders. Are our leaders faithful? As leaders, are we faithful? This can be a tricky question to answer.

Life is hard. It always has been. Living our faith is hard. It always has been.

But the good news for both of these statements is: We are not alone. God is with us. And so are the faithful. “We are surrounded by so Great a Cloud of Witnesses.”

One of the most classic images to describe this “Great Cloud of Witnesses” is to imagine a stadium filled with people ready to cheer for their team. Now, imagine all of us on the field in the middle of the stadium. That crowd is there to cheer and encourage and spur us on to do the best that we can. And those in the stands—The Cloud of Witnesses—are not merely armchair quarterbacks. The Cloud of Witnesses are all those who have lived the life of faith. Those who know how challenging it can be to be faithful. Those who know it is possible to live in faith. We just can't do it alone.

There was a time that I was in a stadium surrounded by spectators, and I truly wished to be all alone. Actually, invisible would have been wonderful.

I was in the 8th grade and on our school's track team. I had been running the mile all through Middle School. But, that year, I had an injury that meant I missed most of the track season. I finally got cleared to run again, but we only had one track meet left: the regional track meet. My coach put me on the roster to run, and I figured it would be nice to run the mile for the last time as a Middle Schooler.

As it turned out, there were not many competitors in the regional. The ACT had been scheduled for that same Saturday morning, so a number of our usual competitors were taking the test rather than running that day. This matters, because at that time, if you placed in the top two of any event at the regional, you qualified for the State Track meet. Much to my surprise, I ended up placing first out of 3 runners—the other 2 being younger and shorter than I was. My time was a personal best that day—6min and 45 secs—not bad, but not great. I hadn't really run all season. But, as circumstances would have it, I qualified for the state meet two weeks later. I trained that 2 weeks, but I was primarily just glad to have the opportunity to run in a real race to finish out my Middle School track career.

Thanks to the ACT, we had several state qualifiers from our team that year. So, I wasn't at the meet alone. “O if only...” I got my number and my heat assignment and showed up at the right place at the right time. To my surprise, I was lined up just 4th from the center of the track. The fastest time in the heat would be on the center with all others stretching to the outside of the track in ascending times. I was a little surprised to be 4th, but there were several heats, and I just figured this was a slower heat.

Until my neighbor—3rd from the center of the track—asked me what my fastest time was. I told her, 6:45. Her eyes showed some surprise, so I asked what her fastest time was. She said 5:43. My stomach dropped, as I realized that was more than a minute faster than me.” So, we both turned to my other neighbor—5th from the center and asked her time. She said “5:46.” Just one second shy of a whole minute faster than my time. I felt sick. And, to their credit, they were trying not to laugh. Clearly, my coach had submitted the wrong time for me—by one whole minute. There was no time to change anything. I was on that line, and we were about to start the race. This news of my misplacement had travelled all the way to the outside of the track. So, I said to all the runners on the track with me, “O.k. Just, please, don’t lap me!” Of course, they were off like jack rabbits just seconds later, and I just started to run at my pace. There were people all around the track and words of encouragement started coming my way. “That’s right. You just run your pace.” And “you got this, girl! Never give up.” And, of course, “Don’t worry, there is still plenty of time to catch the pack.” I ran determined not to make eye contact with anybody talking or not. I just ran looking at the track—one stride at a time.

I did not get lapped. I began my 4th lap around the track and as I finished the curve of the track I heard the other runners finishing. So thankful! Now, I was on the track alone. I figured nobody would be paying attention. But, it was still my last race, so I picked up the pace on the back stretch thinking maybe I would get a personal best again. Finally, I reached the home stretch, and it was time to kick up to a sprint. It was just me racing against my own time. But just as I started my final kick, I heard someone come on the loudspeaker and say, “Ladies and gentlemen, let’s give her a round of applause. Anybody who finishes this race is a winner.” If only the ground could have opened up and swallowed me whole! Well, I did get a new personal best that day.(6:34) My teammates had lots to share about what people in the stands had to say, and I was absolutely unwilling to talk to my coach for the rest of the day.

The author of Hebrews says, “Let us run with perseverance the race set before us.” Now, at a track meet, runners are racing against each other. They are in competition. But what the author of Hebrews is calling for is something different. Rather than simply telling us to “run” it says, “let us run.” The call is to run together—to live the life of faith together. Living out our faith is not about personal bests or who can be most faithful. Rather, the life of faith is to be lived in community.

The Greek word that is commonly translated “race” can also be translated as “gathering,” which leads to a powerful image of people of faith “gathering” together. The faithful are called together for strength and encouragement and to hold one another accountable. This is what we do as a congregation, isn’t it? On our best days, we gather together because of our faith in God. We gather for worship and for study. We gather for forgiveness and for gratitude. We gather for comfort and for strength. We gather so that we can use our gifts to serve others. And, when we gather, it is a blessing for us. It is a blessing for others. And it is a beautiful offering to God. Coming together as a congregation builds us up!

There are a lot of congregations, right? Now this is sort of a “good news/bad news situation.” That there are so many congregations, of course, is evidence of division. Different congregations. Different denominations. All the result of disagreements through the generations or decades. These divisions exist because we believe we are, at least, “more right” than those others. The divisions are sad, really. Evidence, once again, that maybe, sometimes, we are too comfortable with creating divisions between us in this life.

Of course, there is Good News in spite of these divisions. There are so many congregations. There are so many who want to “run this race.” And, Jesus, “the pioneer and

perfecter of our faith” will lead us all. Jesus is the only one who has lived the life of faith in perfection. In all the biblical witness—in all of those who are the Great Cloud of Witnesses--there is no other who was perfect or who is perfect. Jesus does not even expect us to live this life perfectly. Rather, as the writer of Hebrews says, we are invited to “look to Jesus” who will guide us, together, to live our faith in a way that pleases God and that serves the purpose of our Risen Lord.

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