

Divisional Races

Sermon, August 15, 2010

Text: Hebrews 11:29-12:3

It was October 13, 1963, in Game One of a World Series game between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. Sandy Koufax was pitching for the Dodgers before a record crowd of 69,000 in Yankee Stadium. It was a crucial game, and Koufax was one strike-out short of breaking the record of 14 strike-outs in a World Series game ... a record, by the way, set exactly ten years and eleven days earlier, October 2, 1953, in a World Series game between the Dodgers and Yankees. Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine struck out 14 New York Yankees in Game Two of that series. Koufax later said it was not only a challenge but an inspiration to know that among the spectators that day was former Dodger pitcher Carl Erskine, the one who held the record Koufax was shooting for. And Koufax did break the record, striking out 15 Yankees. Koufax later reported one reason he accomplished this high mark was that he saw Erskine, the former champion, was not only watching, but was cheering him on!

The writer of Hebrews could appreciate what Sandy Koufax experienced that day. Listen again to these words from Hebrews chapter twelve. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." The writer likens our life of faith to an athletic race, and in the grandstands are many of the faith "record-setters" of years gone by. We are in the arena, the grandstands are filled with heroes of the faith, a few of whom are listed in the previous chapter ... those who have finished the race, fought the good fight, and are now watching us, cheering us on, rooting for us. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, the prophets and others who, says the writer, "*through faith conquered kingdoms [and] administered justice ...*" These heroes of the faith are now our cheering us on. We have an untold number of Carl Erskines watching us, pulling for us, encouraging us to excel. And these witnesses didn't simply set records ... many actually gave their lives so we might have the faith that is ours today. So, not only do we live in the presence of God at all times, but we live in the presence of a divine audience ... think about all those people in the grandstands rooting for you, cheering you, hoping you will excel.

I don't know how many of you have experienced the joy of doing something right in an athletic contest with people in the grandstands cheering you on; if you have, you how that stays with you forever! It was the final inning of the 2005 championship game of the Cal Ripken League in Apopka. The 11-year-old center-fielder from the Flooring Center was up to bat (*that was my then 11-year-old son*). The Flooring Center was losing, 10-9, there were two outs, bases were loaded ... and Steve was at bat. Well, he hit a double, and drove in the winning runs. Needless to say, his teammates and the fans went wild, and he will never, ever forget that feeling. By the way, I missed it! I was with the PYF at their mission trip in Reading, PA that day ... Betty Tanner was at the game, though, and via cell phones, I was able to hear some of the cheering and share my son's excitement. In fact, he told me this morning he doesn't even really remember the actual hit, but he certainly remembers the cheers! And I'll never forget the first big play I ever had ... I was in my second game as a starting defensive tackle in high school, and across the line from me was an all state tackle from Pottstown High who weighed 800 pounds ... he pretty much immobilized me most of the game, except on this one play. For some reason he totally missed his assignment on me, and I burst through the line untouched. I got the quarterback, caused a fumble, and the stands went wild ... again, a feeling I'll never, ever forget. Well, that's the imagery here! Every time you do something right, the heavenly audience cheers. The cashier gives you too much money in change, and you know she made a mistake, and so you give her back the excess ... and the stands go wild! You help someone in need, you love your neighbor, you do the honorable thing, you take a stand for what is good, you do or say something faithful, good and right ... and the heavenly crowd roars its approval! We live our lives before the divine audience of God, and we live our lives before an audience containing innumerable special people, all who want us to run our races *well*.

Most of us are familiar with the name Johnny Cash, the original Man in Black (*not to be confused with the Men in Black; that would be Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith*), who passed away September 12, 2003. For many years, Johnny Cash was one of Nashville's brightest stars, and many knew him to be a devout Christian. However, he was not always so. For ten years he battled with an addiction to amphetamines, alcohol and other drugs. The turning point in Johnny Cash's life was a night he spent in a jail in LaFayette County, Georgia, where he was taken after being involved in a car accident while carrying a bag of prescription pills and subsequently attempting to bribe the local deputy. When Sheriff Ralph Jones freed Johnny the next morning, he told the singer: "I've watched you on television and listened to you on the radio; my wife and I got your albums of hymns. We're probably the two best fans you ever had. It broke my heart when they brought you in here last night. I left the jail and went home to my wife and told her I had just locked up Johnny Cash. I almost wanted to resign and just walk out because it was

such a heartbreaking thing for me. Here, take your pills and get out of here. Do with your life whatever you want to. But just remember, you have the free will to either kill yourself or save your life."

It was that talk straight from the sheriff's heart that snapped Johnny Cash out of it. He began a month-long fight to withdraw from his drug habit. It was agony, but Cash had help. As he later wrote, "I did it by humbling myself like a child, admitting I couldn't do it alone and that I needed my friends and loved ones and God." Johnny Cash credited that experience with the Lafayette County Sheriff for saving his life; in fact, he later came back to LaFayette to play a benefit concert that attracted 12,000 people (*the city population was less than 9,000 at the time*) and raised over \$75,000 for the high school. Johnny Cash's sense of shame in front of a saddened witness, a witness who wanted him to do well, the LaFayette County Sheriff, was the spark that caused him to change his ways.

To be clear, these heroes of our faith mentioned in Hebrews accomplished great things not so much because of who they were but because of what they believed. We call the men and women listed in chapter 11 of Hebrews heroes, and heroic they were, but that does not mean they were perfect. They weren't. People are people, and people are flawed. It's always been true. Remember who some of these people were. Rahab, the ex-prostitute. Jacob had been a cheat and a liar in his past. Both he and Rabab are in the stands saying, "I know how guilty you sometimes feel. We know how bad memories can trip you up. Keep going." Moses is there, too, saying: "I know what it feels like when you think you're inadequate for the job. You don't have the words and you don't have the energy. But keep going." Samson is there, and we all know his problems regarding self-control and women. Jephthah, who made an idiotic and rash vow that cost the life of his daughter. And we could go on. These early heroes were not perfect, but God did not give up on them. That's the good news. God didn't give up on them and God does not give up on us. Just because we have tripped and fallen does not mean God writes us off. I don't know about you, but that's good news to me. I'm not perfect and you're not perfect. That's why the writer tells us to keep running, and "throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

We are out there running but wait, there is a ball and chain tied to our leg! That ball of weight is our sin. Think of running with that ball and chain slowing you down, and your legs getting tangled in the chain, tripping you up. This is the problem of sin. It keeps us from running well. It stands in the way of the good we would accomplish. Yes, God forgives our sin, but still He longs to help us get that ball and chain off our legs so we can be what He has called us to be and run our race with vigor.

Something else about that great cloud of witnesses from chapter 11: for the most part, they were people who never saw the full realization of their dreams. "None of them received what had been promised." (v. 39) In fact, some of them suffered grievously. This is the hard teaching of Scripture. Just because you are a person of faith doesn't necessarily mean the race is any easier. In fact, the race might be more difficult. V. 36: "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated." Then the writer adds this brief understatement, "The world was not worthy of them."

The great cloud of witnesses cheering us on in our race of faith certainly knew what it was to hurt, and they long to encourage us. There is nothing hard we have experienced that they did not experience as well, in spades. Physical suffering, loss of loved ones, rejection by friends, betrayal by associates ... they know what we are going through. They've been there, and more. Believe me, the people who make up that great cloud of witnesses understand what life can throw at you. They were people who were often disappointed and sometimes suffered grievously, but they did not give up on God. And neither should we.

One last thing to note about this great cloud of witnesses: *They stayed in the race*. Sometimes in the race of life we stumble. Maybe we betray our own ideals. Maybe we just do something really stupid. Or maybe the fault really isn't ours, but out of the blue life deals us a crushing blow – we suffer persecution, we suffer the breakup of a marriage, the loss of a loved one, a devastating diagnosis, the loss of a job. And we realize that all we can do is just hang in there. Dropping out of the race is just not an option. But dropping to our knees IS. We drop to our knees and pray, "Lord, have mercy on me. I don't know if I can make it another day in this race, but I must if for no other reason than people are depending on me. Help me to make it." Sometimes that is the best that a person of faith can do. This is our witness to the power of God in our lives. We hang in there. We take the blows of life, but, by the power of God, we keep getting up off the canvas to the cheers of the crowd in the stands. Call it stubbornness, if you will, but it is a divine stubbornness that says, "God has not created me to be a quitter. God has called me to be a conqueror with His help." Don't give up. Fix your eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, keep moving toward this One who is the epitome of goodness and endurance, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, finished his race, and sat down at God's right hand. With God's help we will finish, we will hang in there, because a great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on. We will win, not because of who we are, but because of what we believe ... more precisely, because of WHO we believe. God does not give up on us and we will not give up on Him.

And at the end, the Bible promises, we will be victorious.