

Cloud of Witnesses

Hebrews 11:16-12:3

Most sports refer to a home-field advantage. Earlier this week on their trip to Italy, the ISU basketball team posted a picture of themselves in front of the 2nd best colosseum in the world, meaning Hilton is the first. Hilton Magic has been a great home court advantage for the Cyclones, even in years where the team isn't that good.

There's debate over why exactly home field advantage works. Some people think it's because of the crowd noise disrupting the visitors, though statistical analysis of NFL games makes that hypothesis questionable. Others think it is because the officials give the benefit of the doubt to the home team on close calls, since they know which fans they're more likely to run into as they leave the stadium. Others think it's because the home team is in their normal facilities and coming from home, as opposed to the visiting team having to adjust to strange surroundings. Sometimes it's obvious, like how teams have to adjust to the altitude when they travel to Denver to play the Rockies or Broncos or Nuggets.

In just two short weeks, Jack Trice Stadium will again be filled with cheering fans as the Iowa State Cyclone football season begins with a game against Northern Iowa. The student tickets were sold out by mid-July, season tickets sold out earlier this week, and the Cyclones look to set home attendance records again this year. Although Jack Trice doesn't have quite the same home court advantage as Hilton Coliseum does, it is beginning to earn a reputation as a harder place for visitors to play. The crowd of spectators cheering the Cyclones on helps the football team play better.

Other events feature that, as well. Watching a game in Fenway Park or Yankee Stadium, Busch Stadium or Wrigley Field, and the crowd cheers on the team when they do well, and encourage (or boo) when the team isn't doing as well. But it's not just sporting events. Actors will tell you that they can feel when the audience is really engaged in the play or musical they are performing. Musicians can tell when there is an attentive, appreciative audience.

In those events, though, the spectators are just that. Spectators. They cannot do what those they are watching are doing. As one fitness expert quipped,

“football is thousands of people who need to exercise watching 22 people who don't.” Many who go to concerts can't play an instrument, many who go to a ballet can't dance, and many who go to a play can't act. Whether it's feats of athleticism and endurance, or musical or dramatic ability, all too often, we watch because we cannot do.

In the lesson from Hebrews, the author gives us a vision of a race, a marathon. As they approach the finish line, the runners are tired and sore, pushed past what they thought they could do. They wonder if they can finish the race. The crowd cheers them on.

The crowd of witnesses that cheers them on isn't just spectators, though. They aren't just passive observers. The crowd is made up of those who have run the race, who have competed and completed the race. It's not the ones who can't do. It's the ones who already have done. They know the race. They know the route. They know the obstacles. They know the tips. The crowd of witnesses cheers the runners on as they approach the end of the race.

This passage wraps up what was started in Hebrews 11, the great chapter on the heroes of the faith. Hebrews 11 gives us many stories of the great heroes of the faith. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses. The list goes on; discussing people who were a thousand years gone at the time the book of Hebrews was written, and it's been almost 2000 years since it was written. All of the so called heroes are held to a high standard. But all of them stumbled and fell.

We remember Abraham for the faith it took for him to take his family to move to a place they had never seen, but we forget that he tried to pass his wife off as his sister so he wouldn't be killed not once, but twice. Jacob cheated and lied his way to becoming the promised child. Moses argued with God repeatedly. Rahab was a prostitute, which might explain how she was able to hide the Israelite spies in Jericho.

The witnesses, those who have run the race of faith before, know the obstacles to finishing the race. Lack of trust in God. Lying, cheating, stealing. Lust, jealousy, envy, greed, pride. Every sin of every kind can distract us and does distract us—sin is always in the way. And

sin, as a distraction, will do nothing to help us cross that finish line, but will rather drag us behind and even pull us off course.

The word used for race in our text also has the connotation of a struggle or fight. That is exactly what we experience every day. As you run the race of faith, you struggle with sweat pouring in your eyes or the tiredness that just makes you want to stop and rest. In our spiritual race we struggle with our sinful nature, the sinful world that surrounds us, and the evil one which all daily try to take our eyes off Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. The witnesses, those who've run the race before, know those struggles and temptations.

But what do we do if all that does not appear to be enough? What if, despite a cloud of witnesses, despite that cheering section, despite our perseverance and sacrifice, we do not know whether we can hold out to the end? Just having a cheering section isn't enough. Despite the superstitions fans have, the spectators can't change the results. As loud as the fans at Jack Trice may be, they can't make the Cyclones beat Texas or Oklahoma or Iowa. A crowd of cheering Cubs fans can't create a win any more than a crowd of cheering Cardinals fans can. Just having a cheering section isn't enough to finish the race, to overcome the obstacles.

The writer of Hebrews has one final word of advice. "Let us run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." Pioneer translates a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*. The *archegos* is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the trailblazer who goes before us. In the context of a race, the *archegos* is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates as they followed in his steps. Yet Jesus is not simply the pioneer; he is also the perfecter. Priests perfect and complete what we lack, bringing us to our goal so that we may have full access to the presence of God. So Jesus not only calls us across the finish line but also fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness. He takes our incomplete faith and makes it whole.

More than just making our faith whole, Jesus makes us whole with each other. While we think of racing as an individual event, it's not. In high school, runners run as part of a team, and the individual results affect which school wins. Many who train to run marathons train as

part of a running club, and even on the day of the race, find someone to keep pace with so they can complete the race. Bikers keep pace with a leader, following the peloton and riding in the draft of those who are in front. Drivers may get the fame in auto races, but they wouldn't make it far without their pit crew. We think of faith as an individual event. It's not. God's purpose is not to save isolated individuals, but to create a community, the church, that cares for each other.

So when our knees are weak and our hands drooping, when we feel worn out in the journey of faith, wondering whether we can hold on and hold out, we hear again this message of encouragement from Hebrews. We remember those running the race with us and those who have finished the race and are cheering us on. We remember our contest, but above all, we remember our captain who has run this race and who beckons us home. Jesus has run the race, and leads us across the finish line.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, IA
August 18, 2019