

Cloud of Witnesses

Hebrews 11:16-12:3

Earlier this week was the second Major League Baseball game held at the Field of Dreams site in northeast Iowa, this year featuring the Chicago Cubs and the Cincinnati Reds. Last year's game, between the Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees, was almost universally praised. The players walked out of the cornfield wearing throwback uniforms. Actor Kevin Costner, who had the lead role in the Field of Dreams movie, appeared, as did celebrities from throughout the world of baseball, and those Iowa residents who were lucky enough to win the ticket lottery.

Part of the movie's success lies in its ability to recall an earlier, simpler time. As Terrence Mann, a reclusive author played by James Earl Jones, says to Kevin Costner's character Ray, "The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball.... This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and that could be again." The connection across generations, the search for a restored relationship between a father and a son, the chances taken and challenges face to realize a dream all help make the movie memorable.

The author of Hebrews never saw a baseball game, but knew about connections across generations and the joys and struggles that come in athletic endeavors. Today we hear the second half of 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, almost 2000 years removed from us. People who had lived lives of faith, but had struggled in

following God's commands, too. People who had run the race of life, and now were with God.

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.

One of the other tag lines from *Field of Dreams* is "Go the distance." It comes along with the clue that takes Ray and Terrence from Boston to small-town Minnesota to find a doctor who had played in one major league baseball game, but had never batted. It provides the encouragement they need to continue on their journey, no matter how strange it seemed and no matter what obstacles they faced.

The writer of Hebrews doesn't say "Go the distance," but has one final similar 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, archehos. The archehos 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.

Derek Redmond was a young British athlete who ran the 400-meter in the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain. Derek's father, Jim, was high in the stands as a witness to the long-awaited race.

Derek had a good start and lead in the race. As Derek approached the finish line, he heard a pop in his right leg and knew that it was a severe hamstring injury. He realized his Olympic dreams are dashed. With tears streaming down his face, he declares that he doesn't want to take a DNF, a "Did-Not-Finish."

Derek continues the race with one leg. He uses all of his strength to limp in anguish towards the finish line. As the crowd cheers, fans rise to their feet, and their cries grow louder and louder, building into a thundering roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond, his father, reaches the bottom of the stands, vaults over the railing and wraps his arm around his son's waist. "I'm here, son," Jim says gently, hugging his boy, "We'll finish together." As they crossed the finish line, the crowd of 65,000 gave them a standing ovation.

We'll finish together. While we think of racing as an individual event, it's not. In high school or earlier, runners run as part of a team, and the individual results affect which school wins the meet. Many of those 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 call from Hebrews. We remember our company, 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.

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