

This large crowd of witnesses

Hebrews 12:1-2

August 18, 2013

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us ...

Abraham and Sarah, Noah and Moses and Rahab, Joseph, Samuel, Deborah, Jeremiah. Peter, John, Silas, Phoebe, and Timothy. Chuck Dalton, Helen Gordon, Jean Stevens.

Who else? Who else stands as a witness to us of the life of faith?

We have this large crowd of witnesses around us! We are not alone. There are others, others we know and love, who have gone ahead of us, showing us the way. There are others, others we know and love, who are going with us now! We do not face the challenge of living by faith, living in faith, living for faith, alone. We are on this journey of faith together, literally together. That's what church is about: helping, supporting, sharing, encouraging, being together. Being together.

We have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way ...

What gets in the way?

Things. Things get in the way. Things we have to have. Things we have to do.

Fear. Fear gets in the way. Fear of letting go. Fear of risking everything for something we cannot see and cannot control. Fear of what other people will think.

Idols. Idols get in the way. Anything and anyone that we value more than God. Anything, other than God, to which we have given our whole selves, heart and soul. Anything that we are unwilling to give up.

We have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly ...

Let us rid ourselves of sin!

Now, let's be clear. Sin is not really so much the "naughty" things, the things about which we feel shame. The shame itself shows that these things do not have a hold on our hearts.

No, the sins which bind us, the sins which enslave us, the sins which destroy us, are precisely those things about which we feel no shame because they are so entwined in our personalities, so much an accepted part of who we are.

Things like pride: trusting above all else our own judgments, our own feelings, our own intuitions instead of trusting God, instead of listening to God, instead of obeying God.

Things like envy and bitterness: fretting and fuming over what we do not have, fretting and fuming over what other people have that we do not have, fretting and fuming over what other people can do that we cannot do, instead of being grateful, utterly grateful, for the extraordinary gift of life we have been given, the gift of all we do have, the gift of all we are.

Things like anger: seeing other people as competitors, as those who get in the way, who keep us from doing what we want to do and going where we want to go, speaking ill of them or doing them ill, instead of loving them as we love ourselves.

We have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us ...

Run with determination the race that lies before us. Are you ready to run? Are you ready to run without stopping? Without giving up?

It's a race, but not a contest. It's not really about winning, but about finishing. When Paul Greene ran his marathon, when Greg Holt runs all his marathons, they don't expect to win. They know for certain they will not win. It's about finishing the race. It's about getting there.

Because we have somewhere to go! We're not there yet. This world is not there yet. We have more to do. God has more to do with us and through us. The race still lies before us. Are you ready to run?

It's not about winning, it's about getting there ... to shalom, to the peaceable kingdom, to the kingdom of God, to the world as it will be when God makes everything new.

In the meanwhile, in this world as it is, we are restless, eager for what is still to come. We are like strangers, like exiles, not quite at home here and now, longing for the home we will share with our God and with each other, running with determination the race that leads us home. Are you ready to run?

We have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus ...

Because he is there, running with us, running just ahead of us, calling us to run after him, calling us leave our nets, to get out of the boat, to get off the sidelines, to get in the race.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end . He did not give up ...

He did not give up! He did not give up because of the cross. When the race led him toward Jerusalem, when the race led him to the cross, he did not turn aside, he did not stop running, he did not give up. Why not? Because of the joy that was waiting!

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus -- watching him, listening to him, following him, running with determination the race that lies before us, not turning aside, not giving up ... because of the joy that is waiting!

In three weeks, we will start a new church year. Sunday School and Parabola will resume. Our choirs will start rehearsing and singing and playing again. We will gather again for Bible study. We will have a stewardship campaign and a thanksgiving service. We will celebrate another Christmas and another Easter.

It will seem like we are going in circles, repeating a cycle, turning around and around and around in an endless circle of life, some leaving, some coming, but still the same cycle, going around and around, always coming back around to where we have been.

But, friends, we are going somewhere! We have a race to run! And we're not there yet! So let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Let us run with determination, and let us give God thanks for the large crowd of witnesses that have raced before us, and this large crowd of witnesses that race with us now!