

May Their Deeds Inspire Us

[Blow whistle.] “Line up! Get ready to run the race!”

That’s the message of our scripture passage from Hebrews 11 & 12 this morning. “Get ready to run the race!”

When the letter to the Hebrews was first written, that was a message that the early Christians surely needed to hear. They were facing a “hard struggle with sufferings,” [Hebrews 10:32] as they followed Jesus in the midst of an ungodly world. The letter-writer urges them to live in faith, to endure the struggles, to “run with perseverance the race that is set before [them]” [Hebrews 12: 1]

This is surely a message we need to hear as well. Each of us has things we struggle with. What can help us to live by faith? To “run with perseverance the race that is set before us”?

There are 4 things that the author of Hebrews encourages us to do. First, to hear the crowd. Hear the crowd. Imagine the roar of the spectators at a track meet—all the wild cheering, clapping, whistling, shouting encouragement. The runner is not alone. She or he is surrounded by a great crowd, showing their support.

In the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, we read about the example of faith-filled living from the heroes of the past. Famous people like Abraham, Sarah, and Moses.... And unknown, unnamed heroes, who nonetheless, loved God and lived steadfastly. Then, the ringing words of Chapter 12: “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.”

A great cloud of witnesses—that’s our experience as well. There are times when we hear the roar of this crowd... and that’s especially true on Memorial Day. We think of all those who have served in the armed forces through the years... their dedication, their courage, their

sacrifice, and especially those who gave the ultimate sacrifice for our freedom. I think of a monument to the 61st Medical Battalion (attached to the 5th Engineering Brigade-Amphibious which landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day). The monument bears this inscription, “Amidst the carnage, they came to save lives. May their deeds inspire us.” We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. May their deeds inspire us.

And closer to home, among our families and friends, we think of those who are now part of this great cloud of witnesses in heaven. Each one blessed our lives in deep and abiding ways. Although they are not physically here on earth, their love, support, and encouragement continues to reach down to us from heaven, we are one in Christ, and shall one day be reunited in our eternal heavenly home.

Today, we remember this great cloud of witnesses. We pause now to name those church members and close relatives of our congregation, who have died during the past year. Following the reading of these names, we invite anyone who would like, to come up to the front and light a candle in memory of a loved one, friend, or neighbor, as together we sing, “Amazing Grace.”

[Reading of names]

Hear the crowd, the great cloud of witnesses.

However, the scripture reading from Hebrews doesn't stop there. It goes on to counsel us: Don't be crushed. Don't be crushed by burdens & by sin. “Lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely” (Hebrews 12: 1) No runner would carry a heavy backpack while competing in a race. Can you imagine that, on a hot & humid day like today?! They would be crushed.

Too often, though, we run our race of life, weighed down by burdens, addictions, worries, grudges, sins. And we don't have to. Jesus died on the cross to forgive our sins, to lift our burdens. He promised, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest." [Matthew 11:28]

Hear the crowd of witnesses. Don't be crushed. Third: Run the course. Run the course. Can you imagine an athlete who has trained for the big race, who has lots of supporters in the bleachers... lean, fit, no extra weight... and then... then just slouches on the sidelines, never taking their place in the starting blocks?

God has planned a course for your life, your race. This is your time. "Run with perseverance the race that is set before you." With perseverance... Even in times of struggle, times of difficulty, run in faith...

How? Most importantly, look to the coach—look to Christ. Now, I've known a lot of great coaches through the years. Athletic coaches here at NRW. Coaches and mentors in Christian life and in ministry, too. But the most important coach is Jesus.

That's what this scripture from the letter to the Hebrews reminds us: "Looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." [Hebrews 12: 2] Jesus is the founder, the foundation of Christian faith. He shows the way, through his life, death, and resurrection. He coaches us in our daily life, guiding us to perfect the running of our race.

So, there we have it... everything we need: "Hear the crowd." "Don't be crushed." "Run the course." "Look to the coach; look to Christ."

[Blow whistle] "Line up! Get ready to run the race!"

Amen.