

August 17, 2025

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## “Playing the Long Game”

Hebrews 11:29—12:2

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We are in the book of Hebrews as this Summer comes to a close. Last Sunday, I preached “Faith as a Way of Seeing” from Hebrews chapter 11. More than being a set of beliefs or a collection of prayers, faith is a lens through which to see the world. “...the substance of things not seen”—bringing to existence the unseen realm of God. This blending of the seen and unseen points to an active and participatory faith: Not something we *have* as much as something we *do*. We can miss this with how we commonly talk about it: “That person is a woman of faith” or “They have great faith”—something claimed as a status once-and-for-all-time.

Yet, aren’t we to be faith-ing our world if faith is a verb and not just a claim we make?! People of faith should be those with the greatest imaginations of the possible, pulling the unseen into that which can transform the seen. Today, in our lesson from the book of Hebrews, the writer wants us to also understand some other things about faith.

We read: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Faith, here, is set in the imagery of a race. I’ve always been drawn to this metaphor from the world of sports. In ancient Greek culture, hearers of this word would have immediately understood the demands of running a race. They would have been very familiar with the olympic games which featured these types of races.

For us today, I want to draw out three take-aways to consider. The first comes from the plural language used in this passage. Listen: “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let *us* lay aside...and run with perseverance the race set before *us*...” If we’re talking about a race, shouldn’t this have been in the first-person: “...let *me* lay aside...and run with

perseverance...” We otherwise envision a race to be a competition against other runners. Yet, contrary to the way faith is often talked about, as a solo venture, here, it is something we do in community. From this, I gather that my faith is strengthened as you are exercising your faith too. Collectively, we dream and imagine the subversive realm of God and summon it into being. I need your vision and you need mine. Our faith depends upon one another’s.

There’s one particular image of running that comes to mind for me. Every November since we’ve lived in Manhattan, our family loves going out to cheer on marathon day. Surely, you’ve done that too—how many have actually run the race? Is there a better display of community and support—perhaps than any other race setting anywhere!

Sure, the runners are there to best their previous records and to prove to themselves that they can finish the difficult race. But the NY Marathon is a collective endeavor. These runners are flanked on every side by “a great cloud of witnesses”—family members, friends, and strangers yelling their names which are posted proudly on shirts or bibs—cheering, making noises, “you got this”, “keep it up”, holding up signs of inspiration or sometimes humor. There is nothing in it for these supporters; there’s no ego on display here—just the celebration of sheer determination and perseverance. You get the sense that they are just as much apart of that race as the runners themselves.

When we think about that great cloud of witnesses in a life of faith, it doesn’t just include those which surround us here and now; we are part of a long line of those throughout history who sought to bring the unseen into the seen, who saw with faith-filled, imaginative eyes. These certainly include those spiritual heroes like Abraham, Joshua, Moses—the victorious ones who earned great accomplishments in their lifetime. But it also includes the martyrs, those who experienced a brutal end as they gave their lives in the exercise of faith—the text says those that “did not receive what was promised.” They are there too. In that cloud of witnesses, we might sometimes imagine a pillowy, puffy white cloud with a select few heroes that rise to the top. But think more of a borderless and expansive cloudy sky.

It is an endless cloud dotted also with the memory and witness of the historically marginalized, oppressed, or silenced in their time—who still depend on us to call into being the radical, unseen vision of God’s kingdom. Who are those you imagine to be in your great cloud of witnesses? Who

continues to keep alive that vision for you? What voices call out the loudest? What surprising voices are there? We also should be thinking about how we are leaving a witness of love, inclusion, and justice for those who will run after us. Within whose future cloud are we making a place by our faith now?

Faith is a race we are running together.

Secondly, we are to throw off the things that hinder us in this race. I used to play soccer in high school. I played on a pretty bad team so I felt like I just about ran a marathon every game. When your team isn't very good, you end up playing *some* offense and a whole lot of defense. There isn't ever a time when you aren't running up and down that long green field. I sometimes think about one of the hardest days of training we went through before one particular season started in High School. We had to sprint across the soccer field with a teammate on our shoulders while our coach ran behind us blowing a whistle. If he caught up to us, we would have to do it again. I cannot explain to you the level of exhaustion that day! But I remember after that drill, how it felt to run without that weight. It felt like gliding. It felt free.

Every distance runner tries to minimize the weight they are carrying: wearing the lightest fabrics, shortest shorts, sleeveless tops. Because there will come a time, many miles in, when those weights feel like they double or triple in size. How true it is that at times our journeys are hindered by needless weights? Sin is mentioned here, but it goes beyond personal morality. It might be the weight of perfectionism, shame, selfishness, greed, or unhealthy patterns. Some of these are personal weights. Some of them are communal—maybe it's complicity with injustice, silence in the face of racism, or marginalization of LGBTQ+ siblings. And we weigh ourselves down.

Equipping yourself lightly for the long game is salvation in Christ. In fact, it seems to be a central message of Jesus to continually throwing off the alluring and shiny weights of the world in order to be quick and agile for the purposes of God.

What unnecessary heaviness are you carrying around? Sometimes it creeps up on us, latches on, and hopes we don't notice. What still needs to be completely discarded so you can run with a lightness? Is there someone else in your circle who could use the help of unloading a heavy weight? Faith—being a way of seeing—is a race we are running together, and Christ's freedom calls us to run unhindered, playing the long game.

Lastly, runners look to Jesus who will help us finish the race. "...let us run with perseverance the race set before us, *looking to Jesus* the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." Can you imagine a faith made perfect? What would that look like? How close can we get to that in our lifetime?

I imagine Jesus sort of like a pace runner. Anytime I've run races, I always find my pace group which gives me a community to hold me accountable. The pace setter of that group gives me the target pace I need. I don't want to fall too far behind and I don't want to run out ahead. As long as I keep them right in my sights, I'll run in my best form. By claiming that Jesus is our pace setter, we claim a journey marked not by domination but service and love. So, there is a pace to our running—This way, we don't get sped up by the endless demands of the world and we don't get slowed down by the hopelessness of what our eyes might often see. This is "looking to Jesus" means.

To close, I think faith is one of those spiritual words I'll always be trying to understand. I used to think it was just blind trust. And while there may be some aspect of that in blending the unseen and the seen, I think we've sterilized the power of faith by that claim alone. When we say we are a community of faith, we are making a bold, powerful statement, that images a potential far beyond just socially gathering and pot lucks. May it be true for us that we look to the long game and run with perseverance. We will discover a lightness when we do this together. Amen.