

## “The Cheering Section”—Hebrews 12:1-2

Imagine, if you can, that you’re in a huge stadium, larger than the largest stadium in the world. It’s filled with millions of people, and more are constantly being added to the multitude, but the stadium is never full—it continues to grow and expand. You’re on the field, but this isn’t a game—it’s a race.

Yet this is no ordinary race. There is a finish line, but there is no one single winner. There is no first, second, or third place. All you have to do to win the prize is to stay on the track and finish the race—and everyone who finishes the race gets the same prize.

The track is straight, and it’s narrow, yet plenty wide for anyone who wants to run on it. But the race isn’t always easy to run. There are weights that try to jump on you and drag you down and stop your running the race. There are times when the course is uphill. There are signs off to the side that point to supposed short cuts and easier routes—yet they can lead you so far off the track that you might never get back on it and finish the race. There are false finish lines that try to get you to stop running.

But as you run the race, the crowd in the stands cheers you on and encourages you to keep your eyes on the goal. It’s a multitude made up of those who have already run the race and finished the course and claimed the prize—they are the cheering section.

It’s a rather odd race to imagine, no doubt. And if you haven’t guessed by now, we’re not talking about sports. We’re talking about the race we run as Christians, the pilgrimage of our lives in which we seek to remain faithful to Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. And if you’re serious about the race, you know it’s not an easy one. There are always temptations to take an easier road, temptations to stop and say, “I’ve done enough; I’ve made it; I don’t have to go any further.” There are temptations to fall weary by the wayside and not get up. And always there is the weight of sin in our lives, trying to hold us back.

But who are those in the cheering section? They are those who have finished the race—those who have departed this life and who rest from their labors in the presence of the Almighty. They are those who have claimed the prize, those who remind us that the victory is not ours to win but only to claim. For the victory has been won already by Jesus, who, through the cross of Calvary and the power of God in the Resurrection, has conquered sin and death and everything that would keep us from finishing the race. It’s Jesus who awaits us at the finish line, at the end of this mortal existence, waiting to give us the crown of life and our place in the cheering section.

Today we remember and celebrate the lives of those of our congregation who have joined that “cloud of witnesses,” those who have claimed the prize of the

crown of glory, those who have joined the cheering section since last we celebrated this day twelve months ago. We have called the names of members of our congregation who have now joined that cheering section we call The Church Triumphant—Frank and Rose and Debi and Bill. We've called in our hearts the names of family members, friends, and others who have also gone on to be with the Lord. No doubt we grieve, at least a little, as we call these names and remember these who were dear to us. But today is really about celebration—we celebrate the common thread of these people's lives: that they finished the race, and now, as part of that great cheering section, they encourage us as we continue to run the race for the crown of life. Last Tuesday, at Bill Holt's funeral, Nolan Lovering shared one of the things his grandfather always told him: "I'm rooting for you." Today we celebrate our belief that Bill and Debi and Rose and Frank and a host, a multitude, of other saints are rooting for us today from the cheering section.

Those in the cheering section encourage us as we remember what they taught us, both in word and in example. They encourage us by reminding us that there's a good and gracious God who's not only watching the race, but who's also involved in it—for it's the Spirit of God, God's own power, who gives us the strength to run the race, to do the things of God, to stay on the course and remain faithful to him. And, perhaps most importantly, those in the cheering section remind us that, without Jesus, we wouldn't be in the race at all. We're reminded that it was Jesus, the perfect high priest, who offered the perfect stainless, blameless, sinless sacrifice of himself to make us right with God. It's Jesus who has gone before us, blazing the trail, so to speak, so we can follow him. And it's Jesus who waits at the end of the race to give us the crown of life and our place in the great cloud of witnesses, that we too can encourage those who still run the race.

So, as we remember and celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us, let's take to heart the words of the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, who says:

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 that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Thanks be to God!