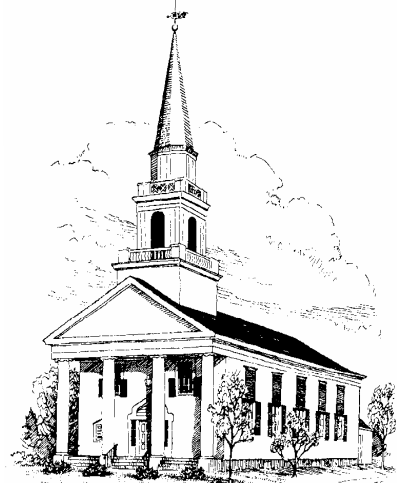


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from August 19, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Running the Race”

Scriptures:
Psalm 80
Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-17



Today's familiar passage from the letter to the Hebrews states: *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.* This passage reminds us both that we have a race to run and that we do not run that race alone; rather, that we run this race surrounded by a *cloud of witnesses*.

Who is it that you think of when that phrase *cloud of witnesses* is mentioned? Who are the people in your great *cloud of witnesses*? Who are the folks that you remember as the people of faith along your journey who have lived lives that have somehow helped you along your faith journey?

Our Roman Catholic and Episcopalian brothers and sisters might find this question easy, on first thought, for they commemorate at least 140 or more saints each year. Each year, they recognize and celebrate the lives of a long list of faith-full people whose lives are commemorated because of their good works and their lives which have deemed them *saints*.

Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that saints are remembered for their excessive love, their flagrant mercy, their radical affection, their exorbitant charity, their immoderate faith, their intemperate hope, and their inordinate love. (*Weavings* article, Sep/Oct) Frederick Buechner also offers us a definition of saints when he suggests: *In his holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called saints.* (*Wishful Thinking*, p. 83)

Despite the fact that our tradition does not commemorate saints specifically, I suspect that each of us can name quite a few persons, both living and dead, who we would consider prime examples of faith-full people—people whose lives exemplify all that we hold good and right and even extra-ordinary. As you consider who is on your list, do you consider the apostle Paul, Paul's companions and his followers, Mary Magdalene, Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, Desmond Tutu? I'd just guess that each of our lists would also contain some members of this church and, perhaps, even a few members of our families.

Who is in your *cloud of witnesses*? And why is it that this writer of the letter to the Hebrews wants us to begin by understanding that we are *surrounded by a cloud of witnesses*? Why do you suppose that we are each stronger because we are surrounded? Did the writer believe that something happens because of this *cloud of witnesses*? Did the writer imagine (do we imagine?) that if we are supported and sustained and encouraged by a cloud of persons, whether living or dead, that it matters to each of us in more than just a passing way? Knowing that there are others out there through time, who have either completed the race or who are simply out there ahead of us on the journey, does make a difference, doesn't it?

The writer uses the common metaphor that our life's journey is sometimes a race. And it's a good and helpful metaphor. After all, we are (here in New England especially) all pilgrim people. We are people going somewhere having come from somewhere and making significant sacrifice along the way to be here at all. The psalmist reminds us: *Blessed are those whose strength is in God, who have set their hearts in pilgrimage.* (Psalm 84:5)

How does it feel when the writer uses the image of racing, rather than simply walking on life's journey? (I wrote this sermon just before I went on vacation for the last two weeks. I had been running a lot just prior to vacation but I've just come off a lovely and restful walking vacation. Even using the word *running* at this point, upon my new return from vacation, makes me cringe just a little.) But the writer uses the metaphor of racing. I know there must be runners out there in the congregation. As I understand it (not because I myself am a runner but because I've been told by those who are), there are few keys to being a successful runner:

1st—It's good to know the course that you are running on.

2nd—It's important to be properly trained and prepared for a race.

3rd—You need to have the right equipment.

So using these three keys, let's examine this metaphor a bit more. If the 1st key to being a successful runner is to know the course, it's clear that we either need to examine the road ahead ourselves or depend on others to help us out to understand the course we are on. The writer of Hebrews suggests that, by seeking the support and guidance from others who have gone before us, we can learn something about the course.

We can learn something from others about the pilgrimage ahead by examining how they ran the race and what course they took. These pilgrims on the journey of life can provide us not only with good clues about the course but also reassure us that it is possible to reach the goal. If we know we aren't the first to run the course, then we can be surrounded by witnesses who already know the way.

We can know that the course has possible pitfalls and dangers along the way and so we learn how to depend on others as well as our recognizance to examine the course. We might also note that God's grace helps us even when we lose our way on the course. So our 1st task is to learn the course.

Our 2nd key for running the course is proper training and being well-prepared for the race. Again we find in our Hebrews text a reminder to give up bad habits that might handicap us on our race. Not only is it imperative that we give up smoking, excessive eating and drink-

ing. But we might need to give up other self-indulgences along the way—other addictions, other habits, and other selfish preoccupations. All these preparations can help make us fit for the race. A life of self-discipline and training, which might include such things as regular prayer, regular community worship and time with God, may be important parts of the training program for running the race of a Christian life.

The 3rd key for a successful runner is having and using the right equipment. We all know about the right running shoes and the right clothing and, now, even the right *sports drink* that can help sustain us along the race.

What is that *sports drink*? What is it that helps sustain us through the most difficult parts of the race? Our scripture writer suggests that the *right equipment* includes looking to Jesus as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. It is Jesus who witnesses to the continued presence and faithfulness of God who accompanies us in all our efforts. Without God in our lives, without a strong faith to sustain us, we will not be able to run the race well.

Malcolm Boyd, in his book of prayers called *Are You Running With Me, Jesus?* talks about this idea of God's presence on the run. He says that we never successfully run life's race alone. We are only able to race at all because *we are upheld and comforted by God's presence and the presence of Christ*. Hear these words of a prayer Boyd wrote:

*Where am I running, Lord? You know these things; I can't understand.
It's not that I need to have you tell me. What matters most is that somebody knows. And it's you. That helps a lot. So I'll follow along, okay?
But lead, Lord! Now I've got to run. Are you running with me, Jesus?*

At the end of each, we need to ask ourselves, "Where on the road of life have I gotten today?" How far on life's journey have I progressed today? We do have models to follow on this race we are each running. Not only do we have the inspiration that comes from that *cloud of witnesses* we each have. We also have the means to run the race. We have the three keys: someone out ahead of us who knows the course, proper training, and the right equipment.

With God's help, we have the steadfast endurance and perseverance that comes with the help of Christ in our lives. We have a goal out there ahead of us. We have the goal of being more Christlike every day. We have both the pioneer and the prime example of faithfulness in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are never alone on the journey.

At the end of this chapter of the journey, let us pray with Paul with clarity and surety: *I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.* (2 Timothy 4:7) Let us go out this day and continue our race. Let us keep the faith. Amen.

