

## **“Olympic-Style Faith: Remembering Our Cheering Section”**

**Genesis 32:22-31**

**Hebrews 12:1-13**

**August 3, 2008 (First in Series; Communion Sunday)**

**Denbigh Presbyterian Church**

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According to one source, some 550,000 spectators from around the world are, as we speak, beginning to descend on the Chinese capital of Beijing to watch the 2008 Olympics (*Homiletics*, July-August, 2008, p. 41). These spectators will cheer on the athletes as they compete for the world’s highest honors in athletic competition. What a crowd they will be, waving their country’s flags and encouraging the athletes to “go for the gold.”

The athletes often speak of how it helps them to be cheered on by the spectators. Just when they think they can’t go on, they hear the encouraging cries of fans and the glimmers of their countries’ flags and something kicks in—energy is renewed, their resolve to keep going—no matter what – returns.

In Hebrews chapter 12, the writer refers to our being “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” as we run the race of the Christian faith. He says that you and I (and all believers) have a cheering section every moment of our lives—a cheering section urging us on, encouraging us, supporting us, running along side us and even picking us up when we fall down.

Who are these cheerleaders? And why do they care about us? The “great cloud of witnesses” or the “communion of the saints” (like we say in the Apostles’ Creed) are the faithful from the past who have run the race before us. They are the faithful who are with us today who are also running the race.

Metaphors—like this one of the Christian faith being likened to a race, with spectators in the stands—are both powerful and dangerous. They are powerful because they help us hear truths in terms we can understand. They are dangerous because you must be careful not to take them too far. In this case, it’s important to remember that the Christian faith journey is a race which requires perseverance, commitment over the long-haul, discipline and a good cheering section. However, the Christian faith is not a competition. Further, the prize is not something we can earn. It has been purchased for us by Christ’s death and resurrection. No matter how well we run the race, we

can't cross the finish line of our own strength. Every step of the race is graced by God. The victory is Christ's. Every step of the race we are encouraged and supported by others—with every step we are indebted to the “great cloud of witnesses”—Bible heroes about whom we have only read, writers and reformers, Sunday School teachers, parents, friends, colleagues and others who have encouraged us in our faith.

Today we read about one Bible hero—Jacob. Hero, of course, is a loose term. Jacob's track record was not always stellar. He made lots of mistakes. Yet, he is among those who cheer us on today in our life of faith. What might he be saying to us?

Jacob and his twin brother Esau were the sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob tricked Esau into giving him his birthright (as the elder of the twins) and then tricked his nearly blind father into giving him the blessing of the oldest son. Jacob wisely got out of Dodge to escape Esau's wrath and went to live with his Uncle Laban. There, Jacob got a taste of his own medicine when Uncle Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah rather than Rachel (who Jacob thought he was marrying and did get to marry after 7 more years of labor). Years pass and Jacob and Esau are about to encounter each other for the first time since the whole birthright/blessing stealing incident. Jacob fears his goose is cooked. Before meeting up with Esau, Jacob spends a restless night at a place called Jabbok.

In this story we don't have a race, but a wrestling match. I know even less about wrestling than I do track, but one thing's for sure—this was more intense than any Olympic wrestling match in history. There have been many interpretations of this passage of scripture. Most people believe this story is about Jacob wrestling with God (some literally, some figuratively) all night long.

I've imagined what Jacob might have been saying: “God, I've messed up about everything I've touched. I've got to face the music with Esau or I've got to run for my life—again. This life of mine has been one struggle, after another and most of my struggles are of my own making. But, God, I want to do better. I want to get things right. I want to be a blessing to you like my grandfather Abraham. But I can't do that without you first blessing me—blessing me for real, blessing me even though I don't deserve it. I can't do this alone anymore. It's always been risky being one of your people and now it's riskier than ever knowing I've got to meet up with Esau. Whatever I have coming, I deserve it. But I want to live—really live. I want

to be your person and start doing things your way. Bless me. Save me. Bless me. Save me. Bless me.”

And God did. Jacob left that wrestling mat having been changed by God. His name was changed. His attitude was changed. His body was changed—he left with a limp. He left humbled, even though he supposedly won the wrestling match.

I like to think of our cheering section—the great cloud of witnesses—including Jacob on the front row. I hear him saying “don’t give up” when you’ve failed miserably. Don’t stop trying to be God’s servant even though you mess up. Take risk so you can grow in the faith and be blessed and be a blessing like you’re called to be. Face your fears. Make apologies. Confess your sin. Start over. Risk whatever it takes to be a faithful servant. Let God change you. Wrestle with him. Accept your new name and new calling and expect to leave changed – maybe even with a limp. In fact, expect to leave with a limp. Jacob reminds me that you never cross the finish line alone. You cross having learned from God and learned from others. You cross the line being carried and supported by others—and you are often bruised by the battle of life and faith.

Years ago, British sprinter, Derek Redmond pulled his hamstring midway through a 400-meter heat. He was in agony—physical and emotional agony. Limping, struggling, and crying, he continued to move toward the finish line. Out of the stands came his father Jim running to his injured son’s side. He held his son and together they crossed the finish—not winning the race of course. But the spectators roared with cheers of encouragement and celebration. And many were transformed.

Perhaps you have seen the news clips about Sarah Tucholsky, Mallory Holtzman and Liz Wallace—all college softball players. Sarah played for Western Oregon University; Mallory and Liz for Central Oregon University. In a championship game between the two rival teams, Sarah hit a homerun (her first ever). She hit the ball out of the park—an automatic homerun. On her way to second base she realized she had not touched first base and turned to go back to first to touch it. As she turned she tore her ACL and was severely injured. She could not physically run the bases herself. The umpire (mistakenly) told the coach that if a team member were to run the bases for Sarah the hit would be ruled a two-run single and not a homerun. What happened next was very surprising. Mallory Holtzman and Liz Wallace, both of the opposing team, asked the umpire if they could carry Sarah around the bases so that she could score the homerun. Shocked by the offer,

the umpire agreed. Mallory and Liz carried Sarah in their arms to each base, lowering her to touch each base with her uninjured foot. The homerun was scored and the game won by Sarah's team. Sarah left with a limp, having won something far more valuable than a homerun or a championship. Again, the spectators cheered and cried. Many were transformed.

The Christian faith is not a competition, but it does require perseverance, discipline, courage and the support of people past and present. It's not about winning in traditional terms. The race has already been won. It is about being transformed by God along the way. It's about being blessed even amid suffering and trials. It's about being carried and carrying others.

What do you hear the Great Cloud of Witnesses saying to you today? Listen for their cheers. Learn from their experiences. Accept their support. Let them carry you when you've fallen down.

We are indeed surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. Thanks be to God.