

THESE GRANDSTANDS AREN'T EMPTY

Sermon, August 14, 2016

Text: Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Today's scripture calls to mind a story I've always loved that took place October 13, 1963 ... it was Game One of a World Series between the New York Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers. The great Sandy Koufax was pitching for the Dodgers before a record crowd of 69,000 in Yankee Stadium. Koufax was one strike-out short of breaking the record of fourteen strike-outs in a World Series game ... a record, by the way, set exactly ten years and eleven days earlier, October 2, 1953, in another World Series game between the Dodgers and Yankees. The Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine (*known as "Ersk" ... or more accurately "Oisk", in the Brooklynese diction of the borough*) struck out fourteen New York Yankees in Game Two of that series. Koufax later said it was not only a challenge but an huge inspiration to know "Oisk" was among the spectators that day, the same man who held the record Koufax was shooting for. And Koufax did break the record, striking out fifteen Yankees ... he later reported one reason he accomplished this mark was that he saw Erskine was not only watching, but was exuberantly cheering Koufax on!

I think the writer of Hebrews might appreciate what Sandy Koufax experienced that day in 1963. Listen again to these words from Hebrews 12: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* I believe the writer is likening our life of faith to an athletic contest or race, and surrounding us in the grandstands are many of the faith "record-setters" of years gone by, including the grand Champion of them all, and they are all cheering us on. We are in the arena, and unlike the grandstands in the early days of the Rio Olympics this week, these grandstands aren't empty! The heavenly grandstands are filled with all the faithful, including many heroes of the faith, a few of whom the author lists in the previous chapter ... those who have finished the race, fought the good fight, and are now watching us, cheering us on, rooting for us. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, David, the prophets and others who, says the writer, *"... through faith conquered kingdoms [and] administered justice ..."* These heroes of the faith surround us, and they are even now cheering us on. We have an untold number of "Carl Erskines" watching us, pulling for us, encouraging us, hoping we will do as well, if not better, than they did in their earthly lifetimes! Not only do we live in the presence of God at all times, but we live in the presence of a divine audience ... think about all those people in the grandstands rooting for you, cheering you, applauding for you, hoping you will do well, wanting you to excel (*and yes, they applaud you even when you're in church!* See Psalm 47:1 ... *this may come as news to some, but clapping and applauding can be worshipful. However, that's another sermon!*)

I don't know how many of you have experienced the joy of doing something right in an athletic contest or in a musical or dramatic performance and having spectators cheering you on; if you have, you how that feeling stays with you forever! Years ago I told you about the final inning of the 2005 championship game of the Cal Ripken League in Apponaug. The 11-year-old center-fielder from the Flooring Center team was up to bat (*that was my then 11-year-old son*). The Flooring Center was losing, 10-9, there were two outs, bases were loaded ... and Steve was at bat. Well, somehow he hit a double, and drove in the winning runs! Needless to say, his teammates and the fans went wild, and he will never, ever forget that feeling ... in fact that feeling helped encourage and carry him through many a hitless game into his high school years. By the way, I missed it! I was with the youth fellowship at their mission trip in Reading, PA that day ... Steve's sitter, Betty Tanner, was at the game, though, and via cell phones, I was able to hear some of the cheering and share my son's excitement. In fact, he told me he doesn't even really remember the actual hit, but he certainly remembers the cheers! And I'll never forget the first big play I ever had (*and really, one of the only big plays I ever had*) ... I was in my second game as a starting defensive tackle in high school, and across the line from me was an all-state tackle from Pottstown High (*he had earned all-state honors his junior year*) who I think weighed eight hundred pounds ... forty-five years later and I still remember his name, John Nash ... (*I learned he went on to play for the University of Maryland where he was a three-year starter on the offensive line and played in the Liberty, Gator, and Cotton Bowls ... while I've only ever played with my cereal and soup bowls!*). John Nash pretty much immobilized me most of the game, except on one play. For some reason on this one play he totally missed his assignment on me, and I burst through the line untouched, got to the quarterback, caused a fumble, and the stands went wild ... again, a feeling I'll never, ever forget. Well, I think that's the imagery here! Every time you do something right, the heavenly audience cheers. The cashier gives you too much money in change, and you know she made a mistake, and you know you could just pocket the "profit," but you give her back the excess ... and the stands go wild! You tell the truth when a little lie would be so much easier, and the heavenly cloud of witnesses cheers! You control your temper and respond with grace rather than with what the other guy really deserves, and woo hoo! the heavenly crowd hollers as one, *"Way to go!"* You help someone in need, you love your neighbor, you do the

honorable thing, you take a stand for what is good, you do or say something faithful, good and right, you basically live out your faith with consistency and integrity in all things ... and the heavenly crowd roars its approval! Yes, we live our lives before the divine audience of God, to be sure, but we also live our lives before an audience containing innumerable special people, all of whom are pulling for us, cheering for us, wanting us to run our races *well*.

Most of us are familiar with Johnny Cash, the original Man in Black (*not to be confused with the Men in Black; that would be Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith*), who passed away in 2003. For many years, Johnny Cash was one of Nashville's brightest stars, and many knew him to be a devout Christian. However, he was not always so. For ten years he battled an addiction to amphetamines and alcohol. By his own account, the turning point in Johnny Cash's life was a night he spent in a jail in LaFayette County, Georgia, where he was taken after being in a car accident ... while carrying a bag of prescription pills and subsequently attempting to bribe the local deputy. When Sheriff Ralph Jones freed Johnny the next morning, he told him, *"I've watched you on television and listened to you on the radio; my wife and I got your albums of hymns. We're probably the two best fans you ever had. It broke my heart when they brought you in here last night. I left the jail and went home to my wife and told her I had just locked up Johnny Cash. I almost wanted to resign and just walk out because it was such a heartbreaking thing for me. Here, take your pills and get out of here. Do with your life whatever you want to. But just remember, you have the free will to either kill yourself or save your life."*

It was that talk straight from the sheriff's heart that snapped Johnny Cash out of it. He began a month-long fight to withdraw from his drug habit. It was agony, but as he later wrote, *"I did it by humbling myself like a child, admitting I couldn't do it alone and that I needed my friends and loved ones and God."* Johnny Cash credited that experience with the straight-talking Lafayette County Sheriff for saving his life. Johnny Cash's sense of shame in front of a witness who really wanted him to do well, the LaFayette County Sheriff, was the spark that caused him to change his ways.

We call the men and women listed in chapter eleven of Hebrews heroes and heroines, and heroic they were, but that does not mean they were perfect. They weren't. All people are people, and all people are flawed. It's always been true. Remember who some of these people were. We have Rahab, the ex-prostitute, and Jacob, who had been a cheat and a liar in his past. Both are in the stands saying, *"I know how guilty you sometimes feel. We know how bad memories can trip you up. But keep going!"* Moses is up there, too, saying: *"I know what it feels like when you think you're inadequate for the job. You don't have the words and you don't have the energy. But keep going!"* Samson is also named, and we all know his problems regarding self-control and women. Also listed is King David, who was guilty of the worst treachery of adultery and murder. And we could go on. These early heroes were not perfect, but God did not give up on them. That's the good news! God didn't give up on them and God does not give up on us. Just because we sometimes trip and fall does not mean God writes us off and/or disqualifies us from the race.

Something else about that great cloud of witnesses highlighted in chapter eleven: For the most part, they were people who never saw the full realization of their dreams in their lifetimes. Verse 39 says, *"None of them received what had been promised."* In fact, some of them suffered grievously. This is the hard teaching of Scripture. Just because you are a person of faith doesn't necessarily mean your race will be any easier. In fact, the race might even be more difficult. See verse 36: *"Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated."* Then the writer adds this brief understatement, *"The world was not worthy of them."* The great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and cheering us on in our race of faith certainly knew what it was to hurt, they knew what it was to want to give up and quit, and they long to encourage us. There is *nothing* hard we have experienced that they did not experience as well, in spades. Physical suffering, loss of loved ones, rejection by friends, betrayal by associates ... they know what we are going through. They've been there, and more. They were people who were often disappointed and sometimes suffered grievously, but they did not give up on God. And neither should we.

One related last thing to note about this great cloud of witnesses, including the greatest Champion of them all, Jesus: *They all stayed in the race.* Sometimes in the race of life we do fail. Sometimes we do fall. Maybe we betray our own ideals. Maybe we just do something really stupid. Or maybe the fault really isn't ours, but out of the blue life deals us a crushing blow. However, dropping out of the race is just not an option. But dropping to our knees IS! We drop to our knees and pray, *"Lord, have mercy on me. I don't know if I can make it another day in this race, but I must ... if for no other reason than people are depending on me. Help me to make it."* Sometimes that is the best that a person of faith can do. We hang in there. We take the blows of life, but, by the power and grace of God, we keep getting up off the canvas to the cheers of the unseen witnesses with a divine stubbornness that says, *"God has not created me to be a quitter. God has called me to be a conqueror with His help."* Don't give up! *"Fix your eyes upon Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, finished his race, and sat down at God's right hand."* With the help and encouragement of the Author and Perfecter of our faith we will finish, we will hang in there, the great cloud of witnesses is cheering us on ... God does not give up on us and we will not give up on Him.

And in the end, the Bible promises, we *will* be victorious.