

Heavenly Cheerleaders©**Hebrews 11:29-12:2****August 14, 2016****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

This past week has been one of those times when it feels like the whole bottom of the world has fallen out. As pastor to Christine and Randy, to Marissa and Beki, I had the intimate privilege of witnessing hearts literally breaking, grief in its deepest place as family gathered day and night to surround their beloved with their loving presence, holding one another up, walking together with Chris through the valley of the shadow of death.

I witnessed tears and sorrow and exhaustion. And I also carried with me the burden of feeling the grief of you, my beloved congregation, because I know that you also are in deep sorrow. It is so very hard to accept when these traumatic, unexpected events happen to someone we are so close to.

But, I have to say, right here at the beginning, that I also witnessed faith as that anchor we have been given. I heard heartfelt testimonies from a grieving husband that he knows deep in his heart that what Paul says is true, that “if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” This is faith. When our hearts are breaking, when we don’t want to lose someone we love, yet we are willing to let go and trust God with our loved one and with our own future – a future that looks different than we had imagined or planned. Still we trust. This is faith.

Faith is having the unimaginable strength to get through the long days and even longer nights; faith is letting your emotions come out, trusting in God enough to know he will hold you in check and you will not “lose it” forever.

Faith is being able to lean into the moment with others, sharing memories, abandoning weeping in order to laugh with one another – even if the laughter circles right back around into the tears.

Faith is never going so far to the edge of the dark pit of sorrow that you lose yourself and fall in, never to climb out. Faith is remembering your baptism, remembering whose seal you have on your forehead, remembering who sacrificed his life for you, forgiving you all your sins, showing you tender loving compassion.

Faith is remembering that our Sweet Savior, Jesus, died for you; it is remembering that on the third day, those who went in sorrow and grief found the tomb was empty, and there they saw the risen Lord.

Faith is believing that, with our salvation through Christ, we too shall have eternal life; that death’s sting does not have the last word; that even if the process of leaving this earth seems labored and long, the reward is waiting, and even if we cannot see it yet – here in this life – we believe with joy that our loved one is at last in the great light and glory and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews talks a lot about the faith of those saints who have gone before us. He names the Israelites who by faith passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but then points out what happened to those without faith - the Egyptians drowned when they attempted to do the same. (Exodus 14-15)

He reminds us that by faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days by Joshua and company. And it was by faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish along with those who were disobedient, because she had received the Israelite spies – men of God – in peace. (Joshua 6)

Those are all Old Testament stories that the author assumes we know. And we are aware of many New Testament stories of faith – of people coming to Jesus, believing he will make the blind see, the lame walk, set the sinner free.

We also know that there is a history of the faithful – the disciples, the apostles, the early church, on up to our present time – faithful believers who have suffered greatly. They suffered from disease, persecution, beatings, prison – the list could go on and on. But it was their faith that helped them endure the hardest things in life.

Then, the author of Hebrews moves from talking about the faith of the ancestors to – well – the biblical Olympics. He writes: “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 ...”

It seems the author has a vision of our running this race of life – persevering with the best champions ever – those who have fought the good fight, endured suffering and run the race through to the end.

My son, Darrick, had this wonderful imagination when he was a little boy. It was strange that he was so devoted to sports because his dad and I really hardly ever watched sports. But Darrick loved baseball and football. He would set up a football field on a piece of a cardboard box and decorate anything to be football players – he would color on pennies – or he would use my hair curlers – it didn’t matter. In his mind, they were professional players who were persevering through the game. And he was one of them.

I would watch as he would make this noise – shhhhhhhhhhh. One day after he had been playing with his personally made field and team players, I was cutting his almost white curly hair and he was talking to me.

“Mom,” he said, “did you hear how the crowd was roaring and cheering me on as I made that touchdown? Shhhhhhhhhhh!”

In that little 4 year old boy’s mind, there was a great cloud of witnesses cheering him on as he persevered through the game. I believe he could almost see them.

We heard, last week, in Hebrews 11:1 that "... faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." But is also more than just imagination – as wonderful as that can be.

Faith is a conviction that is planted into our hearts by the Holy Spirit; it is something that, even though we can't see it and we have a hard time proving it – we still believe; we are still able to trust in God to not only be with us, but to also surround us by those saints, whom we may not see, but who have finished their race, wearing their gold metals, and who are all around us, cheering us on. Heavenly cheerleaders!

I don't know if they're sitting in the great bleachers in the sky or dangling their feet off the clouds ... but, what I suspect is true ... is that they are much, much closer than that ... intimately gathered 'round the bedside of a beloved child of God as she makes her final journey to the finish line, and receives her gold metal.

We imitate those great witnesses as we physically, in our earthly bodies, gather 'round and give support. But through our faith, we can also sense those whom we cannot see, who are supporting us, as well as the one whom we support.

Dear friends, take comfort in God's Words.

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Matt. 11:28

"As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear God. (Fear meaning revere) As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you, says the Lord." Ps. 103:13; Isa. 66:13

"Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." Isa. 41:10

Now ... "May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace in your faith, that by the power of the Holy Spirit, your whole life and outlook may be radiant with hope." – Romans 15:13
Amen and amen.