



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

Voices

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SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 12:1-2: 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,² 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.

SERMON: If you ask the 26,736 runners who finished the race that was set before them on April 15, they will tell you the truth of this passage. They will tell you that the cloud of witnesses on that day, they mattered. If you ask those who ran the 26.2 miles from Hopkinton to Copley Square, they would tell you about the crowd that at times literally carried them forward. They might tell you about the legendary scream tunnel at Wellesley College. There, almost exactly halfway through the race, there is a veritable scream tunnel set up on both sides, and people will tell you that if you watch the runners as they enter that tunnel and when they come out on the other end, they are brightened. Their pace quickens. The scream tunnel by the Wellesley College women matters. They will tell you about making the turn onto Boylston Street, and the sea of fans that stretches before them, cheering them and willing them to the finish line, even as their own powers or bodies begin to fail.

If you ask Michael Herndon, a 31-year-old Marine veteran, he would tell you of a different crowd that cheered him on this year whenever he started to flounder in that race and especially when his legs completely failed him on Boylston Street. Despite those crowds, he had to crawl to the finish line. There was a crowd of three who bore witness to him. He chanted their names over and over and over again: Matthew, Mark and Rupert. Three friends, three colleagues who were killed in Afghanistan by an IED, serving right alongside of him. Crowds of witnesses, they matter. Today our text from Hebrews bears witness to that in our own races of life and faith. Paul here imagines our entire being and faith existence as one ongoing marathon.

While the great cloud of witnesses, those who are gathered here side by side, and those who have gone before in blessed memory, come together to cheer us on, that we might let go of the weight and move forward. Crowds, they matter. And yet, truth be told, those 26,736 runners will also tell you that sometimes it is not the crowd, but it is a singular voice breaking through the crowd that is so desperately needed. They will tell you about moments when loved ones shine through the throng of the crowd with particular words of meaning. Runners write their

names on their arms and on their chests, so that people will call out their names, because they know and science knows that when we hear our own name called by someone else, suddenly we are invigorated. Suddenly we find courage.

Billy Baker will tell you how much particular words from one person can matter, because he offers them, and so often has felt the surprising response. Billy Baker, who ran the marathon himself, knew exactly where he was going to stand. He stood at the top of Heartbreak Hill in Newton. It is a hill that is diabolical. If you wanted to plan the most evil thing in a marathon, you would take that very hill and you would put it right at that very moment, about 18-19 miles into that race. And here's the thing about Heartbreak Hill that Billy learned. You don't even know when you've made it to the top, because it's gradual at the end, and your head is down, and your heart is beating, and so you don't even know. So here's what he does. He stops at the top dressed garishly, and he tells them they have made it to the top. And here's what he's experienced. There are barricades at this point in the race, and yet people have made a beeline turn to give him a hug, because what they needed to hear was that the greatest obstacle that they were going to face on that race, the one they all dread was now behind them. Sometimes what we need is not so much a crowd as one person with a particular message to keep us going.

For me it was not so much a running race, but it was an endurance test nonetheless, when I heard a voice calling through the crowd that kept me going. And I've got to tell you, it came from a most unexpected source. Going off to seminary was one of the most exciting days of my life, with all the possibility that was there. But getting into the details of studying the depths of theology and going into the miniscule nature of Scripture and studying every jot and tittle, it is easy for God to get hidden behind all of that. And despite the fact that we talked about God all the time, God seemingly receded further and further away as if at the top of that Heartbreak Hill.

I only saw her in her portrait in the Common Room, a woman who would become my voice, a woman who would become my hero. She was wearing a wool skirt, a cardigan sweater, her signature large glasses, friendly eyes and a generous smile. She looked like about the most peaceful, quiet person you could imagine, and yet her voice resounded through the halls of Yale Divinity School. And the first lesson I learned from her was to look past whatever preconceptions I might have about the messenger, about this woman in the wool skirt and cardigan sweater, and hear the radical, revolutionary, life-giving message that came out of her voice. For the most important messages in life often come from the most unexpected people. Amen? You cannot read this Bible without coming to the conclusion that God often and always uses the most unlikely people to change the course of the world. Amen? Her name is Letty Russell. You might have noticed that she wrote our invocation for today, she's the one who adapted that beautiful passage from Hebrews for our call to worship. It was her voice that reminded me that my Heartbreak Hill had already been crested.

So on this day I want to share two things that I carry on my race with me from a singular voice that has encouraged me on. The first is this: On this annual meeting day, she calls us to remember that you and I, this church and the church of tomorrow, is called to be a church in the round. That is, that we are to gather around the source and

the head of our church, who is Jesus Christ, the one this passage calls us to look to, that all those weights might drop away. And that we are in that circle to make room for all, to extend extravagant hospitality not just to come in the room, but to gather and make room in that circle equidistant from Christ himself, intentionally, every day, with every breath, making room for all.

You need to know a couple of things about Letty Russell. She was a woman who called that other school, Harvard, and she said I want to apply to come to your doctoral program, send me an application. They said, I'm sorry Miss Russell, we don't accept women. She said I didn't ask if you were going to accept me, I asked you to send me an application. She sent it in on time. She's the first woman ever accepted that year. This woman with the wool skirt and the cardigan sweater, one of her first calls in the late 1970s, as an out lesbian woman, was to an all black church in Harlem. This woman has strength. When she retired from Yale, she and her wife set up a program to invite women from across the world who could not study in advanced programs to get advanced degrees, and they flew them out of their countries if they could do so. You see, Letty Russell, she knew what it meant to be on the outside of the circle. And she came to the understanding that our goal, all of our goals, is not just to let people in, but make them part of our circle. I don't know who welcomed her into the circle, whether it was a person of gentle spirit. I bet it was actually the Spirit itself. But she took her spot in that circle, and there's no question that the Spirit was in her sails. And here's the miracle that she told us about, is that when we draw that circle wide and draw it wider still, we actually, despite the greater circumference, people don't get further away from Christ in the middle. Somehow, miraculously, being in the circle, somehow that larger circle brings us even ever closer to Christ himself. The miracle of one body.

On this day when we thank leaders who have served, and when we lift up new leaders to serve, Letty would remind us that any leader of the church is not ever set above the church, but always set aside for the purpose of welcoming more into the circle of that church, that we are called to draw the circle wide.

Mark Miller, the one whose sung Lord's Prayer has come to mean so much to so many of us, he set this music to a song called "Draw the Circle Wide." (*Piano music starts.*) And this tune and the words brilliantly capture its meaning and its call. It goes like this: "Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still. Let this be our song, no one stands alone. Standing side by side, draw the circle, draw the circle wide." Where Miller's brilliance shines it that his music almost compels us forward. It builds and it builds and it builds and it builds. Truth be told, this is a song that is meant to never end. You could keep singing this song all day long, because what Miller understands, what Letty understands, is that this is not any singular call, this is our ongoing perpetual call to always draw the circle wider and wider and wider, and draw closer and closer and closer to Christ. Mark Miller believes music can change the world. His dream is that music he composes, performs and teaches and leads will inspire and empower people, get this, to create the beloved community. Draw the circle wide. Draw it

wider still. This music and those words make we want to get up and run and pick up the pace just like that scream tunnel in Wellesley.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to share with you about Letty Russell, the thing from this whole idea of circle that cheers me on but challenges me, too. Because you see, she would say that we have to remember and recognize, not just who is in the circle, but who is not. The seminal work that I think changed the world was a book she wrote called “Church with AIDS.” Russell tells the story about how she and others responded to the scandal of the church, which was ignoring the early patients with AIDS, who was banishing them from sanctuaries and not visiting them in hospitals. She talks about how she and the National Council of Churches went out to the congregations and individuals being ravaged by that horrible disease. And to be clear, she says that she did not go out to teach or preach, not to solve or cure, but instead to listen and learn, to repent and reconcile, to let those others draw the circle wide enough to let her in, too.

Her challenge to our ministry is one of looking within and beyond, looking with the church and beyond to see who is missing from our circle. And then not looking just out there but within ourselves to figure out why. And then to look beyond ourselves to the power to change. That we might not just extend extravagant hospitality, but that we might extend true, genuine and faithful hospitality. Here’s what she writes about hospitality: “Hospitality is the practice of God’s welcome.” Notice, God’s welcome, not ours. “By reaching across difference to participate in God’s actions bringing justice and healing to our world in crisis.”

In my ministry, in my faith, there are so many saints who push me forward. And I could not do it without them, many of whom are in this room. I also know this, that in particularly hard moments, there are singular voices like Letty Russell, who becomes my scream tunnel and brightens my pace. People like Letty Russell become the final push I need and the voice of reassurance that I have already crested Heartbreak Hill. Let God do the rest. She is one of the few singular voices that cut through the din, when I need to hear my own voice called and claimed.

My question for you on this day, is do you have a voice like that in your faith journey? Do you have voices that you hear in your head and can turn to, to help you run this marathon that we call life? If you don’t, here’s what I would say. Just open your hearts to listen, because I would never have imagined that that woman in the wool skirt and cardigan sweater would be my hero voice. For often, the voices we need most come when we least expect it and from the most unexpected places. And if you need help, that is why, friends, we have this circle. Turn to somebody next to you at some point and ask them for voices that you might listen to, because you might find a hero, someone who can cheer you on in this race.

Friends, surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us indeed run the race that has been set before us, both as individual disciples and as the great circle, the Body of Christ, in this time and in this place. Amen?



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor