

“Running Through the Cloud”
Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

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Let's imagine we are in a small town. A very small town. How small is it? It's so small there are only two churches. That's right. In the entire town there are only two churches.

One church argues all the time. I mean, all the time. Not gentle, mild-mannered disagreements. No. These are knock-down, drag-out, take-no-prisoners arguments. They are constantly arguing about their ministry: Sunday school, budgets, where to go on a mission trip, how many special offerings to hold. All they do is argue.

The other church never argues. Never a cross word. That's because they talk about everything except their ministry and mission. They talk about the Brewers, or what's coming out of Green Bay. They talk about golf and hunting and the county fair and the latest concert. When they have to, they talk about the weather. But they never argue.

My question, then, my question is – which church is better? Which church is better? The church that argues so much about their ministry they almost come to blows or the church that never argues at all but who never talks about their ministry?

The answer, of course, is neither is a good church. They are both pretty bad. Pretty sad.

It's natural for people who are passionate about something to argue about it. Normal as the day is long. And one of the things I've noticed is more and more our churches are made of passionate people. More and more the people who only had a very loose or tangential relationship to a church are falling away and the people who are left are there because they by golly want to be there. They have a strong relationship to their church and are passionate about its ministry.

As a pastor, I'm OK with that. I would much rather pastor a small church where the people are committed and passionate than a large church where half the people don't care. Seriously.

My point, then, is as churches become more passionate about their ministry, they are more likely to disagree with each other. Some churches will get arguing in their blood. They'll descend into chaos. Others, won't argue because they'll never talk about anything the least bit controversial.

But there is another way. There is another way to be a passionate, ministry-driven church. There is a way to be a passionate church without having huge arguments or pretending arguments don't exist. These churches do ministry as a team. They run the race of ministry as a team.

Some of you will remember the movie "Chariots of Fire". 1981. It's a true story about the British team at the 1924 Olympics. The two main characters are a Jewish runner, who runs to escape prejudice, and a son of Christian missionaries who runs to glorify God. But it's really an ensemble movie. The Jew and the Christian have leading rolls but it's really a movie about the team itself.

One of the things we learn is the team argued and fussed and bickered with each other, but they also tried to help each other. Even though they argued they each tried to help the other be their best and help the team be its best. Help the team be its best.

They didn't shy away from hard conversations and there were some strong words in the locker room. But they each trusted the other because they had a common commitment to being the best individuals and the best team they could possibly be. They had a common vision of success that encompassed all of them.

Every church eventually faces difficulties. They face hardships. Some churches turn passive. They spend more time talking about the weather than about the Kingdom of God. Others make arguing a way of life and do little else.

But other churches realize they are not running by themselves. They can't see them, but they know they are being cheered on by a great, huge, enormous cloud of witnesses. A cloud of witnesses urging them on to be the best Christians and the best church they can be.

Abraham, Sarah, Joshua, Rahab, Barak, Deborah, Elizabeth, Mary, Mary Magdalene, the Apostles and oh so many others across

time urging us all to, “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfector of faith” (Hebrews 12:1b-2a). Following the example of Jesus, and cheered on by the great cloud of witnesses, they come together as a team and run the race of ministry set before them.

By now, some of you may be wondering if perhaps I know something you don’t. Is there some conflict you’re not aware of?

The answer is, “No.” Not as far as I know. I’m not detecting any serious conflict or passive neglect. But I do know we are a church of passionate people. We care a great deal about our worship, our ministries, our life in faith together. And passionate people will, from time-to-time, get passionate. It’s normal.

When we do get passionate let’s neither turn on each other nor turn away from each other. Rather, let us run the race well, as individual Christians and as the Body of Christ. Let’s run through the great, cheering cloud of witnesses, following in the footsteps of “the pioneer and perfector of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame” (Hebrews 12:2b-2c), for us and for our salvation, Jesus our Lord. Amen.