

Romans 8
Oct. 13, 2024
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Let's be honest. The 2024 Paris Olympics would have been nothing if it were not for the presence of Snoop Dogg. It's the D- O – double G really kept us engaged and entertained between and during events. If you tuned in you watched the 52-year-old rapper freestyle during the ceremony, chatted with Simone Biles' family, and set the mood for the 2024 Olympic Games by busting out dance moves in his Olympic outfit.

I am convinced that during Snoop's time in Paris he did not sleep, he learned about swimming with Michael Phelps, wore equestrian gear with Martha Stewart and commented on how the horse's hair game was off the chain. He toured France checking out the Mona Lisa and admiring how hard she smiled at him, he stepped up to announce badminton in a comical way. He was seen in the stands at the women's gymnastics qualifiers dancing and bringing smiles to the faces of Simone Biles and Jordan Chiles, he rode with US Men's basketball team on the way to their game, rapping and offering encouragement, and cheered on the US athletes in track and field. And yet, for all the time he kept our sides in stitches there was a seriousness to the work he did as well. When asked about his role at the Olympics, this is what he had to say, "I think it is very special because it's a time where the whole world can come together and cheer for their countries, cheer for certain athletes. And then at the same time, we come together as one as America," he explained. "A lot of times in the world, it is always division and separation, but this is a chance for the world to be one page, for everybody to be together, to cheer for each other, to root for each other. So, it's actually [like] a peace offering."

As a second-grade assistant cheer coach I have to say Snoop really did understand the assignment. I was so sad when I realized this morning's sermon was a Sunday when my kids would be with their dad because I had fully planned to have Hadley show up and do some cheers for us. Unfortunately, you will have to settle for me. I too, did some cheerleading in my prime. Not sideline cheering like Snoop and Hadley but competition cheerleading. And you know cheerleading has always been the sport that many claim is not a sport. And yet, there is tumbling, and technique, and throwing your friends in the air. It takes choreography and flexibility. AND – a good attitude. That is the most important thing.

Which is unlike any other sport. The football boys we cheer for? No one asks them to smile while they make tackles. No one asks them to appear happy in the rain, the cold, and the heat. They can have whatever attitude they want so long as they play hard. But cheerleaders? Cheerleaders are the face of the sideline. They need to appear put together and happy. They need to promote positivity and hope even when they aren't feeling it.

Snoop gets it. When asked how he was holding up in the rain, Snoop replied, "I'm chillin like a villain, raindrops falling on my head — but we still playin' to win, baby." Cheerleading takes a lot of hard work physically, but it also takes a lot of heart work. The job of being the cheerleader isn't always an easy one, and yet, everybody needs a cheerleader.

Our Romans passage today has a lot of language about trials, perils, and pain, with sighs too deep for words. And we know about these things all too well. We know about going through it. We know about having our backs to the walls. We know how it feels when it all comes crashing down.

Romans 8 reads:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait. ²⁴ For in^[n] hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. ²⁸ We know that all things work together^[n] for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than victorious through God who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God."

Ultimately, friends, this, is a passage about hope. That is why we read it so often at funerals, because we need the reminder that death and our trials are never the last word. But, it's hard to remember to hold onto hope when we feel overwhelmed or exhausted. It is hard to hold onto hope – when there does not seem to be any. It is hard to hold onto hope when we are in the valley of the shadow of death.

It's why we need cheerleaders. One or two or a whole team. Without them we could get lost in our sorrow and our pain. We could get lost in how divided or

hopeless the world seems. We could get lost in how large and looming our personal problems and our communal problems feel. Cheerleaders encourage us to be brave with our lives. They help us to see our situations differently. They remind us to have hope. They encourage us to stay the course. They show up when we need them and come alongside us. They whisper words of encouragement or when we fail to listen, they yell at us through megaphones.

This morning, I wonder who your cheerleaders are. The people who make you brave enough to wake up another day. Who is the person who supports you and has your back? Sometimes those people show up unexpectedly and sometimes they are a steady source of encouragement in our lives. I hope we are all lucky enough to have these people in our lives.

When I think about my life and the times I have needed encouragement I realize I haven't ever been brave alone. It was always with the help of someone encouraging me or holding out for me a candle of hope. Going to seminary, dealing with illness, changing jobs, having children, loving difficult people, saying goodbye, trying new things, starting over – none of these things in my life have been possible without people beside me cheering me on.

Friends, if we want to do brave things in our lives we need a cheerleader or two. People who love us no matter what, who will be there to lend a hand, give encouragement, and celebrate the wins with us. We know about life's difficulties, and we know too, how much having someone in our corner changes how heavy life feels. Even if it's just one person who is standing behind us, it bolsters us and gives us strength. This journey in life, as we know is almost impossible when we attempt to live it alone.

During football games I often find myself repeating a few key phrases. The first is spirit. The girls are good at calling and doing the cheers as we move into the semifinals, but they forget to cheer when the crowd is cheering. So often we are reminding them. I can't blame them. I am almost forty and couldn't tell you exactly what the team is doing with their sports ball. The other thing they hear a lot is – "support your team". It means they need to turn around and cheer for the players.

Today's text and Snoop remind us how important it is that we are cheerleaders in the lives of others. How important it is to support your team. Paul comes along side this community to offer hope in their despair. He reminds them that nothing separates them from the love of God and carries for them a candle of hope when it would seem they can't carry it for themselves. It is easy to be buried under the pain of the world, and our worries about an unknown future.

But, we aren't called to be in the despair business. We're in the hope business. I'm not talking about *the false optimism* that pretends things are fine when they aren't. I am talking about being our imperfect human selves and joining with other imperfect humans to practice what we'd like the world to be like. That's the hope business. To recognize that human schemes fail and will come to an end. God's work of love endures and gives life. And sometimes we have to cheer even when we don't know how or why. Even when maybe, we aren't feeling it. That is what being people of hope is about.

Paul writes: *I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;*

I'm going to confess I don't really know what Paul meant when he wrote that, about creation waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God.

But our world is ready for the children of God to be revealed in some new ways. Rather than being revealed to be exclusionary, or worried about our own success, perhaps creation is waiting with eager longing for us to be revealed as people of love no matter the cost. It's time we are revealed as people who believe in hope in the middle of the storm. Maybe creation is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God who live lives focused on abundance and community rather than isolation and scarcity. Maybe creation is waiting and seeking out the ways we are holding candles of hope for one another. Maybe creation is waiting for us to be revealed as cheerleaders in times when its easy to be a cheer leader and times when its not.

Friends we are called to be cheerleaders. Maybe not in the, "Y-E-L-L" kind of way but definitely in the "we are proud of you I say we are proud of you" sort of way. Paul ends this passage with a powerful statement.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Creation is groaning for us to believe those words, to live as if we believed them to be true, so that God's love might be visible and revealed to the world. Creation is groaning that we expose the hope that exists in the world to those that have lost hope. Creation is groaning that we be the cheerleaders.

When we become cheerleaders, we do the very thing Paul is talking about. We are doing the very thing Paul is doing. We are revealing God's love to one

another and we are shining a light of hope into someone else's darkness.

That is something we do when we gather each week. We come to worship and gather for *community*, to recognize our human experience in the lives of others, and to find support for our lives through the love of others. We're here to *worship*, to offer praise and prayer and thanks to God in spoken liturgy, in sublime music, in majestic beauty, and in silence. We're here, *wondering* if we can find hope because we're exhausted by the despair of the world.

Each of us can do little things and can make a difference in the world the way cheerleaders do. I've seen you do that. We're called to keep doing that.

And there are things that all of us, together, can do to amplify hope to a world lost in despair. The way we cheer each other on, and sit with each other, and journey together, is a claim of hope—reminders to the world and to one another that God is still active and working in our world for good.

May we continue to be cheerleaders for one another, and may we continue to believe that hope exists for a world made new.

Amen.