

"Winning the Race"

Hebrews 12:1-3

August 18, 2019

10th Sunday After Pentecost

There once was a phrase used to describe life which you don't often hear very much anymore: "the rat race." The phrase implied that life is a continual competitive struggle, like a race, in which all of us are running. We strive hard to win the race with the hope that, by winning, we will gain some sort of success in life. The only problem is that the race is hard. The race is discouraging. The race is exhausting. And, quite frankly, the race is impossible to win. "The trouble you have with the rat race," said one comedian, "is that the rats are winning."

But there's another kind of race going on. In our text for today, the author of Hebrews compares the Christian life to a foot race and, instead of seeing this as a negative, the author tells us how to run the race and how to win. He says there are three things which must be done successfully to win any race, whether it be a physical race here on earth or the race of faith which leads to heaven: entering the race, preparing for the race, and running the race.

First, there is the matter of entering the race. Entering the race involves a cost. It may be an entrance fee or, if run as part of a college or Olympic program, there is the expense of training to qualify for the race. When properly qualified, the athlete is able to enter the stadium and enter the race.

As the athlete enters the stadium, he or she receives more than permission to run the race. The athlete receives something which is vitally important for him or her in order to win the race: the support of the people in the stands.

I don't know if any research has been done on this topic, but I would have to believe that having the presence and support of the people in the stands makes an athlete do better. Professional teams, when contending for championships, like to have more games at home because it is felt that having all of their fans present (the so-called "home court/field/ice advantage") will help them win. Imagine the difference between running a race in an empty stadium with running a race before a packed house. With the fans there urging them on, I would think that runners will run faster and be more likely to win in such a situation.

Second, having entered the race and obtained the backing of the fans, the time comes for the athlete to be prepared for the race. This means freeing oneself from anything that would hold you back and make you run slower. Imagine trying to run a race in lead gym shoes or wearing blue jeans, or having a bulky winter coat on. To run faster and win, one must be as light as possible. In the ancient Olympics (of which our author would have knowledge), the runners ran naked in order to run faster. Although people won't do that today, they find ways to shave off every extra ounce of weight which would prevent victory. Thin and light track shoes, short and aerodynamically designed shorts & jerseys, and so on will make sure that you can run your fastest and win the race.

Third, having entered the race, obtained the support of others and put aside every ounce of weight which would hold you back, it's time to run the race. How you

run, in addition to how fast you run, is crucial. When running, one doesn't just flail around, run all over the track, wave to the people in the stands, or look behind at the competition and expect to do well, much less win.

To run the race successfully, you must do several things. You accept the fact that it is going to be painful to run a long distance race and you simply endure that suffering. And, throughout the race but especially as you near the finish line, you keep your eyes focused on that finish line and the victory which is to be yours.

Running the race of faith that leads to the victory of eternal life is similar in many ways. First, you must enter the race of faith. This is not something we come out of the womb prepared or able to do. Our sin against the law of God, doing that which He has forbidden or failing to do that which He is commanded, not only prevents us from gaining the victory, it disqualifies us from even being entered in the race.

Yet God, in His great mercy toward us sinners, has paid the entrance fee that we might be enrolled in the race of faith. When Jesus cried at the end of His time upon the cross, "It is finished!", He was saying, "It is paid in full!" Our debt of sin which kept us from ever running the race of faith to eternal life in heaven, had been paid for. We are in the race. God has brought us to His "stadium" called the church and entered us Himself by the waters of Holy Baptism as we see today with young Paxton. He is just starting the race today. Many of us have been running for years.

But we are not running this race alone. In our text, the author says, "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." These are people who, by faith, have already run the race and won the victory. They support us in our race, not by cheering us on, but by having provided us with their witness/testimony to encourage us when things seem difficult; to strengthen us when we feel weak; and to support us when we feel all alone.

The entire 11th chapter of Hebrews is a listing of these witnesses, people who have won the race of faith, not as a result of their strength and effort, but by faith. Their faith and how they lived it becomes a model and example for us in running the race of faith.

There are famous people of faith who, not being perfect, yet by faith won the race. There is Abel, Enoch, Abraham, Moses, and many others who did spectacular things by faith and won the race. And then there are others, those not so famous, perhaps, known only to you: your mother and father who taught you the faith and encouraged you in the race; a pastor or Sunday School teacher who instructed you in the Word of God and helped you in the race; a wife or husband, grandfather or grandmother, or some other friend or relative who encouraged you in your race of faith. All who have, by faith, won the race are in that cloud of witnesses for us.

Second, there is preparing to run this race. That means getting rid of anything that will hold us back or weigh us down. That which holds us back is sin. Before, it kept us out of the race, now, it could keep us from winning the race. That which weighs us down are the things of this world which may be perfectly fine and good, but which can distract us from the race by our attention to and love for them.

If you want to win the race, get rid of that sin! You cannot continue in the race and continue to carry that extra weight. You will lose. Turn to the Lord in repentance

and receive His absolution on a regular basis which will lighten your load and allow you to run fast and sure. Do not be distracted by the wealth and possessions of this world and weighed down by them. Think of the Holy Bible as being the thinnest and sleekest of wardrobes for running this race. The Word of God will help you to run fast and sure. Will you ignore it? Will you try to run the race while being weighed down?

Thirdly, run the race. The author of our text tells us that, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses and since we have laid aside every worldly weight and every sin which clings so closely, run the race. Run with endurance and perseverance, knowing that the race will be difficult and painful at times. There will be suffering and hardships. There will be disappointments and difficulties. You will be running in the opposite direction of the world and those of the world will not like that.

When you are feeling as if you just can't do it, that the race is too long, that the race is too hard, and no one can do it, then remember those in the cloud of witnesses. They have done it. By the same Holy Spirit, by the same faith, and by the same strength of God, they ran the race and won. As you run the race, draw strength and encouragement from them.

Most importantly, keep your eyes focused on Jesus Christ. That does not mean some ghostly appearance or mystical experience. It means to focus in on Jesus Christ in His Word. He is the one who, for the sheer joy of having us win the race, endured the cross and the shame in order to pay for our sins. He is the one who rose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. Because of that, He is the founder, that is, the content of our faith. He is the perfecter of our faith who will bring it to completion on the day of His return.

We also look to Jesus as our example and model for endurance. He endured the worst already and has overcome it. We look to Jesus for help because he has taken a seat at the right hand of God's throne with all power and authority belonging to Him. We can depend upon Him to share with us His victory, to lead us through to our victory, and protect us along the way.

We get a glimpse of that race during every Divine Service. The cloud of witnesses – all the saints of God – surrounds us, but we do not see them nor do we look to them in faith. Jesus is present where even two or three are gathered together in His name. We fix our eyes of faith upon Jesus and what He comes to bring to us that day: the forgiveness which lightens our load in the race, the life which endures the struggles of the race, and the promise of victory in that race.

We see that forgiveness distributed from the altar, the focal point of Christ's work for us, His sacrifice for us. We have the cross above the altar as a reminder of His presence. We distribute the Lord's body and blood with the bread and the wine as we kneel here before him. In former days, the communion rail would be a half circle with the saints who are alive communing here. Directly behind the altar wall was the church's graveyard where the saints who have died were laid to rest and so completed the circle. And so the words of the liturgy are powerful reminders and encouragers: "with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your glorious name..." That means your mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, son, daughter and all who died in the faith are with us to encourage us and help us in the

race. We are on this side of death, receiving the Savior's body and blood. They are on the other side of death, communing with the risen and living Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And so we continue running the race until we join them in heaven.

Modern-day athletes will go to great lengths to win a competition and earn some sort of medal or reward. They will eat, train, and focus their attention on everything needed to win. We are running an even more important race with an even more glorious prize. It is a long and hard race which we cannot win on our own. Rather, having the saints of heaven to encourage us; having gotten rid of the "sin which clings so closely" and holds us back by regular repentance, confession, and absolution; and having set our eyes on Jesus who has set the race before us, run the race Himself, and gained the victory for us; run the race. In crossing the finish line in heaven, you will win, not a medal of gold, silver, or bronze, not the fame and adoration of the masses, but the crown of life, perfect peace, and everlasting joy in an. Amen