

August 17, 2019

“Running the Race”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Hebrews 12:1-3; I Corinthians 9:24-27

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Since the Falmouth Road Race is this weekend, I thought it would be appropriate to talk about running, and, as our scriptures implied today, the importance of running well and finishing strong. So I'd like to start by sharing a true story about runner, John Stephen Akhwari from Tanzania, who ran the marathon in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Approximately half way through the race there was some jostling among the runners and Akhwari took a bad fall. His leg was bleeding, he dislocated a knee and hit his shoulder hard on the pavement. Most people would have stopped right there. Akhwari, however, continued. He was determined to finish the race, and, over an hour after the winner crossed the finish line, so did Akhwari. Let's watch. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlfMogR7ZnI>

“My country didn't send me 5,000 miles to start the race, they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.” And, we, as Christians have a race of faith to run and finish. We heard it today, “Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us and never give up.” Now at first this may sound daunting. How can we run like that, when sometimes we don't even feel like walking? Well, let me share some edited thoughts by Max Lucado from his book, “*Just Like Jesus.*”

On one of my shelves is a book on power abs. The cover shows a close up of a fellow flexing his flat belly. His gut has more ripples and ridges than a pond on a windy day. Inspired, I bought the book, read the routine, and did the situps....for a week. Not far from the power-abs book is a tape series on speed reading. The course promises to do for my mind what Power Abs promised to do for my gut – turn it into steel – mastering this six-week series will enable me to read twice as fast and retain twice the amount. All I have to do is listen to the tapes – which I intend to do ...someday. Don't get me wrong. Not everything in my life is incomplete. But I confess, I don't always finish what I start. Chances are I'm not alone. Any unfinished projects under your roof?

You know as well as I, it's one thing to start something. It's something else entirely to complete it. However, I do believe there are certain quests better left undone, some projects wisely abandoned. And so my desire is not to convince you to finish everything. My desire is to encourage you to finish the *right* thing. Certain tests and races are optional – like washboard abs and speed reading. Other races are essential – like the race of faith. Consider this admonition from the author of Hebrews: “Let us run with endurance the race God has set before us and never give up.”

The word “race” is from the Greek *agon*, from which we get the word *agony*. Those of you who are or have been runners know the feeling. And similarly, the Christian’s race is a demanding and grueling, sometimes agonizing race. It takes a massive effort to finish strong. Likely you’ve noticed that many don’t? Surely you’ve observed there are many on the side of the road? They used to be running and kept the pace. But then weariness sets in. They didn’t think the run would be this tough. Or they were discouraged by a bump and daunted by a fellow runner. Whatever the reason, they don’t run anymore. They may be Christians. They may come to church. They may put some money in the plate and warm a pew, but their hearts aren’t in the race. They retired before their time. Unless something changes, their best work will have been their first work, and they will finish with a whimper.

By contrast, Jesus’ best work was his final work, and his strongest step was his last step. Our Master is the classic example of one who endured. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus “held on while wicked people were doing evil things to him.” Jesus “held on,” implying that Jesus could have “let go.” He could have quit the race. But he didn’t.

Have you ever thoughts about the times when Jesus could have given up? How about his time of temptation? “The Spirit led Jesus into the desert where the devil tempted Jesus for forty days.” We imagine the wilderness temptation as three isolated events scattered over a forty-day period. In reality, Jesus’ time of testing was nonstop; “the devil tempted Jesus for forty days.” Every step, whispering in his ear. Every turn of the of the path, sowing doubt. St. Luke doesn’t say that Satan *tried* to tempt Jesus. No, the passage is clear: “the devil *tempted* Jesus.” And he could have quit the race. But he didn’t. He kept on running.

Temptation didn’t stop him, nor did accusations. Can you imagine what it would be like to run in a race and be criticized by the bystanders? This is what the Bible tells us people said about Jesus. “Hey, liar!” (John 7:12). “Foreigner, go home where you belong.” (John 8:48) “Since when do they let children of the devil enter the race?” (John 8:48) That’s what happened to Jesus. His own family called him a lunatic. His neighbors treated him even worse. And when Jesus returned to his hometown, they tried to throw him off a cliff. (Luke4:29) But Jesus didn’t quit running.

Temptations didn’t deter him. Accusations didn’t defeat him. Nor did shame dishearten him. Think carefully about the supreme test Jesus faced in the race. On the cross, Jesus was covered with shame. He was shamed before his family. Stripped naked before his own mother and loved ones. Shamed

before his fellow men. Forced to carry a cross until the weight caused him to stumble. Shamed before his church. The pastors and elders of his day mocked him, calling him names. Shamed before the city of Jerusalem. Condemned to die a criminal's death.

How did he do it? What gave Jesus the strength to endure the race? We need an answer, don't we? Like Jesus we are tempted. Like Jesus we are accused. Like Jesus we are ashamed. But unlike Jesus, we give up. We give out. So how can we keep running as Jesus did? How can our hearts have the endurance Jesus had? How? By focusing where Jesus focused: on the prize, "the joy awaiting him." From Hebrews, "Because of the joy awaiting him, he accepted the shame and endured the cross."

This verse may very well be the greatest testimony ever written about what awaits us at the end of the race – heaven. Remember, Jesus is the only person to live on earth *after* he had lived in heaven. He knew heaven before he came to earth. He knew what awaited him upon his return. And knowing what awaited him in heaven enabled him to bear his trials here on earth. In his final moments, Jesus focused on the joy God put before him. He focused on the prize of heaven, and what he saw gave him strength to finish. By focusing on the prize, he was able not only to finish the race, but to finish it strong.

And such a moment awaits us at the finish. In an hour that has no end, we will rest. Surrounded by saints and engulfed by Jesus himself, the work will, indeed be finished. The final harvest will have been gathered, we will be seated at our place at the table, and Christ will (welcome us) with these words: "Well done, good and faithful servant." And in that moment, the race will have been won! Amen,