

II Timothy 4:6-8 and Hebrews 12:1-2

“Run the race”

On the heels of our time of celebration for being together for 15 years I’m noticing that a lot of important milestones are happening in my life right now. Not only was this year a celebration of 15 years with you, but it was my 40th high school reunion which we did not have. It was my 35th college reunion which we did have but which I wasn’t able to attend. In two years there will be more milestones, Stacy and I will be married for 35 years in 2028 and I’m turning 60 in that year as well.

I have decided that for my 60th birthday I’m going to invite everyone I know to join me in running a marathon. I’ve done one before and it was the worst experience of my life, but you know, over time we tend to forget, so I’m going to do another marathon. We’ve chosen the time and the place, Reykjavik Iceland in August. Who is in? Even if you aren’t running the race you can join us to make fun of those who are running the race.

When I was in Florida there was a pretty good group of runners who would gather and run together. We would run the Gate River Run in Jacksonville, a 15K that is celebrating its 50th anniversary this next year as well. To train for that run which ended with running over the bridge into Jacksonville, I would run the Ravines State Park in Palatka because it was the only place that I could find that had any elevation at all in that area. Running along the side of the Ravine state park was a golf course that was separated by a fence so golfers couldn’t get into the park and the park folks couldn’t get into the golf course.

As I would run along I would periodically look over and see a golf ball and so I would stop and pick it up and put it in my pocket. A few paces ahead I would see another one so I would pick up another. Eventually I would finish my run with my pockets full of golf balls, my shorts down to my knees and with all the stopping and starting it would take me twice as long as it should have. I was certainly weighed down and the golf balls were clinging to me and making the run so much harder than it ever should have been.

Both of our Scriptures today use the metaphor of running a race to associate with our life of faith lived in Jesus Christ. This image of a race to convey the challenges that we face as we follow Jesus is common and very appropriate to all of our life situations. Let’s read.

READ

We know from Hebrews that we do not exactly know who it was who wrote this sermon. Remember, we are calling it a sermon and not a letter because of its nature of speaking directly

to the community about a topic of faith that really defines a sermon. There is no greeting and no farewell like you would have in a letter. But we definitely know who wrote our first Scripture, and that was the Apostle Paul writing to a young pastor, Timothy, whom elsewhere he describes as his son, even though we know that he was not his biological son.

The Apostle Paul is in the last stages of his life and he wanted to leave behind a legacy for Timothy that he would never forget, a legacy of faith and a legacy of teaching that would last him a lifetime. So here he uses an example of a race to describe what his own life was like and he encourages Timothy to finish the race. Finish the race. There was one race that I took part in that I did not finish. It was in St. Augustine, I believe it was a 10k so not very long. But what I did not realize was that it was a beach, trail, and road race. I had never done one of those before. We began on the beach and the sand was soooo soft that by the time we got off the beach, about a mile down the road, I was exhausted. We next headed into the woods and the path had not been cleared well so I was tripping and stumbling along and by the time we came out to the road I was exhausted, frustrated, mad, and you had a choice to go left and finish the remaining 3 miles or so, or turn left where there was the finish line in sight, but not finish the race. I turned left.

Stacy and the girls were there and they saw me walking in and the look of disappointment on their faces I will never forget. They thought I was hurt, I wasn't except for my pride. But I was just weary, and tired, and the question of why am I doing this kept coming up and was stronger than the shame of not finishing the race. A race has a beginning and an end, a start and a finish. When you hear Paul say he finished the race, you understand that this is the goal. When in Hebrews the author says run the race, you assume he means run the race until you finish.

Now elsewhere Paul writes that we are to win the race. I Corinthians 9:24 he writes run in such a way that you may win it. In John you have Peter and John who race to the empty tomb and John wins that race. But for the most part in the other examples that we have in Scripture the emphasis is on running the race, from start to finish. We had the fantasy football draft yesterday for the two lower leagues, and there are some in that draft that you just know will play the whole season and will end up dead last, simply because it happens every year. But that is okay, because they are engaged in the fellowship and the time well spent.

Paul's legacy to Timothy in our first Scripture is that his race was one that inspired. This is exactly what the author of Hebrews wants us to think of in regards to Jesus. This section of

Hebrews is entitled Jesus the ultimate example of our faith. When we see the disciplined, loving, strong, merciful, and faithful way that Jesus ran the race, we are motivated to lace up our running shoes. The only thing that causes us to shrink back is our problem of weariness. The race is hard, our muscles are tired and we lose heart. If it so joyful, why is it so hard. These are the questions and the answers that we seek in our Scripture today.

Stacy and I rarely watch TV shows together. There have been some that have come on that we both enjoy, like All Creatures Great and Small. Recently Netflix came out with a remake of Little House on the Prairie and we are enjoying watching that together. I do recommend it unlike some of the other series that I have mentioned from this pulpit that I do not recommend and that Stacy and I would never watch together. In this remake you really see what it looked like living like a pioneer, someone doing things that no one else had ever done and establishing the way in which things were being done.

Jesus is called in these verses our pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Let's not forget that what we are talking about here in these two chapters is the faith that we have is better than the giants of the faith that went before us in the Old Testament. That is why these verses begin with therefore, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets like Elijah from last week. But they did not know Jesus. We serve the GOAT of faith and so then we do not need to get weighed down with those things that are inconsequential, like legalism, or those things that clearly take us away from the faith such as sin and following worldly values.

Jesus is the champion in the exercise of faith and the one who brought faith to complete expression. Let's not lose track now that we are talking about faith. It is within this faith of ours that we operate as we have surrounding us a cloud of witnesses. We have surrounding us these giants of the faith but also in Greek the term cloud of witnesses was also used to describe the spectators within an arena. In the first century we read about foot races that took place within arenas and the spectators being describes as a cloud of witnesses.

You know the first Olympics started as a simple foot race and the runners would disrobe and basically run naked, pretty much, maybe not completely, but pretty much. Rid yourself of anything that might weigh you down certainly meant any of the robes that they might be wearing, or any golf balls they would have in their pockets. What is it that weighs you down as you run your life race. Think about it? There are some things that make your race more

meaningful and rich, your family, your children, your spouse, your time in nature, whatever it might be. But there are some things that absolutely weigh you down, like our sin, our love of stuff and things.

What helps our race, as this Scripture tells us, is to stay focused on Jesus, fix your eyes upon Jesus. It is such a clear image. **SING** It is such a clear image of fixing your eyes on Jesus. How do we do that? In September we are starting up a 90 Day Challenge which is to read through the Gospels in 90 Days. It is one chapter a day, not the 6 chapters or more that were a part of the read through the Bible. I heard you, you don't begin your training with a marathon, you start with a mile. I began training for my marathon in two years, I'm running a mile a day, yesterday I ran two miles. This 90 Day Challenge is meant as a soft start, an opportunity to see the life of Jesus and take heart from it.

But what is it that distracts and takes our eyes away from Jesus? Identify those things and take them out of your life. Whether it is sin, or priorities, or anger, or jealousy. Whatever it might be, let's rid our lives of that. This race is not a contest of speed, but of stamina. The author tells us to run with perseverance, not with a benchmark of speed. It is a benchmark of perseverance, and faithfulness, of finishing what you have started.

We have one who has set the example for a race well run. The value of the cross is that Jesus did not die by accident, but rather through capital punishment. This is significant. The shame of the cross lies in what it stood for, a convicted criminal and enemy of the state. Jesus humiliated provides us with endurance when we are humiliated.

We are each in different stages of our race. Some of us are just starting off this race of faith and are full of joy and excitement as the gun has just gone off and the crowd of people is pushing forward. It is exhilarating. Some of us are at mile 18 of the marathon and we have hit that wall, we are tired, we are weary. Look to those around you and get courage and energy and joy from this family that is supporting you. We can get weary, but it is in those times that we hear the words of Hebrews that we strive for the joy set before us, the joy of embracing Jesus face to face. Amen.