

“An Anchor for the Soul: Running the Race”

Hebrews 12:1-3 • 1 Corinthians 9:24-10:11

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • May 22, 2016

Yesterday was the annual running of the Beach to Bay Marathon here in Corpus Christi. How many of you ran in that race? About 15,000 runners came out for the forty-first running of that race but this year offered a little change. The race, which starts out on the island and ends just down the hill from us here, has always been a relay where teams of six runners competed over the 26 miles. This year runners had the opportunity to run the entire course solo and there were a number of people who chose to do that.

I had a feeling that most of you didn't have the opportunity to participate so we've arranged for us *all* to go right not and run to the island. We're going to race. The first one to get there will get us a table at Snoopy's and the last one has to pay. How does that sound? No?

The truth is that it's physically impossible to just go out and run a marathon. It takes training. Lots of training. Years of training. And that kind of training takes tremendous discipline. We could *try* really hard but unless you've been training you are going to fail.

In several places the Bible compares the Christian life to running a race. At the end of his life the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." But for some reason we think that we can live the Christian life, following Christ, just by trying harder. Trying harder doesn't cut it when trying to run the race of faith any more than it does trying to run a marathon. To follow Jesus faithfully requires *training*.

This is what Paul is telling us in our first reading from 1 Corinthians. He says, "Don't you know that in a race all the runners run but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." He goes on to explain that winning requires training and self-control. He says, "I discipline my body and keep it under control."

We find the same idea in Hebrews 12, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before

us." The first thing you need to see from this passage is that God has laid out a course for your life. No two people will have the same course. Our paths may intersect with others at various places and sometimes we run the race side by side but each of us has a unique course in life ordained by God. This is important – we don't create our own course. Through the Christian life we discover the course that God has laid out for us.

That race that God sets out for us is filled with many twists and turns. Today we honored our students who have graduated high school. That's one of the turns in their race. Other turns might be getting married, getting a job, *losing* a job, having children, losing a loved one. Each turn in the race becomes an opportunity to follow Jesus through the turn or to get off course.

The path of our race is not always easy. Sometimes it's uphill and hard, sometimes it's downhill and easier. Becoming a Christian is one of the easiest things in the world to do. Faithfully following Jesus for your entire life is one of the hardest things in the world to do. Jesus said, "The gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life." This is why the writer of Hebrews says, "run with *endurance*." The race of faith is like a marathon. It's a long-distance race not a sprint and that calls for perseverance, pressing ahead no matter what happens to us.

The picture that the writer of Hebrews wants us to imagine is running a race in a stadium packed with cheering fans. But these are not just any fans. The stadium is packed with all the saints who have gone before. Abel and Enoch. Noah and Abraham. Moses and Joshua and Rahab. David and Samuel, Elijah and Daniel. All the people who lived *by faith*. These great pillars of the faith are standing there cheering for *you!* They're saying, "I did and so can you." Hebrews 12:1 calls them a great "cloud" of witnesses. The idea is that there are so many of these examples in the faith that we

are complete surrounded, like when you're in a dense fog. That's the spiritual reality in which we live. We can't see them with our eyes but we can see them "by faith."

So how do we go about running this race faithfully? Our passage gives us two things that will ensure that we finish the race in victory. First, you must ruthlessly get rid of anything that is holding you back. Just before they line up for the race, runners will take off their warm up suit. Modern super light synthetic fabrics allow them to run like they are not wearing anything. In the ancient world they also ran like they weren't wearing anything because they *weren't* wearing anything. Just before the race the runners would strip off their heavy garments. The Bible is telling us to do the same thing, metaphorically. Lay aside anything that is hindering you from following Jesus.

The verse mentions "sin which clings so closely." The idea here is not just sinful acts, it's the heart behind the acts. It's the desire to sin. Each of us is drawn to some sin more than others. You know what keeps tripping you up. But the verse also mentions laying aside "every weight." Some versions translate this as "hindrances." These are things that are not necessarily bad but they slow you down. In your life, what is it that keeps you from worshipping regularly? What prevents you from growing in your faith or building deep relationships with other Christians? Ask yourself, "Why don't I go to a weekly Bible study or prayer group?" The answer you come up with is probably the weight that you need to put down. For example, if you said, "I don't have time," then the weight you're carrying is busyness. Instead of saying, "I don't have time," substitute "it's not a priority." If that makes you a little uncomfortable then it's time to do some surgery on your calendar to rearrange your priorities.

So that's the first thing. Get rid of anything that's holding you back from worshipping, connecting, growing, and serving. The second thing, after you've stripped away the weight, is to focus on Jesus. "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus,

the founder and perfecter of our faith." In English we miss some of the meaning behind these words. Jesus is not the founder of a religion. The word translated as "founder" is actually related to the word for beginning or first, *arche*. And the word translated as "perfecter" comes from the root word for completion or end, *telos*. You could say, "look to Jesus the beginning and end of our faith." In Revelation 22 Jesus says, "I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." Jesus is the source of our faith, the object of our faith, and the guarantor of our faith.

One of the first things track coaches teach runners, especially sprinters, is not to look at the other runners around you but to look ahead. Keep your eyes on the finish line. Here Hebrews 12 tells us the same thing. Keep your eyes on the finish line, which is eternity with Jesus. Don't get distracted by worldly things. Run in such a way as to get the prize. Consider—think about—Jesus. Think about what he went through, how much He suffered. Think about His faith. Think about Him seated on His throne in heaven calling you. Verse 3 tells us that we will actually receive strength by focusing on Jesus. "Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted."

Graduates, let me tell you life is hard. College is hard. Over the next few years your faith will be challenged. You will have freedom you've never experienced before. There will be times you will feel alone. You will have opportunities like never before to get off the course laid out for you by God. All of us face those same temptations every day. Look to Jesus. Spend time with Him in His Word every day. Surround yourself with people who are also running the race of faith in Christ. Remember the great cloud of witnesses. Think about all the people – the heroes of the faith and the "regular" saints – who are cheering you on and praying for you. Train for this race and run with endurance in such a way as to receive the prize – eternal life with Jesus!
Amen