

August 14, 2016  
Hebrews 12:1-3

Proper 15c  
A Race Already Run

*Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Over the past 9 days and for a few more, Athletes from around the world have come upon Rio De Janeiro to compete in the 2016 Summer Olympics. Some have run races, some have swum, others have lifted weights or spent time diving. Athletes who have all trained. Watching the games has brought a question to mind. Have you ever tried to run a race? I am not speaking about the 100m dash or even the mile run. For those races you can run and the way to win those races is speed. The faster you are the better you will finish. The race that I am speaking about is the marathon. A 26.2 mile race. Now I can tell you I am not a marathon runner, and I will never run a marathon. I can tell you though, that marathon runners, they train. They train for months before the race. They start in short runs 3-5 miles and they work themselves up to longer runs, 13-15 miles. To me it seems crazy, that you can run for hours. From what I can tell when I have talked to marathon runners, the coolest thing is saying, "I finished the race". I can only imagine what that might be like. Someday I might say that with a 5K. When you ask a runner what you need when you run a marathon, the number one thing a person would tell you is "Endurance."

Endurance! Isn't that what a person needs in life. Endurance one of the first things you need to do to finish a race. Think towards last week's reading of Hebrews 11. Noah endured. Noah endured a lot of criticism as he was building an ark. Remember it hadn't even started to rain yet, EVER. Abraham well look at what he endured. He endured almost a whole lifetime without a son and than God promised that he would have a son, not to mention God told him to move to a place he would show him. What about the heroes of faith that we read about today, such as Joseph, being sold into slavery, being put into prison after false accusations, Moses – being put into a basket at a young age, pledging himself to his Hebrew people, going to Pharaoh several times to ask for the Israelites to be freed and the list goes on as we read on in Hebrews. What about the Apostle Paul and what he endured...Paul writes to the Church in Corinth: *"Five times I received at the hand of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness..."* You get the picture...Paul also endured much to finish his race.

Endurance isn't the only thing a runner needs. A runner needs encouragement. When I have talked to marathon runners and even other athletes, another thing that helps them succeed is the cheers. The chants from the roadways and the stands, "Let's Go team!" Or other supportive cheers. There are times when endurance is waning and life's race is becoming hard, perhaps we haven't trained long or hard enough, but then the encouraging words, build us up. They help us keep going, but sometimes we don't listen to that advice.

Our very life is like a race. We need endurance and encouragement. But many times our endurance falters and so does encouragement. We become burdened with the pains and struggles of life. The author to the Hebrews not only talks about endurance, but he also talks about throwing aside every weight and sin. What weighs you down, what are the sins that cause you to stumble? What are your burdens in life? Is it loneliness, is it the feeling of inadequacy, is it the questioning of your faith? Could it be the way you treat your parent or child or spouse? Could it be the other pains of life: cancer, car accident, fire, theft, death? Maybe it's the business of life, running from one event to another...school and the fall sports season is almost upon us. The busy summer season is almost behind us, but then we get a different kind of busy. Perhaps you are constantly running and your endurance is failing.

Think back to the runner with me for a moment. What is the runner wearing? Normally you see the runner wearing tight clothes so there is nothing that hinders them and slows them down while they run. What really is spectacular to me is in the winter when I see runners. Sure their legs, arms, and head is covered. But do you see them wearing a big bulky winter coat. I don't and I am impressed. The things that weigh us down we need to cast off. Sure some things that I named before we can't on our own cast off, but there are some things we can. Friendships that lead us down the wrong path is one of things I can think of or perhaps even changing our priorities.

The author says we need to get rid of the sin that clings so closely or in other translations entangles us. As I was thinking this week about what entangles us and trying to get a picture of what that might be, the first thing I thought of was a spider web and how that web entangles the spider's prey, whether it be a fly or other insect. That really doesn't do us justice. What did me justice was the name of a famous Olympian. No not Michael Phelps or Apolo Anton Ohno or the newest hero. No none of our current Olympic heroes. The name that I came across was Johnny Weismuller. He was an Olympic gold medalist swimmer in the 1920s. But maybe the name rings a bell with you in another way. The old Tarzan movies. He was Tarzan, the original Tarzan. Remember the scenes when he would swing through the jungles with his knife in his teeth, and there would come a time when he would have to jump into the water just to save Jane or one of the other characters. The music changes and then you see it, the octopus, which would entangle Tarzan.

Sin seems to be like that octopus that entangled Tarzan. Just one drink, and then another, and another. What about that lustful look? Another tentacle. One click on the computer...another one...that little white lie, that one answer to the test that you had written on your hand, another tentacle. In just a matter of moments entangled, trapped in sin. The author tells us to throw that aside as well. Well we can't on our accord.

There's one more thing that we can learn from marathon runners. That is the critical point in the race. Number one is when the gun goes off and the race begins. They say it is tempting to run as fast as you can at the beginning and then you are done, out of gas after several miles. The second critical point is the halfway point of the race. AT

this point one might call it “hitting a wall”. The temptation is there to quit, because you think you can’t go any further. Life is like that as well. The Christian life. We all know people who we have witnessed run so fast right away and we’ve seen those people get to a troubling point in life and they quit, they give up.

But the author to the Hebrews is clear...” run with endurance the race that is set before us...” The race is set before us and there is one that has already run his race. Who endured to the end, who paced himself, who had the endurance, and he even at points didn’t get the encouragement from those around him, but he had the encouragement from the Father.

Here the author shares with us how we can run the race, for we can’t run it on our own, but we run it, *“looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”*

You see our Lord Jesus, he ran his race opposed. He not only was opposed, he was persecuted. He ran the race so well he paid the price. So when we grow weary and when we grow tired, look to Jesus. Actually not only then, but at all times look to the cross and the empty tomb, there you receive your strength. Look to your family of faith that Christ gives to you. For the cross is where our race is won. The cross and empty tomb is where we finish our race, because Jesus Christ went to the cross for us and came out of the tomb for us.

As I think about the cross and think about what Jesus did there for us, I again think to those things that entangle us, the things that so easily ensnare us and we become weighted down. I picture a runner, running with that winter coat on and perhaps even a backpack full of things that would weigh him down. I then think about another one that runs up next to you the runner, and takes your weight, takes your burden and runs and finishes the race with it on.

When I was a camp counselor we would do a skit to illustrate this to the kids. We would have one of us playing the part of Jesus, one of us playing the part of you or me, playing the part of a sinner. And another playing the part of the weight of sin, the sin monster. The person playing the part of sin would be on the sinners back and you can see the sinner struggling to walk, because he had the weight of sin on his back. Then enter Jesus who talks with the sinner and then takes his sin away and now Jesus is carrying the sinner’s weight on his back.

In my mind it makes sense. Isn’t that what Jesus Christ does for you and for me every time we confess our sins to God our Father. Every time we receive those words of forgiveness. You know what they are, you hear them every Sunday, when I stand before you in the presence of God and state, “I forgive your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It’s true when we have Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith running with us and taking our weights, when we lay our sins

on Jesus, we have nothing to fear...for we are free. We can then continue to run our race and with joy come to the finish line where we will receive the crown of life.

We have the ability because of Jesus to run our race with endurance and with the encouragement to finish strongly. Our encouragement is found through the cloud of witnesses, those included in Hebrews 11, those that you knew personally, and the countless other saints to go before us whose names are unknown. The biggest encouragement to finish strongly though comes from our Savior and Lord, when he speaks those words of love to each and every one of you. Those words of love, "Father, forgive them." "Give me your burdens, I love you." In the name of Jesus. Amen.

*Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds, and keep them focused in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, the author and perfecter of our faith. Amen.*