

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 18, 2019ⁱ

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Hebrews 11:17-31; 12:1-3

“Encouragement”

How do you feel about exercise? Love it or hate it, there's no arguing that you need it. We all do. That's the way we're designed. That doesn't mean exercise is easy; in fact, exercise can be difficult. Moderate exercise might not be too bad, but if you really push yourself, exercising can leave you aching and exhausted. And it's work! It's so much easier to just sit around, following the path of least resistance. So why do it? Why exercise if it's going to wear you down or beat you up? Even if you're not a fan of exercising, you probably know why you should. It benefits your health. It can improve your mood. And when you regularly work at it, exercise can challenge you to stretch your limits, getting you to do things that you might never have thought possible.

The author of today's epistle reading from the book of Hebrews frames our life of faith in terms of a particular form of exercise: a race. Even if someone's not a fan of sports, they'll know what it means to run a race – even if they're from the other side of the world or separated by 2,000 years. The idea of running a race is part of the human experience. And from how Hebrews tells it, you and I are the athletes out on the field. It doesn't matter how old you are: when you were baptized, you became a racer. That's life for the Christian. It's an ultramarathon through territory that can sometimes be rough and unfamiliar, and occasionally brutal. Your heading towards a finish line that's out there, somewhere. And even though you don't know how long your race will run, you know as a baptized child of God who's waiting for you on the other side of that finish line.

So let's say you're running along in this great race. Do you suppose you'd pick up stones to carry with you as you run? Would you find some of those weighted wraps to tie around your wrists and ankles? Might you hit the course carrying a fully loaded backpack and heavy boots? Those might be fine things to do if you're training for the race, conditioning your body for competition. But when it's time for the actual ultramarathon, I'm guessing that you would ditch as much extra weight as you could, going with the lightest shoes and running apparel that you could find. Back in ancient days, Greek athletes would run naked so as not to be weighed down by anything unnecessary that would slow them down. You're running a race as a Christian. And you've got a lot of things going against you.

For one, the weight of sin can seem insurmountable. We have this confusing problem, don't we? We're constantly tempted to pick up weights that make it harder to run the race before us. All those things that we might want to say or do that go against God's design and turn us off track. Big choices, little choices, habitual choices, they cause us to stumble under their weight. And beyond our sin – as if that weren't enough – the world sets up hurdles and other obstacles to try and trip you up and knock you out of the race. What weight of sin have you been carrying? What impediments has the enemy placed in your path?

You don't have the home field advantage. Even though sometimes the twists and turns might seem familiar, you're running in hostile territory. The wind is against you, pushing back against every step. It's what Jesus warns us about in our Gospel text (Luke 12:49-53), telling his disciples that the world will be in opposition to them, where even family members would turn against those who follow him. The odds seem to be stacked against you and everyone else running the race of life in Christ.

As the author of Hebrews puts reminds us, though, we're not the first ones to run this race. It's the same course that Jesus ran before us. **Jesus founded the race**, the ultramarathon that is life lived according to God's instruction and design. He's the **basis for faith** that trusts in our Father in heaven. He charted the course for us all, showing us the way to go through life. And what's more, **Jesus finished the race**. He's **the goal of faith**, because he is the one who won the race for you and me. No one else could, no one else did. He crossed the finish line after running a perfect race, without turning off course or crashing into the obstacles that the enemy set before him. **Jesus is our model for endurance**, too. He looked ahead to what came after his humiliation and suffering. He kept his eyes on the prize, the joy of life with God's redeemed people, the redemption that he was bringing about. Jesus was looking ahead to life with you!

Imagine the setting for our great race as it's depicted in Hebrews. It's an immense stadium, but even though we're in foreign territory, the stands are filled with crowds of our faithful supporters. You heard some of their names in today's reading: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, the judges, the prophets, King David. They're like you and me. **You and I are numbered among the hall of famers!** They're part of that

“communion of saints” that we confess in the Apostles’ Creed, cheering us along as we run the race that is set before us. They’re hidden from plain sight by the cloud, as it were, invisible to the world around us, but that doesn’t change the fact that they’re rooting for us like our biggest fans.

Persevere in running this race. Keep on going towards that finish line despite the hardships that you encounter. Jesus blazed the trail for us, bearing the full opposition of our broken world. Endure the hardship, discomfort, and pain that will come your way as a follower of Jesus, the “author and finisher” of our faith. Look ahead with patient expectation for God’s action, His promised salvation for you and all His people. Because Jesus, the victorious Son, is enthroned at the right hand of God in the glory that was his before the world began, and he continues to work for the benefit of his people. He endured everything so that you could join him at the victory banquet.

Jesus has won the race in your place. You’ve been made right with God, because Jesus carried the weight of all our sin for us. He’s the great high priest who offered himself as the sacrifice for you and me on the cross. That’s what we call **justification**. Our success doesn’t depend on our exertion or effort. It’s done, it’s finished, it’s accomplished for you and for me because of Christ. As Christians, we’re running this great race of life in hope of the victory that waits for us. But God still calls us to be mindful of how we run.

Be on guard against the sin that would trip you up and weigh you down. Cast it aside. Repent of it, turn away from it. It’s actively sabotaging you and trying to keep you from crossing the finish line. That turning away from sin, running the course according to God’s design, is what we call **sanctification**. Like elite athletes, you and I can continue to seek improvement in our tactics and techniques, working to our lives in Christ to the best of the ability God has given us.

Because Jesus will see you through to the finish line, and beyond. Look to him as the one champion who has run the race and is cheering you on. Keep your eyes up towards what’s waiting ahead across the finish line. See what’s unseen and hidden from the eyes of the world.

Look around you. In addition to that great cloud of witnesses in the stands of the stadium, you’ve got a team surrounding you here. We’re running the race together! We are community in Jesus, people who are brought together to encourage one another and cheer each other on. When one of us stumbles – and we all do – reach out and lift them up to run alongside you. Experience the joy of God’s gift of forgiveness together. Come to His house and His table to receive the gifts that He gives so that you might run the race in His strength.

Look to Jesus, who has run the race and won the race. Because in him, you have victory, too.

Amen.

ⁱ Passage for memory:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder 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. – Hebrews 12:1-2