

“Forward In Faith”
Philippians 3:4-14
October 8, 2017

You’ve seen them along the side of the road. They often wear loose fitting clothes and the expression on their face is usually a mixture of pain and determination. You’ve seen them in the rain, you’ve seen them in the cold, you’ve seen them on a summer day when the sun is out and the humidity is nearly 100 percent. You’ve seen their suffering, and yet you drove right past them without offering to help. But that’s the way they want it, for they are runners or joggers. A unique class of people who are driven to punish their bodies in this way. Many of you know that I have been a part of this group for most of my adult life. In fact, many of you have passed me on the road and you have seen that look on my face on your way to work in the morning.

For many runners, including myself, our running is never really a race against anything other than ourselves. It’s about overcoming yourself. So if any of you ever decide to take up running, and other runners here today can back me up on this point, you will notice that different parts of your body will begin to hurt the further you go. It might be your shoulder during the first mile, your chest or lungs during the second mile, and perhaps your legs in the third mile.

Soon all the parts of your body will try to convince you that it’s time to slow down or even stop. And all of a sudden you start having these arguments in your mind. “Why am I doing this again?” “Do I really need to go faster or farther than I did yesterday?” “Wouldn’t it be nice to stop and just walk the last ½ mile?” And on and on it goes, step after step. But the better or more serious runners have learned how to distinguish between real complaints and false complaints in their bodies. While they pay attention to the real complaints that could mean damage to bones or ligaments, they disregard the complaints of muscles that simply are not used to working that hard. They do this because they know they’ll be better for it. They see the payoff of better fitness and maybe even better overall health. This is what running is – a battle against yourself.

Oddly enough, faith is often like distance running. Keeping the faith is a battle against yourself. In our second lesson for today Paul says in verses 12-14, “...I press on to make it (eternal life) my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ...Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” That sounds somewhat like running, doesn’t it?

But it’s not exactly like running, because faith is not something we do by ourselves. Faith is a gift that God gives to us through His Holy Spirit. It is not something we acquire or earn on our own through hard work or patient endurance. The phrase that I have highlighted in this text: “made me his own” is a phrase that literally means to “grab” or “to take hold of.” And I like that phrase, because the Bible tells us that Paul, before he became a follower of Jesus, was headed down a road one day to a city known as Damascus, where he was determined to kill Christians. But Jesus had other plans for him as He blinded him on that road and in a sense grabbed him and pulled him away from his sinful life and into His grace. It’s not like Jesus said to Paul, “If you just run hard enough down this road to Damascus, you’ll earn your way into heaven.” Jesus made Paul and all of us His own through His death and resurrection. Jesus won the race and broke the finish line tape for us when He said, “It is finished” on the cross. By becoming one of us and living a perfect life, He won the race that God called Him to run without any help from us, and yet we still share in the prize of eternal life because of what He did. It’s like how every member of an Olympic gold-medal winning sports team receives a gold medal, even though not every member may have played in the winning game. Through His Word, Jesus reached down with His Holy Spirit into our lives and called us by name, He took hold of us, and made us into the heaven bound believers that we are today.

And that’s what the Reformation was all about. Five Hundred years ago, the leaders of the Church were telling people that you had to buy your way into heaven by purchasing these pieces of paper, called indulgences, from the Church in order to be forgiven. But a young German monk, named Martin Luther, challenged the leaders of the Church by saying, “That’s not what the Bible says. The Bible says that we are saved by God’s grace, through faith. This is not something we purchase or do on our own. Jesus did all the work to get us into heaven. He made us His own through His death and resurrection.”

So in this text, while Paul talks about running a race and straining forward to win the prize of eternal life, he is not talking about us earning our way into heaven – that has already been done by Jesus. What he is talking

about is you and I, as God's children, remaining on the path to heaven, and staying in the faith to which you and I have been called by God. God's goal for you is to see you in heaven for eternity, and He wants you to make that your goal, as well.

And that's the challenge. That's the race. That's the battle against yourself. For just as the muscles in your body hurt or complain whenever you force them to do some running, your sinful nature that you were born with complains whenever you take strides to live in accordance with the will of God. "What are you doing?" It will ask you. "Why are you giving money to the church? You earned that money and you should spend it on yourself. That's what everyone else is doing and look how happy they are with their new stuff." Or our sinful nature will say to us, "What's wrong with watching a little bit of filth on TV? It's not going to hurt you. And why should the bad language in a TV show bother you, everyone uses it." Or I'm sure we've heard our sinful nature tempt us by saying, "Why do you go to church on Sunday morning? Wouldn't you rather sleep in? You've worked hard and you need to rest. So quit your running and relax, everyone else does it."

Keeping the faith is like running in that it's a battle against yourself. To keep the faith is to agree with God that our old sinful nature is our own worst enemy. And if we don't ignore it, but choose instead to follow its voice, we will eventually fall out of the race and our faith will be in jeopardy. So how do you silence that lazy complaining voice that comes from deep inside that tries to get you to turn away from God's way and honoring Him? Paul reminds us in Romans 6 when he said, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" At your baptism, Jesus grabbed you and made you His child (as He did with Nolan this morning). In your baptism a connection was formed between you and Jesus and as a result you can silence those temptations of your sinful nature by giving them to Jesus each day and asking Him to take them away. But when we do give in to those urgings of our sinful nature, we can confess those urgings or sins to Jesus and receive forgiveness on a daily basis so we can run the race of faith in peace.

Experienced runners will tell you that once they're bodies are finally in shape, they actually enjoy running. I'm sure you've seen those runners. As they run, they have a look of confident joy on their faces and they will tell you that running is an essential part of their day, and they feel bad when they can't run. And so it can be with us as we run the race of faith. We can get to that point, too. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:29) The major burden of your life is that sinful nature of yours, and when you finally get a handle on it, and it is silenced by the power of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus you are set free to really run the race with confidence and joy. Regardless of how difficult the course you are running might be. Joy will be yours as you press on in the faith.