It’s a Marathon, Not a Sprint

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2

*So then, with endurance, let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfecter. Hebrews 12:1-2a*

My spouse Jayne and I have quite different styles of preaching. I on the one hand, carefully schedule the writing of my sermon to begin on Monday morning, carefully research the biblical passage and think through what I will say. Jayne, on the other hand, writes her sermon on Saturday most of the time, while the house is quiet after I take my jaunt out to the golf course. I, being who I am, like to have the words before me as I mount the pulpit. She, being who she is, more often than not, has handwritten notes outlining the route she may or may not take through the sermon. I go from point A to point B – I am, after all, an INTJ, if you know the Myer Briggs scale. Jayne? She eventually reaches the Promised Land, but she often takes a more circuitous route getting there, she being an ISFP. She’s a wonderful preacher; we’re just different.

One of the things she tells me about my preaching – gentle criticism – is that I tend to use illustrations and examples from sports too much. Guilty as charged. Being aware of that, I try not to do that.

But in this passage from Hebrews, I can’t help myself. After all, the writer himself uses the world of sports here. The first half of the reading follows up on last week’s pantheon of faith’s superstars with some further examples of persons who exhibited faith in their lives. Then he culminates his teaching on faith with his final words of encouragement for us:

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We are asked to consider our faith journey through life as a long-distance race, one in which we will have to pace ourselves in order to finish. Life for most of us is like a marathon, not a hundred-meter dash.

Sports, as in many aspects of life today, is dominated by the need to win. Nobody remembers who finished second, onetime coach Leo Durocher observed. George Allen, who at one time coached the Washington Redskins (I hate that name) football team, fervently demanded of his players, “Winning is not the most important thing; it’s the only thing.” Our culture is obsessed with winning. We are equally obsessed with “winners.” How many ways do we prostrate ourselves before the “winners.” But there are some endeavors where the very contest itself shows that the real victory is finishing, not winning. I think perhaps the “mother of all endurance races” might very well be the “Ironman triathalon championship in Kona. You swim 2.4 miles, then you bicycle 112 miles, then you run a marathon, 26.2 miles. All under 17 hours! In my mind, just finishing one of those endurance contests is “winning.” I can’t even begin to imagine what it’s like to finish one leg of the Ironman, only to turn around and do two others!

I think this exposes the folly of our obsession with “winners” in that, while there are only two “winners” of the Ironman championship, one woman and one man, it would seem to me incredibly absurd to call someone who “merely” finished, even just before the 17-hour time limit, a “loser.” In fact, the “Ironman mantra” - “just finishing is a victory”— was inspired by Julie Moss, who in 1982 collapsed just yards from winning the women’s championship and literally crawled across the finish line!

If we want to consider this passage from Hebrews in terms of a race, I would have you think with me in terms of another kind of race, that is, a relay. When I ran high school track, the relay race was my favorite. I ran on the half-mile relay team. Besides being a competition of speed, it was a team effort as well. It was a choreographed race, in which the handing of the baton to the next runner meant almost as much as the speed of the individual runners. Many a race was lost because of a botched handoff of the baton.

The writer of Hebrews writes of a “great cloud of witnesses.” These witnesses are not only out there watching us run the race of life, but they are cheering, encouraging, and supporting us. One of my mentors, the great Carlyle Marney, once observed there are two groups of people who have gone before us. Some of them live in the basement of our lives. These are the ones who inhabit the dark, dank spaces in our souls. They are seated there, holding us back. We hear their negative voices, criticizing all that we do. They hold us back from fulfilling the potential God has placed within each of us.

* *You’ll never amount to anything.*
* *Why don’t you ever do things the way you’re supposed to?*
* *Who do you think you are anyway? Just stay where you’re supposed to.*
* *Why can’t you be like your sister?*
* *Don’t apply for that school, or job, or promotion; you’ll never make it.*

These are the people who inhabit the dark places of your life. They hold you back. They keep you from reaching the potential you truly have or to reach for the dreams or calling God has for you.

But, Marney insists, there are people in the balcony of your life. They are your cheerleaders. They are the ones who encourage you to reach for the stars. They are the ones who set an example for you and say, you can do it, too. But they also kick you in your okole when you don’t step up, telling you there’s more to you than you can see. These are the ones who sit in that great cloud of witnesses.

One who sits in that great cloud of witnesses for me is Toyo Nakamura. Toyo, whom many of you will remember, was a tireless advocate for justice. And she would be embarrassed as heck if she were sitting here listening to me talk about her. Instead she sits as one in that great cloud of witnesses, my balcony. I recall vividly during the time of the redress process from the Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ to Native Hawaiians. The redress plan, which called for about $3.5 million in cash and land to be redressed to specific Native Hawaiian groups, caused much controversy, which the redress committee anticipated. We decided to issue an open invitation to any and all Hawaii UCC churches to have members of the committee come and talk with them. One church let it be known that they were not happy and accepted our invitation. Toyo went with me and sat in the congregation. It was a brutal session. After it was over, we debriefed on the drive back to her home. As she was about to get out of the car, she looked over to me, gently smiled, and said quietly, “Wally, I am so glad that you’re my pastor.” With that, she got out, closed the car door, and walked up the steps to her home. I sat there with tears flowing from my eyes. It was what I needed in those moments. It buttressed my faith, that what we were doing was just and in accordance with God’s call to us to be a just peace church.

The race of life, of living out our faith, is challenging at best. Look at where it took Jesus. And if we are to run the race faithfully, we need all the strength that God can give to finish the race. Do you know that often-told story about the guy who falls off a cliff, only to grab on to a scrawny branch, which kept him from falling to his sure death. In his dire need, he calls out to God to save him. God responds, “I hear you, my son. I will save you.” He’s hanging there for dear life, when a passer-by has heard him and offers to help. “That’s okay,” he answers, “God will save me.” After a few minutes, his strength wanes and he is forced to let go, falling to his death. When he gets to heaven, he complains to God, “I thought you were going to save me?” “I tried, I sent someone to rescue you, but you didn’t take the help!”

In our journey through some of the most difficult parts of our lives, God forms that great cloud of witnesses, our balcony people to encourage, support, affirm us, and get us closer to the finish line. God has provided one of those clouds of witnesses for each of us. Perhaps you sit in someone else’s as well.

One final sport story. The once famous singer Bing Crosby used to host a golf tournament that would team a professional golfer with three amateur celebrity types at the famous Pebble Beach golf course which was situated on the spectacular beauty of Monterrey Bay in northern California. The tournament was mostly for fun and charity, although the professionals were playing for cash prizes. One of the regulars in the tournament was the actor Jack Lemmon, a mediocre golfer at best. One year, toward the end of the tournament, Lemmon hit an errant drive that went wildly to the right side of the golf course, bounced and barely trickled over the side of the cliff. When he and the others on his team got to where the shot had gone over, they located it on a tuft of grass that prevented it from going into the ocean. Locating the ball, he said to the others on his team, “I think I can hit it back onto the golf course.” By this time, they were so far out of the lead, it mattered little. The others said, “No, you may be able to hit it, but it’s so steep, you’ll lose your balance and fall.” So someone had the stupid idea to form a human chain, holding on to him as he swung, so that he wouldn’t fall over. It was totally illegal and wouldn’t have counted, but by that time it didn’t matter. I recalled watching that, laughing out loud, but thinking, isn’t that what Christian community is all about? People holding on to each other, allowing them to do what needs to be done, keeping them from falling.

In that great marathon we call life, we often find ourselves in those precarious places. May God provide for us those balcony people to hold on to us, encourage us, stay with us, all the way to the finish line. May we be those people to one another.