

"The Great Race"

Hebrews 12:1-11

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The Olympic Games have finally concluded and I have to admit that I'll be going through withdrawals for the next couple of weeks. I have always loved the Olympics, both summer and winter, but among all the venues, it has to be the track and field events I enjoy the most. I love to watch the races and see who will win the relays or the 100 or 200-meter dash and thus claim the coveted title of the world's fastest man or woman. From my earliest years right up to the present time, I've always been a huge fan of competitive sports although I have to confess that I've always considered myself a slightly above average player when it comes to actually playing them. I have to blame that on never being intense enough about any one sport to BECOME better than I am at it, that there have always been OTHER things I've felt MORE intense about such as my education and preparation for ministry. Hence, sports have always been more of a SOCIAL activity for me, a chance to enjoy my time with friends rather than a matter of having to dominate someone or win at all costs.

To be intense about something, to be gripped by an obsession so excessive that it eventually takes over and controls your entire thinking and being can be a sure recipe for disaster, ESPECIALLY when it gets in the way of personal relationships. In my first pastorate, I used to get together regularly with a group of men who liked to spend their lunch hour playing pickup basketball at the local Y. We'd create two even teams and then have a nice friendly game amongst ourselves until it was time for everyone to clean up and return to work. One particular person who was also a close friend of mine was SO intense about playing that he was always getting into arguments and even fights with the others. One day, it came to a head and the manager of the Y made the decision to ban him from the gym for good. After a couple of weeks, this friend called me up and asked if I'd write a letter on his behalf to get him reinstated. With some reluctance, I did and after assuring the manager of the gym that I'd been assured me there'd be no more problems, he was allowed to return. But what I have NOT said was that this friend of mine, who was always getting into arguments and fights until he was finally banned for unsportsmanlike behavior, happened to be the pastor of the largest Methodist church in town.

Usually Tom Clifton, who you know often fills the pulpit during my absence, and I set aside one day each week for golfing together. We spend most of the day laughing, discussing ministry in general, complimenting each other's shots, and offering encouragement when it's not going so well instead of turning it into a blood sport where we try to beat our opponent into submission. The secret is that neither of us keeps score and that probably accounts as to why we've become such good friends over the years. We actually compete against OURSELVES, trying to improve our shots by varying our iron selection, adjusting our grip, moving our stance, and altering our swing in order to cut down on the hooks and slices. When we've concluded our 18 holes, neither of us even knows who won because that's never been what's important- it's just a couple of friends enjoying our friendship and feeling blessed to play a game with the beautiful blue sky above our heads and God's gorgeous green earth below our feet.

Last week, I had breakfast with several friends and we were sharing baseball stories. One fellow mentioned the old Washington Senators and how awful they were for so many years. In fact, they were SO bad, an old saying about them went “Washington- first in war, first in peace, and last in the American League.” I mentioned to him how in an effort to improve the team, the owner hired as the team’s manager one of the greatest hitters the game had ever seen- Ted Williams. In fact, Williams--“the splendid splinter” as he was often referred to--once confessed that what drove him to BE the best player in the game was his dream of walking down the street and hearing people say, “See that man- there goes the greatest hitter who ever lived.” However, after only a couple of years managing, he quit in frustration, the reason being that the rest of the team never embraced the SAME striving for excellence, the SAME hunger to win that had driven HIM; they never had the same desire and intensity to be the best as HE possessed when HE was a player. Hence, the very thing that made him a baseball god was also the SAME quality that made him such a POOR manager- he never had the patience that it took to be a good teacher, someone who understood how to work with “mere mortals” ESPECIALLY young players still learning the game.

Believe it or not, sports also seemed to play a role in the life of the early church. The metaphor of a “race” is one frequently employed by New Testament writers, especially by St. Paul. In his epistle to the Corinthians, he writes:

*Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*

In his letter to his young protégée Timothy, he sums up his life:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*

And again, in his letter to the church at Philippi, he exhorts his brethren:

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, 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.*

The Epistle of Hebrews was written to Jews that had converted to Christianity who, as a result of the persecution they were experiencing, were threatening to return to their old faith. The author is trying to persuade them how Christ is INDEED the BETTER way, that he is the perfect fulfillment or completion of what God had begun long before in Abraham and Moses, in David and the major prophets. In the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, the writer has created a "Hall of Faith"- a litany of past heroes to serve as both an example and a stimulus to arouse faith and endurance. Then, in chapter 12, the reader’s eyes are directed to JESUS CHRIST himself as at once the inspiration of faith and its most glorious example. It says that if they remain

faithful, if they faint not but persevere to the end, they shall receive their reward in the same way that a victor's wreath is placed upon the head of the winner. But THIS reward will not be some fading garland, not some passing honor, but an IMPERISHABLE CROWN that leads to eternal glory.

When the writer of Hebrews says, "let us run with patience the race that is set before us," he is referring to the Olympic games of his OWN day. No occasion or event was held in higher esteem than these games, and gaining the victor's prize in the athletic contests at Olympia was one of the most cherished ambitions of any youth. They were celebrated every fifth year, and all persons of Hellenic blood, no matter what their nationality was or from what corner of the earth they came, were eligible to compete. Huge concourses of people filled the tiers around the great amphitheater while previous winners were given distinct places of honor from which to view the competitions.

The point being made here is that life is like a magnificent foot race; it is a grueling marathon that needs to be run with every bit of our intelligence and skill and patience. There are no short-cuts allowed, no spiritual steroids to give someone any kind of advantage. As the Olympic athletes trained for their race, so must WE as the people of God train for OURS; as they exercised their bodies, so must WE exercise OUR souls. In other words, we need a renewed intensity, a renewed commitment, a renewed love if we're ever going to complete the race set before US. The race course, LIKE LIFE ITSELF, is filled with many peaks and valleys and treacherous turns which, if we're not prepared for, we can soon be overwhelmed by its difficulties and challenges and find ourselves crippled by the side of the road instead.

Of course, many of us don't like to think of life as a race. Races are far too demanding, far too brutal. When I was in seminary, my roommate George was an accomplished tri-athlete, that is, he participated in races that involved running, swimming, and cycling- all three. I've never known anyone in my life with a greater sense of self-discipline and commitment to becoming the best than he had. His dedication eventually inspired ME to take up jogging because I wanted to develop that same kind of self-discipline in my OWN life. Thus, in the morning when he took off for his daily run, I took off after him, furiously trying to keep up. By the time he had finished his course and returned to the apartment, I would show up fifteen, twenty minutes later huffing and puffing, convinced I was about to die. Of course it didn't help that I smoked a pipe which I constantly inhaled twelve out of every 24 hours of the day. After a week of this self-abuse, I simply gave up. The bottom line was that it was just too much work and I didn't want to pay the price.

The fact is that to be a runner means to be competitive, that you have to be in constant training for the event. As any Olympian knows, months and years must be spent well in advance of the meet, straining every nerve in preparation. Every muscle must be strengthened and hardened; physical and mental stamina must be developed through constant exertion. As I watched the British Open a couple of weeks ago that was held in Troon, Scotland, I sat there thinking what a charmed life those golfers had, how they make big bucks simply hitting that little white ball around the course, enjoying the world's most beautiful scenery and the adoring gaze of the crowds; I was more than just a LITTLE envious of them. But what I DIDN'T want to think about were the hours upon hours they had spent to get to where they were now, that unless

they were willing to put in the time and energy that being a professional golfer demands, they wouldn't have gotten anywhere close to such a prestigious event. Those players are reaping the reward of years of hard work and financial sacrifice that few of us have EVER had to make.

I think most of us would much prefer to think of life more like a playground than a race course, as a casino to have fun in rather than an arena to prove oneself. At heart, most of us, Christian and non-Christian, tend to be hedonists- lovers of pleasure and ease than we are lovers of purpose and discipline and fortitude. Christ and the church then become just another option in our lives, something to participate in if the spirit moves us- which it doesn't very often. Too frequently, we look to Christ, not for guidance or continued strength but for the quick fix, for instant answers to life's problems. It seems that it's only when our backs are against the wall, when we find ourselves overwhelmed by trouble or tragedy of one sort or another, only THEN do we then call out and implore his help. Otherwise, we'd have no purpose for him.

Similarly, we look to his church, not to pay our vows before God, not to become enjoined to a community of faith where we might grow together and discover the meaning of such words as "grace" and "love." Many go to church on Sunday mornings seeking entertainment. If the service is too long or the sermon too boring, we decide to go somewhere else the following Sunday, that is, until we find one that fits our mood and suits our purposes. We go wondering what it is that WE can get out of it rather than what it is we can give TO GOD and to each other. There is no radical discipleship in our lives nor is there much devotion or commitment in our service- only a need to fill our boring lives with the latest sort of diversion or pleasure.

It is with FORTITUDE and PERSEVERANCE that we must run the race set before us if we are to eventually cross that finish line. Running is more than just a sport- it's a profound journey of self-discovery, resilience, and unwavering determination. Whether we're a seasoned athlete or embarking on our first race, every stride we take represents a testament to our dedication. And whether we want to compete or not, each of us is in it ALREADY and it becomes our opportunity to either succeed or to fail, to persevere to the end and thus claim our prize or to quit in mid-stride and never claim the victor's crown. The course we run is life itself with all its situations and surprises, with all the friends and relations that touch and influence us. Certainly, none of us can ever see or know precisely where the finish line is, but if we keep our eyes fastened on the race leader, if we concentrate on CHRIST HIMSELF--the one who goes before us and is called "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"--he will provide us with the guidance and direction we need to find our way and achieve our goal.

And one last thing, we can take solace in knowing that this leader, this model who trains and motivates us to get to the finish line is no Ted Williams, no harsh taskmaster who demands we're either "in it to win it" or get out! He doesn't expect us to be perfect as HE was but rather with patience and love, he takes his time working with each one of us, allowing the very best in us to be brought out. And should we falter, should we struggle and fall down under the weariness and weight of the strain, there is no criticism, no condemnation, no complaints that we're nothing but a bunch of quitters. Rather, he promises to help us onto his OWN shoulder so that we eventually DO finish the race with him. Hence, if our faith is directed toward him and ONLY him, he will ensure that we ultimately COMPLETE the course, that we run the WHOLE race where we will then enjoy the victors crown TOGETHER. Let us pray...

*Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, as we stand on the precipice of this challenging race we call the Christian life, I come before you seeking the strength and endurance required to conquer the miles ahead. Bless us with the unwavering energy to navigate through the trials and surmount any obstacles that may cross our path. Grant us the awareness that we possess capabilities far beyond our imagination, and may your divine strength flow through every fiber of our being as we embark on this journey. In Christ's name we pray, amen and amen.*