

"Watching the Runner Ahead of You"

Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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A few months ago I won a road race. I announced it here, and you applauded.

The truth, which I think I told you at the time, is that at 71 I am officially "old." AARP says so. Social Security says so. By the time I leave you next June, the United Methodist Church will say so, too, mandatory retirement being age 72.

Of course, many of you know I am already retired, which I did at age 64. The joke among family and friends is that I'm failing it gloriously. Or ingloriously, depending on with whom you speak.

But back to that race victory. It was a 5 kilometer race, 3.1 miles. As is often said in the racing community, it's all about who shows up on race day. On that race day, I was one of two runners in the 70-74 year old age group who showed up. I won.

As a younger and thinner man I have a more robust running history, including six marathons (26.2 miles), at least twice as many half-marathons (13.1 miles) and innumerable 10 kilometer and 5 kilometer races. I know Mark Davis was a collegiate racer as was my wife Carol, and James Levario has also raced in high school, all of them out-performing me by (pardon the pun) a mile. Connor Langdon, our testimony speaker today, is training for a marathon. As for me, Carol once said to me in that sweetest of "I-don't-want-to-hurt-you-but-you-really-have-to-know" voices: *"You know, you don't have a runner's body."* Sadly, it's true. But I keep running anyway.

What does this have to do with the Christian life or today's scripture?

First, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that we stand in a long line of saints. I'm not talking about folks who appear in stained glass windows. I'm talking about living, breathing, flawed but faithful followers of God. Many of the letters of the New Testament are addressed to *"the saints"* in a certain place: Ephesus, Philippi, Rome, Corinth and the like. You and I, not just folks from a dusty past, are the saints of God, as we just sang and will sing at the end of our worship.

Second, they and we have **been through** some stuff. The writer of Hebrews is specific: mocking, scourging, chains, imprisonment, stoned, sawn in

two, killed with the sword, going about destitute. Are you feeling better about **your** trials right now? They may not rise to the level described in Hebrews, but they are every bit as real and feel every bit as burdensome. It's good to know we're not alone.

Third, through faith they and we have also **overcome** some stuff. Again, the writer is specific: enforced justice, received promises, conquered kingdoms – or at least the Saturday crunch at LaBonne's – stopped lions, quenched fire, escaped death, won strength from weakness. We will hear today yet another testimony of how living our faith opens us to the transforming power of God: how we, too, overcome "stuff." Everyone has a story. Everyone has a burden. Those that triumph often do so because of their openness to what God can and do through them.

Fourth, despite all the experiences of those who went before us, the writer of Hebrews says that they did NOT receive what was promised because apart from US they were not made perfect, made complete. So we are not only in a long line of saints, we are the key to the past becoming the living present.

And then-and THEN-we get to the climax of this passage. Here it is:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Looking to Jesus. "Watching the runner ahead of you."

In that 5k race back in May, I watched the runner ahead of me. And, trust me, they were nearly ALL ahead of me! There were only 81 finishers. I finished 77.

But there was one that I could see in the distance ahead of me. And I knew that if I could just focus on her, and keep a steady pace trying to catch her, I knew I would finish stronger than if I just kept the pace that felt comfortable.

I can't tell you exactly how far ahead of me she was. Based on what I know of the race course, I'm guessing a quarter mile. I kept trying to catch up. I kept making goals that said, *"Let me see if I can catch her by the time she reaches that tree....that culvert....that stone wall."* Each time I failed. But each time I knew I was a bit closer.

Near the end of the course there is an “S” curve going uphill. I knew it well, having nearly been hit by a cyclist on it some years before. I said, *“If I can reach her by the ‘S’ curve, I’ve got the race.”* I didn’t. Up she went. Up I went behind her.

By now we were less than 100 yards from the finish. It was now or never. I surged. She surged. I surged. She surged. I surged: and crossed ahead of her by 15 seconds.

The point was not to come in ahead of her. I mean, honestly, what’s the difference between finishing 77th or 78th? The point was to be inspired to do my best while trying catch up to her as an example of what I could do. It actually might have been better, for this sermon, if I had NOT finished ahead of her.

For you see, isn’t this what it is to be a follower of Jesus? We are looking to him, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We following him, “watching the runner ahead of us,” running the race with perseverance, seeking to be the best version of ourselves, seeking to be the best version of the disciple he wants us to be. We are trying to be conformed more and more into his likeness, and that means drawing close to him in our hearts and minds and souls. It means prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness, as our membership vows state. It means seeking first HIS kingdom and HIS righteousness, and the other stuff will be added to us.

Here’s the best part: you don’t have to be a runner to “get” this. Ask our confirmands. They’ll tell you. It’s sanctifying grace, that love of God that so inspires us that we want to be like Jesus and serve like Jesus and love like Jesus. It’s the love in which we continue to grow, day after day, pursuing it because, well, what’s better than this love that is poured out for us on the cross, overcoming shame, and giving glory.

I don’t know if I’ll ever race anything longer than a 5K again. In fact, the day will come when I can’t even do that. But I know this: I’m going to keep pursuing Jesus until the day that the Lord calls me home. And I’m going to keep watching him lead us, you and me, and this congregation and its ministries, into love and service in his name. Amen.