



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Great Race
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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 sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

When I was in junior high and high school, I ran track for a couple of years. I wasn't fast enough for the 100 yard dash and I didn't like the longer races, so I settled into the middle and ran what was then called the 220 and the half mile. If you ran those races you were probably also on the 880 relay and the two-mile relay teams, and ever since that time the image of a relay race has felt like a pretty good metaphor for all sorts of other things in life.

In a relay race you have to do four things.

First, you have to run your leg of the race as hard as you can. Everyone's effort is important, and if you don't do your best the whole team will suffer.

The second thing you have to do, simple as it sounds, is not drop the baton. That might seem self-evident, but once in a while somebody actually manages to drop the thing you're all supposed to carry, and when that happens it's almost impossible to make up the lost time.

The third thing, and in some ways the most difficult, is that you have to pass the baton safely to the next runner on your team. That's hard to do when you're running full steam, and not surprisingly, it's when the baton is most likely to be dropped.

And then, finally, after you've passed the baton, you have to get off the track because, unless your team is running dead last, somebody else is right behind you, and you need to make way for those who come after you.

I imagine you can already see how a great deal of life is something like a relay race.

In the Greco-Roman world, where the Olympics were born and the New Testament was written, athletic contests were common and runners were everywhere, so it's no coincidence that the image of a race should show up in the Bible itself.

The life of faith for a devoted Christian – that is, for anyone who takes Jesus seriously and really wants to follow him – is in some ways a strenuous life, and in that respect it's a lot like running a race. Jesus says we are to love God with all our might, which is exactly how you run a race. If you don't run with all your might, you're not really in the race at all.

Some people call themselves Christians, but what they mean by Christianity is more like a casual stroll than a great race. They amble along at a leisurely pace, and nothing about their faith ever urges them to do

much more than they're already inclined to do, following their natural desires and interests. Lots of individuals, and sometimes whole congregations, conjure up some easy, comfortable religion, and they might even call it Christianity, though they're careful to keep the more challenging claims of Christ safely out of sight.

For Jesus, a consequence of loving God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength is loving your neighbor as yourself. The second part of his Great Commandment follows naturally from the first, the way apples grow on apple trees.

In fact, Jesus says you can tell a tree by its fruit. If it claims to be a fig tree but produces no figs, it's not much of a tree, and it might not be a fig tree at all. Among Jesus' less comforting observations (and not everything Jesus says is comforting), he reminds us how a fruit tree that bears no fruit gets chopped down and thrown away. It's only good for firewood. If he'd used a more athletic image, he could have said that a runner who doesn't run the race with all his strength is no runner at all, and he might even get cut from the team.

The New Testament has lots of images for the life of faith, and in the letter to the Hebrews it looks a lot like a relay race. The writer describes so many faithful people who have gone before, and he says to his own generation, in effect, "Now it's our turn":

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

Every congregation that's been around for a while has its founders and builders who spread the word and created a space to worship God and a community in which to serve God. They established the congregation not only for themselves but also for those who would come after them: for their own children and grandchildren, and for people they never knew, who would join later and become part of the same church family.

Each new generation depends on others to help them grow in faith, and we witness the continuity of this great race every time we baptize a baby. We remind ourselves that preachers and teachers and youth leaders and choir directors and volunteers in mission have helped us all to learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We've seen reflections of Christ in other Christians, and they've passed the baton to us, encouraging us to run our leg of the race well, as so many of them have already run.

In our consumer culture, it's easy for people, especially young people, to imagine that the church exists as a kind of service provider, to be there when they need it, without their having to contribute much towards sustaining the community themselves. But all the great images of the church in the Bible point to

something infinitely more dynamic, more exciting and engaging, than our consumer mentality might imagine.

The church is a body, the scripture says: the body of Christ in this world, animated by the Spirit of God. Every member of the body matters. The body nourishes and sustains each part, and every member's activity contributes to the health of the whole. The vitality of any congregation depends on the extent to which most of its members contribute much of their energy and resources to building up the body.

And the church lives to bring good news of God's love to the world around us, just as Christ came not to condemn the world, but to save it. That's why Jesus says that loving God means loving our neighbors too; and when somebody asks, "Who is my neighbor?" he tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, by way of saying that even those who we think are not like us are also among our neighbors. The neighborhood is much bigger than our own family and a few good friends. In this day of global awareness and interconnection, the neighborhood turns out to be virtually the entire world.

I've always felt a strong sense of responsibility to do some good in the world, in whatever way I can. That's just part of being a Christian and taking Christ seriously. But when my grandson was born six months ago, my already strong sense of responsibility was multiplied by a couple orders of magnitude.

I'm deeply concerned these days, when I look at our society and the state of our planet, that this

generation – all of us who are adults and make choices that affect the state of the world today – is not running our leg of the race as faithfully as we should.

For example, we keep experiencing more and more massive storms, and rising sea levels, and more extreme climate conditions; and yet, despite the almost unanimous warnings of climate scientists, whose predictions are generally coming true even faster than they expected, so many of us disregard what we see all around us and deny the need for action.

The front page of the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday said the economic toll of Hurricane Florence alone may near \$50 billion this year, and that's nowhere near last year's \$133 billion for Harvey and \$120 billion for Maria, and \$84 billion for Irma – not to mention all the personal suffering that comes from these storms in this country and around the world. I understand that for all kinds of reasons, including economic self-interest and tribal loyalties and ideological rigidities, some people have strong incentives to deny what everyone else can see so clearly. But our grandchildren will ask one day, when they're living with the consequences of our apathy and inaction, why we did not do more to care for the world we passed on to them.

Something similar is true with our economic self-centeredness, whereby we incur deeper and deeper national debt to pass on to our children and grandchildren, and the way we generate ever harsher hostilities that tear the fabric of society and undermine

the commitment to truth itself – all of which might make democracy more difficult to maintain a generation or two from now.

We're not running our leg of the great race with our best effort, and in some cases we're even dropping the baton in ways that will make it hard for those who come after us to make up for our lost time.

In a track meet, any given runner may participate in more than one race, and in our lives we all run several races as well. We care for our families, and try to give our children the best of what we've learned from our parents and grandparents. We pass along best practices in our careers, and improve on what we've inherited. In church we share the faith of our spiritual fathers and mothers with our own children, to the extent that we reflect the love of Christ in all that we say and do. And in the world around us, we're responsible to God for being good stewards of society and of the earth itself, for the sake of our children and our children's children for generations to come.

No matter which event we happen to be running in, the requirements of the race are largely the same. Run your part as hard as you can. Don't drop the baton. Pass the baton safely to whoever comes next. Then get off the track and make way for those who come after you.

In life, as in a track meet, we all participate in multiple events, and when we step away from one event we can turn our attention to focus on another.

Even in retirement there are plenty of events for seniors to run. Seniors may run a little slower than other people, but there are rewards to be found in every age, and none of us should ever give up until the whole meet is over and it's time to go home.

In a few months I hope to run in some other events, though I'm not sure what all of them will be. Figuring that out is part of what I look forward to. Meanwhile, I trust that the baton I've carried for a little while here will find its way into good hands, even as so many others are running such a good race of their own, in and through the church.

In all these things, you and I are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and they're sitting in the stands, cheering us on. They've finished their leg of the race and handed us the baton, and now they want to see us honor God by running our part with all the courage and strength and joy and faith that God has given us to run.

I hope we won't let them down.



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