



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Third Sunday After Epiphany

January 22, 2017

“Going the Distance”

(2 Timothy 4:7)

Rev. David K. Groth

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Collect of the Day: Almighty and everlasting God, mercifully look upon our infirmities and stretch forth the hand of Your majesty to heal and defend us; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

It takes no great skill or strength to begin a race or marathon. Anyone can do that. It's the middle and the end that really matters, when the joints ache and the feet are sore and the lungs are burning.

It takes no great skill to begin a new semester in college. Those first days are easy. Buy the books, become familiar with the syllabi, take a few notes. It's the last days of the semester that really count . . . when the papers are due and the exams looming.

It takes no great skill to begin to love. We call it "falling in love," sort of like tripping. It just happens of its own accord. The skill comes in keeping the marriage vibrant and strong and fresh over the decades in spite of all the little hurts and disappointments and maybe some big ones too.

To do anything with the same eagerness with which you start it is never easy. You have to roll up your sleeves and work at it. Or in Paul's terms, you have to fight the fight, finish the race, keep the faith. There's no other way.

In our text Paul is approaching the end of his life. He's old, and in some ways, very tired. He's been preaching and teaching and planting churches like Johnny Appleseed. But now he's sitting in a Roman jail, writing a young colleague named Timothy who is in the early and formative stages of his vocation.

The first of his letters to Timothy is formal and very general. The second letter is informal and very personal. It's a wonderful letter, and, in fact, the last known letter of Paul. It's a farewell letter. It's become clear to Paul he will soon be executed for his faith. So the letter has a sort of last will and testament feel to it in which Paul exhorts Timothy to remain faithful even while others are dropping out. "Be persistent and patient" he advises. Teach and preach the

Word faithfully, in opposition to false teachers, and in spite of rising systematic Roman persecution. Paul also asks his young friend to make a special effort to come see him before the onset of winter, and to bring along his coat, some scrolls and his notebook. He complains about a coppersmith with whom he must have had an argument and urges Timothy to handle him with care. “Beware of him” Paul says.

Near the end of the letter, Paul writes, “I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

Who of us, at the end of life, wouldn't give just about anything to be able to say that? “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

I'd like to zero in on finishing the race. Paul often compares the life of faith to running a race. For example in Hebrews 12, he writes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” That is, it's hard to run the race when you're weighed down with stuff.

Today American combat soldiers are carrying well over 100 pounds of gear. Everybody knows that's too much. It slows them down and leads to fatigue, injuries and even death. Therefore, the armed forces is doing everything it can to reduce the load soldiers are carrying. So also in the life of faith, it's hard to run well if you're bogged down by sin and its guilt. So lay aside the sin, Paul says, which means avoid it, ignore the temptations. But it also means give that heavy load of sin and guilt over to Jesus every week and let him wash you clean with his absolution. Let him handle that load of sin for you. It's too much for you. You cannot bear it yourself. Let him take it away from you.

The same is true for the temporal cares and concerns of life. Jesus taught they'll choke the life right out of you if you let them. You cannot carry them yourself. You cannot run the race well under all that weight. Take them to the Lord in prayer. Let him lift that yoke from your shoulders.

His shoulders are strong. Napoleon wrote that as he took off his uniform in preparation for bed, he would think of himself also taking off the cares and concerns of the day. Then he would get on his knees and pray, handing those cares and concerns over to the Lord for the night. The point is, none of us can expect to run a good race weighed down by sin and guilt and the cares of this life.

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul writes, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, 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. So I do not run aimlessly . . . I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (vv. 24-27).

I’m no runner. Dr. Paavola should really be preaching this sermon. He runs just about every day and has run 26 marathons in his life, four of those Boston marathons. Can you imagine? I picked his brain a little bit about the marathon mindset, and I think there are some things we can learn from runners, things Paul was alluding to already 2000 years ago.

First, Dr. Paavola paces himself. Ignoring what others are doing, he determines a pace that insures he can reach the goal. He writes, “Most marathoners have a GPS watch with them which tells them their exact pace each moment, and you aim for a consistent pace through the whole race.”

Isn’t that true for us as Christians as well? Consistency is the key. Consistency in worship. Consistency in prayer and Bible Study. Consistency in serving and giving. Running a race marked by fits and starts is probably not a good strategy. You cannot hope to run a good race by sprinting and then loitering. Consistency is the key.

The second thing Dr. Paavola thinks about is conserving energy for those last few miles. He said from mile 22 or 23 it takes all the effort he can muster just to

maintain pace. How disappointing it would be to run a good race 24 of 26 miles, and then suddenly lose heart, drop out and not cross the finish line. So also in life: one can be faithful for decades, but then near the end, when things get tough, if he drops out of the race, he's gained nothing. And if he loses his faith, he loses everything. He's disqualified from the prize. He's failed to cross the finish line. Remember what Paul wrote? "Let us run with endurance the race set before us." The end of life, like the end of a race, is always more difficult. Make sure you're not entering that last stretch without the spiritual resources you will need.

Dr. Paavola said some races were really tough. For example when it was pouring rain (as in Madison, 2004) or 89 degrees and muggy (as in Boston, 2012) or when you're seriously hurting (Milwaukee, 2009), when you know the race is going to be difficult, you just run it mile by mile. Then the goal is just to get to the next mile marker, and then the next one. Some marathons are hard, he said, but you just keep going one mile at a time.

That's probably good advice for us. When you're seriously hurting, or the elements seem against you . . . then thinking about the goal or finish line being so far away can be overwhelming and discouraging. You have to change your goals and run it mile by mile.

Addicts do this. They count the days they've been sober and tell themselves, one day at a time. I don't need to be worrying now about the Superbowl party in February and all the alcohol offered that day. I just need to get through this day. Then, as the days pile up, they can tell themselves: You don't want to throw all this away. And you can get through this day because you've already gotten through all these other days.

A friend of mine is a recovering alcoholic. I asked him about this last week and he said he's been sober for over 8 years. AA marks these milestones with coins. He has an 8 year coin somewhere, but the one that means most to him, the one that was in his pocket when I saw him, is this one, a 24 hour coin.

When you're seriously hurting, or the elements seem to be against you, remember Dr. Paavola's advice: "just keep going," one mile marker at a time, one day at a time.

Finally, it's no secret that for every one of us in this room there will come a time when the subject of running or even standing will be irrelevant. For everyone of us a day is coming when everything is failing, (kidneys, heart, lungs, memory). On that day, we will need to know the love of God is not failing. When our capacity to love him and follow him has faded, we'll need to know his capacity to love us and hold us and carry us has not and will not fade away.

On that day, just trust that he's with you, holding you, walking with you, and will in fact carry you over the finish line if he must. That mark incised on your forehead in your baptism, that mark promises the same. It reminds you of what the Lord has done to save you. It reminds you of his extraordinary faithfulness to you, long before you were ever able to be faithful to him. It reminds you that his love for us is far more important than any of our faltering attempts to love him.

Our deepest faith is that our God in Jesus Christ has fought the good fight for us against sin, death and the devil and has won. Jesus has already run the race and has already crossed the finish line and has graciously given you the prize.

Sometimes we assume people who know that and believe it should celebrate it like they just won the lottery. We should be throwing our arms around each other and laughing and dancing and toasting. But I don't think it works like that, not in this life or this world so broken by sin. We don't have to force ourselves to feel something we don't. It is enough to quietly trust in his love and promises. It is enough to know that his strength and faithfulness and love (and not ours) matters most. It is enough to know that when we can no longer run, we can rest in his embrace. And even on those dark days in the valley of the shadow of death, there is joy, a quiet, subdued joy, for sure, but real joy nonetheless,

because of God's abiding love for you and faithfulness to you.
Amen.

