

Running With Jesus

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

August 15, 2010

In my view chapter 11 and the first part of chapter 12 of the book of Hebrews is one of the most wonderful portions of religious verse in all of the scriptures. It's a masterful litany of Faith's Hall of Fame: By faith Abel & Enoch & Noah & Abraham & Sarah & Isaac & Jacob & Joseph & Moses & Moses' parents & the prostitute Rahab & Gideon & Barak & Samson & David & Samuel & the prophets – "Name after name is given of those faithful heroes who: 'by faith conquered kingdoms, by faith enforced justice, by faith received promises, by faith stopped the mouths of lions, by faith quenched raging fire, by faith escaped the edge of the sword, by faith won strength out of weakness, by faith became mighty in war, by faith put foreign armies to flight' (Hebrews 11:33-34)."¹ It really is quite a powerful and impressive litany for those who know their old testament.

Let me see if I can create the emotion – the feeling – this writer of Hebrews awakened in those who read his letter. The Pro Football Hall of Fame game was played in Canton, Ohio last Monday night. This year the game was between the Cincinnati Bengals and the Dallas Cowboys. Some unbelievable players were inducted into the hall this year – among them Jerry Rice, Emmett Smith, & Dick LaBeau.

When the game was played on Monday, not only were these three greats in the stands and along the sidelines but numerous past inductees into the Hall of Fame sat in the stands. Imagine being a player in the game and knowing that in the stands that day were the greats of the sport. Imagine looking into the stands and seeing not only Jimmy Brown & Ozzie Newsome & Paul Warfield – OK, a little partisanship – but also sensing the presence of the greats from other teams and some perhaps no longer even alive: Johnny Unitas, Jim Thorpe, Walter Payton, Dick Butkus, Ray Nitschke, George Halas, Tom Landry, Bill Walsh, Vince Lombardi and on and on we could go.

"These are the men to whom the game belonged (long) before (the current players) took the field. These are the players and coaches who set records and won championships. Trophies and awards are named after (some) of these guys – and now they're watching (the current players) play their game."² Can you imagine what it would mean to know that those were the guys in the stands cheering you on? Wouldn't you think it would cause a player to step up their game a little if they knew those guys were in the stands watching? Don't you think they'd want to try and do their best in memory – in honor – of what the heroes of the game did?

At the start of chapter 12 the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote what I think is one of the most memorable, inspiring, motivating transitional phrases in all of scripture when he wrote: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," and then he continues with, "let's throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

"Carlyle Marney called these witnesses our balcony people. He said that we all have people who sit in our balcony and cheer us on. People of all ages who enable us to run the race with perseverance and grace. We can't run the race alone. We find our way because there were (all those named by the author of Hebrews) and a multitude of others. But we run the race faithfully because of all those other nameless champions. It might be a mother, an aunt, a father, a cousin, or a scout leader. It might be a teacher or pastor or youth leader or neighbor or author of some book we have read. (The questions we might want to ask ourselves this morning include):

“Who sits in our balcony? Who cheers us on? Who is it that made it possible for us to keep on keeping on? (Or, we might want to reverse the order.) Whose balcony do we sit in? Whom do we cheer on? Who is it that counts on us and our faith and fidelity?”³ Who among us are going to be the ones sitting in Camila’s & Eliana’s & Claire’s & Michael’s balconies in the coming years?

I doubt I would shock anyone if I admitted to enjoying the Olympics. I’ve had the good fortune of being able to attend two: in Montreal in 1976 and in Atlanta in 1996. On the trip to Germany Dorothy and I and a dozen others from this church went on a few weeks ago our guide pointed out every time we went by it the ski jump in Innsbruck used in the 1976 winter games. I have to admit I don’t typically watch much of the winter games, but I watch as much of the summer games as possible. I also have to admit that I spend a lot more time watching the track and field events than any of the rest. In the ancient games, it was primarily what was contested and it’s that image that the author of the letter to the Hebrews was drawing upon in this portion of his letter.

Several years ago I came across a description of the scene that those in the early church probably could visualize when they read or heard these words from the author of the letter to them. I long ago lost the source of this description but I think it helps recreate the scene they could envision: “The nearby sea is like sapphire, the sky cloudless and of the deepest blue. The air is soft and the sunshine warm. In the distance are the graceful brown columns of a Greek temple. Along the highway running from the temple in the stadium are busts and tablets on which are inscribed the names of the winners in the Olympian Games in past years. Along the race course rise, tier upon tier, the marble seats of the stadium, crowded today with visitors from all parts of the Greek world who have come for the annual celebration of the games.

“Presently, there is the sharp, clear, commanding note of the herald’s trumpet calling the *runners to their marks*. A hush comes over the expectant crowd. From out of their training booths the racers come, trained to the moment, not an ounce of superfluous flesh sagging from their splendidly molded bodies, bronzed by the sunlight. At another blast from the trumpet announcing that the runners should *get set*, they take their place on the starting line, every muscle tense and set. Among the thousands who line the course not a word, not even a whisper, is heard. Suddenly there rings out the third blast on the trumpet, and the racers are off like an arrow, straining for the distant goal. Save for a loin cloth they are naked. For months they have trained for this race, abstaining from strong drink and rich foods and the pleasure of the world. The ambition of each racer’s life is to have his name inscribed on one of those memorial tablets and to have the laurel crown of victory placed on his brow. As they flash down the course, their friends on the marble seats, who happen to be from that part of Greece from which a particular runner comes, shout their encouragement to them.”⁴

With that image in our minds let us again hear the words those struggling to stay faithful read in this letter from one concerned about the possibility of their giving up the faith: “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation *The Message*: “Do you see what this means – all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running – and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!”⁵

Living a Christian life is not unlike running a race in the Olympics. Running with Jesus – living a Christian life - calls for self-denial, concentration, ambition, endurance. Olympic runners strive for a corruptible crown, a crown of leaves – yet they give their all. Surely running with Jesus deserves the same intensity – a similar striving with everything we have.

This first paragraph in the 12th chapter provides us a three-fold strategy, if you will, for running with Jesus – for successfully competing in the game of life as a Christian. In order for the baton to be successfully exchanged between those who have gone before and us the author of the letter to the Hebrews offers us some training tips.

First, he notes that it is necessary for us to “lay aside every weight.” Strip – take off those sweat pants – those warm-up clothes – those things that encumber us – those things that are not in and of themselves evil, but can be pretty weighty when the tough starts to happen around us.

Dave Scott is a legend in triathlon circles. For those of you who don’t know, the Ironman consists of a 2.5 mile swim, a 112 mile bike leg and a full marathon – 26 miles and 385 yards. When Scott turned 40 he still competed in the Hawaiian Ironman hoping he could once again out endure men two decades younger than he.

He started the marathon – after completing the swim and bike portions –in front. It really was a race between he and one younger running machine. He finished second thus silencing his critics. Now, Dave Scott’s secret is he knows how to train. His diet is so disciplined he washes off his cottage cheese to eliminate any unneeded fat – OK, a bit compulsive – but to an elite athlete any fat is a sin that clings too closely and has to come off.⁶ It might be the difference between winning and losing.

Our author of Hebrews coach notes that once the athlete is lean and light, then the issue is staying that way. The phrase he uses is “and the sin that clings so closely” which literally means “the easily surrounding sin.” Staying in top form means that we have to eliminate distractions. Sin does to our spirituality what junk food does to us nutritionally – it makes it difficult to realize our potential and to hang in there for the long haul. And that is what the Christian life is – what running with Jesus is – an endurance event.⁷

The third thing we need to keep in mind if we are going to run with Jesus is that we to need to train with him – after all, “he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” He has already had experience on the course of life. He has blazed a trail for us.⁸ If we want to make it, we will benefit from his experience and seek out his guidance and example.

If the words by the author of the letter to the Hebrews aren’t tough enough, let’s take a quick look at the ones from Jesus’ own lips in today’s Gospel lesson: “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.” (Luke 12:51-53)

Sometimes the words or actions of Jesus cause us to wonder? When we hear words like these we wonder about his appropriateness in our quiet worship service while we are preparing for our Sabbath rest? We’re a little more comfortable with the cuddly little baby and pastoral shepherd images and wonder where those are when he makes such a pronouncement? We are more comfortable when he’s talking about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field and healing the sick and blessing children. The Jesus we hear from here is the one who fell off

the popularity charts and got himself nailed to a cross, rather than the other. This Jesus is a lot harder to run with – a lot harder to follow – a lot harder to invite others to train with.

This Jesus demands that we take off our rose colored glasses of piety and note that he puts healing someone ahead of obeying the Sabbath law against work. The baby Jesus wasn't a threat to the social order. It's when he became a man that things got tough. And, it's when we take on running with the adult Jesus that our training and real living demands being really ready for all that life will send our way.

One preacher chose to meddle a bit more with our everyday living by providing some examples like:

- “How can we say to Emmanuel – God with us, born in a barn and crucified on a cross – that my child's education is more important than that of the kid in the ghetto?”
- “How do we say to the Christ who had nowhere to lay his head that it is more important for (us) to live in a (\$300,000) house than it is to provide public housing, and therefore, (we) will vote against a tax increase because its passage would mean cutting back on (my) vacation this year. In a world where we, who must diet to reduce our overweight while three-quarters of (the world's) population goes to bed hungry at night – how do we say to the Bread of Life, ‘I can't afford to tithe?’”⁹

There's no question that being concerned about social justice and human rights is a Christian tenant. Social justice is not some communist inspired weird idea, no matter how many times Glen Beck says it is or quotes from portions of the bible to make his unique form of Christianity popular and appealing to the masses. The concept of being concerned about our brothers and sisters who are disadvantaged/poor fills the pages of the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If we want to run with Jesus, we need to take training with him very seriously. It's the only way we will survive what the world will throw at us.

Let us pray.

1. David Kalas, Emphasis, July/August, 2007, p. 57.
2. Ibid., p. 52.
3. Ibid., p. 57.
4. Unknown.
5. Eugene Peterson, The Message (Colorado Springs, Colorado: NavPress, 1993), p. 474.
6. Kirk Webster, “No Pain, No Gain,” Big Lessons From Little-Known Leytters: Second Lesson Sermons for Sundays After Pentecost (Middle Thirde) Cycle C (www.sermonsuite.com).
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. W. Robert McClelland, “A Faith That Burns,” Fire in the Hole: Sermons for Pentecost (Middle Third) (www.sermonsuite.com).