

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Power of Perseverance"
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August 19, 2007

I've never been a big sports guy. That's not to say that I haven't done sports. I've dabbled in football, baseball, basketball, racquetball, handball, badminton, water polo, weight training and cross country running. Now when I say dabble, it means that I played these but not at a highly competitive level. In high school, we had to choose between sports and music, and I chose music. But what I learned about sport was that in both individual and team sports there is a training, a wisdom that comes with experience and also a sense of some things that should not be done for a long time in your life, such as contact sports. You need to take the long view on your sports.

In running, there are at least two types of runners: sprinters and long distance runners. The sprinters trained for bursts of power and great starts. The marathoners trained for consistency and being able to finish well. May I say before I get to the reasons from Hebrews 12 for talking about sports, that sprinters and marathoners are a metaphor for people in the church that Ken Callahan has used. Some of us start and initiate new things well, have great energy, but don't necessarily give out such high energy over many years. Others of us have given and given and given of our time and energy and presence in many ministries over a long time. I'm here to say that we need both the sprinters and the marathoners. And you know I'm not talking about how strong your legs are or the health condition of your feet. I want to encourage everyone here to take part in this place as they are able with the full gamut of their gifts and abilities.

Sports and church often compete for peoples' time and it is impossible to give oneself to everything. But as I have been encouraging everyone here in the last few weeks, take a look at your time, look back at your schedule, whether it is written down or not, and you will see where you have given your heart. Now I'm thinking of past Falls, not past Summers at this point. And choose again this Fall to make time for what you know is most important, for your sake, for your children's sake, for your grandchildren's sake.

Why talk about sports? Because the writer to the Hebrews finishes the Hall of Fame chapter by saying that all these amazing people who trusted a marvelous God are in the stands cheering you on in your choices to trust God or not. Now the Scripture doesn't say that great cloud of witnesses can see us, nor does it encourage us to look into the stands. Rather it says to fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He wrote our stories before we knew how to write. He will take us by the hand into the very place where God can be seen face to face. And he wants us to know Him and grow in relationship to Him. He wants us to first of all say "yes" to Him being in our lives. Then He wants to explain to us that there will be challenges to our trusting Him as we continue day by day in relationship to Him, just like any relationship, but this one being the central and key relationship in life.

If you go verse by verse through what we read in Hebrews, you'll see that the people of God faced an army in Egypt, they face a walled fortress in Jericho, they faced their parent's foreign gods in Gideon, Deborah and Barak faced outstanding odds and won, Samson fought invaders and his own addictions, Jephthah's mother was a sex trade worker, and his brothers kicked him out of the family, but later he had mighty victories and trusted God, David was the young boy out in the field taking care of the sheep, then he was the shepherd king, the musical warrior who knew that worship was the strength of his life because it kept Him close to God who meant everything to him, and Samuel who was a miracle child that grew up under a wicked priest Eli yet was faithful to God when so many others chose a different way and I too don't have the time to go into every story. But each one trusted God and amazing things happened to them and those who followed them. Even those who were tortured to death chose their commitment to God rather than giving up on Him. The Scripture says simply that they were commended for their faith, for the way they trusted God. What have you faced in terms of obstacles to your faith? Have you heard God's commendation of you for making it through? What obstacles do you still face?

Because the Scripture says these folks mentioned in Hebrews trusted God even though they did not receive what's available to us already in Jesus Christ. But we too have to make a decision as to whether we will be counted amongst those who call themselves followers of Christ, Christians. We too may come to a time where there is not only shame and guilt for being Christian, as is already the case in some circles, but whether we hold onto

God, more than employment, more than commerce, more than relationships. Today thousands of Christians die every year around the world as they seek to bring the gospel to every tribe and tongue, every place and every language. In fact, there is a Sunday that some churches recognize called the International Day of the Persecuted Church. Very little media coverage is given to this fact.

This was in part what Jesus is talking about in the gospel of Luke. You know Jesus believes and receives the ten commandment teaching of honouring your father and mother. So why would he say that there will be families of five where there will be three against two and two against three, sons against fathers and daughters against mothers, daughter in laws against mother in laws, etc. Why would he say such a thing? Because he knew that some would have to choose between having a relationship with Him, with Jesus when the father or mother or brother would say, "If you choose that relationship with Jesus, then you are no son of mine, no daughter of mine, no brother of mine, no sister of mine..." In many cultures today, if someone becomes a Christian, a funeral is held for that person, indicating that they are completely dead to the family, when in fact they are totally alive.

So Jesus warns us that if we think we will have an easy time of it and peace from every direction, be warned! There's a long race ahead of every believer, and that race is not optional. Of course, you can choose to drop out of the race. You can stop. So count the cost when you enter the race, fix your eyes on the one who called you into the race, realize that many have run the race before you and have completed it. Know that Jesus went through huge amounts of shame, disgrace, but scorned the shame and disgrace of the cross to win eternal life for us who didn't deserve it and couldn't achieve it.

You will encounter opposition to your faith, to your trust in God. There will be many obstacles to overcome in your personal race of faith. Some will be put there from the outside. Others will already be there on the inside. That's why the writer to the Hebrews encourages us to throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles us, just as a runner doesn't carry heavy weights during a race, nor does a runner run through high weeds or grass where he cannot see the ground. Because like sin, there may be a hole in the ground, unforgiveness or an addiction that throws him out of the race. So God tells us to run with perseverance. That word "perseverance" has elements of endurance, of patience, of faithfulness, of steadiness and a

sense that yes, I have trained, yes, I have the breath of life in me, I can run the race. So if you “hit the wall,” you’ll be able to keep on going...*Explanation of “hitting the wall” for long distance runners...*

But it is also is a sense of no matter what comes my way, I will stay faithful to God. I will not abandon my faith. I will choose to trust Him, even though everything fails and all is lost, God remains true. I remain His, and He remains mine. This is the grace to race.

I remember seeing many “bumps” in long distance racing in the Olympics. Both in the men’s and women’s competitions. I particularly remember one where a runner cut another runner off at the turn and both of them went down. I remember a marathoner being so exhausted and dehydrated that he was staggering into the stadium where he would finish or try to finish his last few hundred yards of the 26 mile race.

Perhaps you know those who have given up on Christianity and given up on the church. There are many causes for this. You know church people and church leaders who have been less than exemplary in their actions and their words. If I may stand in for these, I ask your forgiveness on their behalf. Some, many do not even know how they have caused others to stumble.

Some have come onto the race track as the dog came onto the Tour de France road and caused the cyclist to crash. The dog didn’t know any better, the cyclist couldn’t do anything about it. Some crashes are like that. Others are not.

But the race goes on. What will you do to increase your endurance of the bumps and obstacles in the race? How will you stay steady as others wobble and even give up? The power of perseverance is the mercy and grace of God that holds you every day, in everyway. How will you tap into that power? Again, by listening for God’s love, by experiencing first hand his warmth, his care, and his words of life.

Strangely, this race is as much a gift as life itself. God himself holds us on the track. All we do is agree with his gracious hands upon us and be thankful. Thankfulness is one large factor in persevering. But that’s a topic for another sermon, another day.

Let us pray.

