

Psalm 19:1-5
Philippians 3:12-16

Marathon Faith
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Have any of you run in a marathon? (none) Have any of you thought of running in a marathon? (one)

A quick web investigation of the three major US marathon races yielded the following results: The most recent, the New York City Marathon, had over 90,000 applicants; the oldest, the Boston Marathon, had just under 25,000 participants; and the Los Angeles had just over 20,000 participants. Now none of the websites gave the statistics of how many “finished” the marathon. They did, however, list the winners in the three main categories: men, women and wheelchair. However, with only these few “winners” it means that approximately 134,901 people failed to win. I am sure that most of these, though, did not have it as their goal to win, their goal was simply to finish!

As Paul shares with us his faith journey and encourages us on ours, I am confident that he sees our journey in faith not as a sprint, a quick run to the finish line, but as marathon. Paul, as he writes to the Church in Philippi, remarks that he has not yet finished the race but he keeps pressing on toward the finish. He is not there yet, the end is still in the distance but he keeps pressing forward in the race. Paul is striving to make forward progress, keeping his eye on the prize – heaven, even in the midst of his current situation. He is a prisoner of Rome. At best he is under house arrest, chained 24/7 to a Roman guard. He is limited in where he can travel and the people he can be in contact with. Yet, he is still in the race!

It would be easy for Paul to be distracted from the goal, the race. He could be wallowing in the situation in which he finds himself. He had dreams of going to Spain to minister and to visit again all the churches he has helped establish. He has an agenda that is being hampered by his current situation. He could be angry, disappointed and frustrated with the situation. However, he keeps looking ahead, keeping his eye on the prize before him, the crown of life.

We have a friend who has a job that I would never want. He is a high school driver’s education teacher! I asked him what the most frequent mistake young drivers make. He responded, “They fail to keep their eyes far enough ahead to where they are going.” He went on to say that they get distracted, turning the radio, etc. They do not focus on the goal before them. Paul says, he presses forward toward the prize/goal that is ours in Christ Jesus. The goal is ever before him.

As I read this passage I also note what Paul does NOT do. He does not dwell on or in the past. It would have been easy for him to do. He grew up under the teaching of the respected rabbi Gamaliel. He became a Pharisee of the first order, zealous beyond his years for the faith. Today, we would call him a radical fundamentalist. He persecuted the church. He had sent men, women and possibly

children to prison for embracing faith in Christ. He had destroyed lives, homes and families. He would have lain awake at night thinking about these people, seeing their faces in the dark as they were carried away. He had been out to destroy the church. He could have—but he does not. God has called, forgiven and redirected Paul. Paul has discovered the love and grace of God in Christ Jesus. He comes with a confidence that his hope is not in the past but in what Christ accomplished on the cross and it to this his faith points. He presses forward, his faith marathon not yet finished.

Paul also acknowledges that he has not done this on his own. Even his past history in Judaism has prepared him for these hours. He has learned the history of his people well, he knows their Scriptures. He has the ability to use the Sacred text to bring people into faith in Christ. It has prepared him for the ministry he is now involved in. He has found others to help and assist him. He relies on them, now more than ever. This is not a journey, a race we are required to do alone. Others and Christ walk it with us, we press forward to our goal.

Paul's advice to us is that we hold fast to what we have already accomplished. Remembering that this journey is not a sprint but a marathon, we are to keep our eyes on the goal that is before us. We must keep the vision before us. Now, we are all in different places in the race. Some may be just starting, others in the middle and still others nearing the end—but we are in the race. I remember listening to a physical therapist talk to a patient. She daily reminded him of the final goal of their sessions together, that he would walk again. However, as she reminded him of that final goal she also would encourage him and remind him of their daily goal—one or two more steps than yesterday. He would not reach his goal in one or two days – but each day, each new step would bring him closer.

Now any trainer will tell you that if you want to run a marathon you don't go out on the first day and try to do the 26.2 miles! You probably won't make it and will quit discouraged. What they will advise you to do is to take it a little at a time. Start out with maybe a half-mile goal and gradually increase that goal until you reach the 26.2 miles. It will not happen overnight. It will take time, determination and training but they will be there to support you, encourage you and push you on. We have come this far by faith, let's keep running the race before us.

We come with thanksgiving for the progress that we have already made, even if it's only the first step, the decision to run the race. Each day is another victory. Paul's mobility is limited. There are no private times, conversations. Everything Paul does is seen or heard by another, the Roman guard he is chained to. Yet, Paul is able to say, "I press on." We come with thanksgiving for the steps already taken and with faith for the journey that lies ahead.

I appreciate the way the New Revised Standard Version translates the 12th verse of our text: “*but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*” This is Paul’s journey. As we have said earlier we are all on different places in our journey. We struggle at different places and with different issues in our faith journey. Each of the marathons that I spoke about at the beginning has a place where the runners often “hit the wall.” For the Boston Marathon (the one I know best) there is “heartbreak hill”. Now this is not a big hill, it rises gently only ½ a mile but does it at the point in the race where the runners are at their most vulnerable. It is here that supporters gather to cheer the runners on—knowing that many end the race at this point.

Each of us has a different “heartbreak hill.” It is the place where we want to drop out of the race. Where we feel we cannot go on any longer and we want to yell, “Stop the world, I want to get off.” Paul says when we get to this point we need to remember that “*Christ has made us his own.*” Christ has made us his. He stands cheering us on, encouraging us to keep “pressing on”. In two weeks we will again enter the Advent season, the time of year when we are reminded of God coming in Christ. Christ came that we might know God and know life abundantly. This is the joy Paul celebrates in his Philippian letter...leaving that which is behind we move forward with God to the goal that is before us. We live a marathon faith.

Do any of you remember the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City? A wonderful example comes from the marathon of 1968. It was about 7 p.m. on October 20, 1968. At the Olympic Stadium it was beginning to get dark and the cool of the evening was setting in. The last of the marathon runners were being assisted at first-aid stations and people were heading for home. Mamo Waldi of Ethiopia had crossed the finish line much earlier looking as strong as when he had started the race. As the last few spectators were leaving they heard sirens and whistles through the gate entering the stadium. Their attention turned to the gate and they saw a sole figure, wearing the colors of Tanzania, limping into the stadium. He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. John Steven Aquari had fallen early in the race and had badly injured his leg. Now bandaged and bloody it was all he could do to limp his way around the final lap of the track and finish the race.

The sparse crowd stood and applauded as he completed the final lap.

When he finally crossed the finish line, one man dared ask him the question that all were thinking, “You are badly injured. Why didn’t you quit?” Aquari, with a quiet dignity, replied, “**My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to finish.**”