

“While We Run This Race”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
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Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. 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 11:39-12:2)

One of my favorite memories of my grade school years comes from what is called in Korean “운동회.” In English, it means “Athletic Meet.” Once a year, usually in the Fall, when the weather becomes cooler and the year’s crops have been harvested, the entire school gathered together on the school ground for a full day of running, jumping, throwing, and playing all different kinds of games. I know, which student would not like something that gets him or her out of a classroom for a full day? Any excuse is good excuse, right? I have no intention to deny that, but I don’t think that that was the only reason. On that day, we all had some game to play or race to run. And, at the end of the day, we all received a prize or two. We were all part of something big and fun, which also involved a great picnic. You remember? This event was held toward the end of the harvest season, when food was plentiful. Our moms and dads, aunts and uncles would prepare a special treat and join us on the school ground.

Our first lesson tells us that our life’s journey is something like that – one big athletic meet. It says that we are all athletes, especially runners. It is not just us, the believers and worshipers here and now, but those of the ancient times and those yet to be born, those in the West and those in the East, those in the North and those in the South. The Bible tells us that we all are runners in one big race. No one’s race is complete by itself. We are in a race, staggered over time, that no one can finish until the last of the participants has entered. Verse 40 of the Hebrews passage reads, in Eugene Peterson’s Message translation, “*God had a better plan for us: that their faith (which means the faith of those who have gone before us) and our faith would come together to make one completed whole, their lives of faith not complete apart from ours.*” The author, then, pictures a cloud of witnesses assembled along the race course. Having finished their own leg, our ancestors of faith are watching the race that still continues. They are cheering for those still running, with all their might, with all their heart. What a moving, touching, and grandiose image!

I, myself, am not a runner. I love sports in general. But running has never been my forte. I was not particularly good at running, and I did not like it, either. I found chasing or kicking or hitting a ball a lot more exciting than just running for no purpose. I never imagined myself at track meets, jumping up and down and yelling. Believe it or not, that is what I do now, as often as I can.

My youngest son started to run about four years ago as an eighth grader at Julian Middle School. Then the next year, as a high school freshman, he was a varsity runner for his school’s cross-country team. Then, the following year, he was one of the eight Track and Field All State Athletes from Oak Park River Forest High School. This summer, he had this great opportunity of training with some aspiring young Ethiopian athletes at a running camp in Addis Ababa. Yes, I am

a proud mother of a runner. I am proud of his achievements, of course, but more importantly, I am proud of the discipline and determination, perseverance and passion he has developed and exhibited through his running career. I guess you need some talent to be successful in whatever you do. But I do not think that what made my son a good runner is not just that – talent. My son's life revolves around running. Training is one of the top priorities in his daily schedule, no matter what. He even pays attention to his diet. And he spends much time reading and thinking about running. I had thought that running was a kind of dumb and boring sport which everybody could perform well without too much effort, but that seems to not be the case.

Well, that is what the Hebrew tells us about our race of life and faith. After pointing out that we all are part of one big race, after reminding us of the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and cheering us on, the Hebrews passage continues, *“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.”* (12:1)

First of all, we are told to lay aside every weight and run light. Some of you may remember Abebe Bikila, who won the 1960 Olympic marathon in Rome running with his bare feet. In modern day competitive running, virtually all athletes use running shoes. But did you know that racing shoes are becoming lighter and lighter? From my own experience, I can tell that the cost of a pair of racing shoes is reversely proportionate to their weight - the lighter, the more expensive. Extra weight is such an issue in running. Our passage tells us that the same is true for our race of faith. We'd better strip down. We'd better rid ourselves of any burdensome weights.

Let us make a moment and imagine ourselves in a stadium. We are standing on the starting line, ready to take our turn at running the race. Now, let us make a pause and take a hard and serious look at ourselves. What are we wearing? What are we carrying? Are we not loaded with unnecessary baggage that weighs us down: guilt, illusions, addictions, ego needs, pride, ambition, greed, heartaches, grudges, bitterness? Let us think about how all these burdensome weights will affect our race. We do not really need them, do we? We could put them down and lighten our load, could we not? Think about how much easier it will be for us to run the race, if we do not have to carry them with us, lap after lap, mile after mile.

We are mistaken if we think that we can run this race while carrying all this baggage with us. We are mistaken if we think that our strength, our energy, and our help come from what we carry. We are mistaken if we think that our ambition makes us stronger or our anger gives us energy. No way! It's not by our own power, by our own strength, that we endure or accomplish or even live. We do so only by God's power, in God's grace.

The Hebrews passage instructs us that, after laying aside whatever weighs us down, we are to run the race set before us with perseverance, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Yes, Jesus both began and finished this race we are in. Yes, Jesus has set the pace and cleared the finish line of the race we are in. Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, Jesus the rock of all ages, Jesus the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Living Water, Jesus the Bread of Life, Jesus the Great Shepherd, is not only our companion and coach as we race. But, he is our finish line, he is our ultimate goal, he is our destination. That is why and how we can persevere in this race. We do not run this race alone. We do not run this race in vain.

Let us warm up, train, and get suited up, as we run this race. Let us be clear about what we carry, as we run this race. And let us persevere, as we run this race, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Until that day, when all our running will be gathered into as a whole and all will rejoice in the heaven's harvest picnic, let us keep on running, by faith, aware of God's grace every moment, grateful for the gift of the great cloud of witnesses. Amen.