

“Going the Distance”

Text: Isaiah 40: 25-31; Hebrews 12: 1-4

Rev. Barbara A. Frey

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Ever been in a race? Sure, you’ve been. Everyday of your life you’re in a race that has a start and a finish. Now, of course, we know that there are many kinds of races. Some come quickly to our mind such as the Olympics, marathons

What do all races have in common? Yes, all races have a start and finish, and involve Going the distance. Today I would like to identify and focus on 3 spiritual qualities that can make a difference in a race – any kind of race – even in the so-called rat race of life. Peace (from within our core being), Prayer and Perseverance. There’s another spiritual quality that when added with the other 3, can make all the difference in the race – in life. And that is community. This story is dedicated to all of you – my faith community who has been there for me!

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, ‘This will make it better.’ Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for ten minutes. People who were there are still telling the story. Why?

Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters in this life is more than winning for yourself. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing yourself down and changing your course. (Homiletics online)

On New Year’s Day I challenged myself and all of us to discover our identity as “People of the Light.” Today, since we’re using the metaphor of a Race, let’s change “People of the Light” to “Bearers of the Torch.” In January, as we thought about the metaphor of the light shining in the darkness, and the darkness not overcoming it, I ended with a story that I would like to begin with today because it ties in with the first spiritual quality that can make a difference in a race: **Peace.**

Alexander Papaderos, knows about personal peace and a compassionate peace. He is the respected and renowned founder of an institute for peace in Greece. He shares this insight...

Papaderos said, ‘When I was a small child during the war, we were poor and lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place I kept one, the largest piece By scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could

reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine – in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became [mature], I grew to understand that this was a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light truth, understanding, knowledge – is there, and it will shine in many dark places only if I reflect it.’

‘I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of the world ... and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise.’ (Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It* (New York: Villard Books, 1989). pp. 176-77).

We all know persons like this who have an inner peace – a way of being that is a comfort just to be in their presence, who can help us take deep refreshing breaths, who can relieve the stress and tension, who can help to restore our strength. Perhaps, in the pew, sitting near to you, is such a person. When we find our own peace within, the journey is easier to manage.

Prayer is another spiritual quality that can make a difference in a race. Prayer can be a comfort, especially when in the quiet and solitude, you can feel a divine presence, who can help you take deep refreshing breaths, who can relieve the stress and tension, who can help to restore your strength.

The prophet Isaiah had a profound message for the people of Judah in exile from their homeland, living as captives in Babylonia who needed encouragement and reassurance that God had not forgotten them. Isaiah’s images of an eagle mounting an air current to take to the heavens, and a runner gathering new strength for a final push were concrete and meaningful. The energy that he describes is not boundless vigor, but energy that results from “waiting on the Lord”, energy that supports the ability to carry on. Isaiah’s runner is not a runner who’s suddenly able to spurt to the finish line with boundless energy like someone with a Red Bull addiction, but is rather a steady practitioner of the art of life who simply runs – without weariness.

With what you have – God and Christ on your side, you can be energized to reflect light into the dark places of the world ... and change some things in some people, and even change some things in your own life.

Another spiritual quality that can make a difference in a race is **Perseverance**.

The lesson from Hebrews states this, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” I love this metaphor of the race. I love how it expresses a profound spiritual truth in such an earthy way. Running, and its counterparts/ walking, bicycling, hiking, especially in Connecticut in the humidity of summer, make you hot and sweaty. Describing spirituality as a form of running reminds us that our souls are connected to our bodies. It reminds us that spirituality can be very physical.

The story of Terry Hitchcock intersected my life this week as I prepared the sermon. In the local Library as I looked through the rental DVD's, I spotted the inspirational documentary "My Run," based on a true story. Terry became a single parent for his three young children when his wife died from cancer. Terry felt like he lost everything and was very depressed but he kept himself anchored enough to take care of his kids or at least fake it well. He finally came to a place in his life when he began to work through things and to reconnect with his children. He found a new perspective about happiness and about treasuring every moment because time waits for no one. Terry discovered that happiness is a journey, not a destination.

The race Terry ran was a marathon/26.2 miles each day for 75 days. He was not a competitive runner, but he felt a call – a strong need to run and to take up the cause of single parent families, to tell his story and give a voice to the voiceless. For him, the race was not just physical, but mental and spiritual too. His faith helped him because a lot of the time he really hurt and was tired and didn't know how he could go one step more. He said there were not many good days, just good moments. Terry touched and inspired many who needed to see and hear that ordinary persons can do extraordinary things and how these ordinary persons can live their lives and survive and move forward. Terry measured his success by simply completing the marathon – going the distance.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews also isn't talking about a competitive race. We are called to run the race called life with perseverance, but the point is not to beat everyone else. We have to run our own race with perseverance. It doesn't matter if some people are faster than we are. Our task is to keep running at our own pace.

This journey of life can be exhausting and sapping, for there's no shortage of things that wear us down. For starters, there are simply the demands of each day. But there are larger issues that sap our energy, too. If we pay attention to the news, we can hardly keep a bounce in our step. Closer to home, there is stuff that undermines our vigor as well. We have problems at work, difficulties in our relationships, worries about our children, unwelcome interruptions in our plans and unexpected health difficulties.

Yes, life can wear us down and our spiritual journey can hurt. We, of course, are not in the sandals of the exiles in Babylon nor of the persecuted Christians when Hebrews was written, but we experience plenty of pain in our own ways. The question for them, and the question for virtually all of us at some point or another, is how do we handle the pain? Can we keep going? Hebrews talks about people who answered yes. The people of Israel passed through the Red Sea. They conquered Jericho. Rahab survived. Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets all accomplished great things, despite the problems they faced.

And they all did it by faith. Finally that is what we have to do too when it's hard. We have to do it by faith.

As "People of the Light" /"Bearers of the Torch." Let's remember the 3 spiritual qualities that can make a difference in a race---any kind of race---even in the so-called rat race of life. Peace (the inner contentment kind), Prayer and Perseverance. With that mix in lots of faith and a supportive network.

As “People of the Light” /“Bearers of the Torch.” A story to carry home.....In the original Olympic games in ancient Greece, the greatest event was a race up and down mountains. Speed wasn't the most important issue, because the runner ran the race with a flaming torch. The winner was not necessarily the first person to reach the finish line. It was the person who crossed the line with the flame still burning. From this story you might take this thought with you: We need to run the race in such a way that we don't put out the flame. We might be later in crossing the line, not only because we are protecting our own flame but also... because we are lighting the torches of others whose flames have gone out. Winning, as someone has said, is about going the distance and finishing well, not just finishing first.

“We Are Walking in the Light of God, “We Are Walking in the Light of God.” This spirited African song embodies today's message. Today is our blessed opportunity to strengthen and deepen our efforts to get life right, both our journey of faith with God, and the daily walk we make with our fellow travelers.

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