

Hebrews 11:29-12:3
With Perseverance and Heart
Hope Christian Reformed Church
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How many of you are runners?

How many of you are long-distance runners: cross country, or marathons?

How many of you aren't runners at all?

For those of us who *aren't* runners, what is it about running that keeps us from doing it?

For me, the list includes:

- shortness of breath (that is, lack of physical fitnesses),
- aching muscles,
- running in the heat and humidity,
- running in the cold,
- running in the wind,
- running in the rain,
- rigorous discipline,
- determination to stick with this because it's so important, etc. (you get the idea...).

For those of you who *are* runners, what is it about running that keeps you running?

I have friends who run, and some of the things they love about running are the exact same things I hate:

- They have to push their bodies, through heavy breathing and aching muscles.

- They have to adapt to heat, cold, humidity, rain, wind, snow.

- It requires rigorous discipline.

And – tell me if I've learned this right – runners have a sense that training for and finishing the race matters. It's important.

Two of my friends are marathon runners. One ran in the Chicago Marathon, and the other ran in the Boston Marathon. And, over the course of their training, both of them got injured, not too long before they were supposed to run their races. (Now, if I were in their shoes, I'd be thinking, “Whew; now I've got an excuse; I can gracefully bow out of this intensely demanding race without being a quitter.)

But my friends wouldn't quit! They would rather run injured! So they did! They had this sense that they had been working too hard – they had invested too much – to give up now. And it turns out that, way back when they began their training, they anticipated that this might happen.

But for them, running the race was important.

And finishing the race mattered.

- Part of it had to do with sticking with the goals they'd set.

- And part of it – very deeply rooted, I suspect – had to do with their identity.

- They *are* runners.

- So they run.

- And they run with everything they've got.

The writer of Hebrews also tells his readers: Run, hard, with everything you've got.

He tells his readers: There is a race, and there's a course set out for you.

He tells them: It's urgent that you run, and it matters that you run hard.

He tells them: This requires determination and focus.

He tells his readers: Throw off everything that weighs you down and tangles you up.

Run the course with perseverance.

Fix your eyes on Jesus, so that you won't grow weary and lose heart.

See, the readers of this letter were growing weary.

And the writer fears that they're in danger of not only losing heart, but also losing faith.¹

Now, we don't know much about who the writer of this letter is, or who his readers are. The best we can figure out from the context is that the writer is a pastor who knows – or at least knows about - this congregation, and is concerned about their well-being.

Clues throughout the letter give us an idea of what the church was dealing with²:

Not long after they came to know Christ, they experienced persecution, or at least harassment, for their faith.

In chapter 10, the writer refers to the “earlier days” when they stood their ground “in the face of suffering.” They were “publicly exposed to insult and persecution”; they sympathized with those who were thrown into prison, and they even “joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property” (10:32-34).

In chapter 12 (verse 4), the writer acknowledges that they haven't yet “resisted to the point of shedding [their] blood,” but the fact that martyrdom is even mentioned means that it is a possibility, and may well become a reality in the coming days.

In the early days, when these Christians first came to believe, their faith was strong. It was demonstrated through their love, and work, and help for the people of God (6:10). They suffered along with those who were thrown into prison, and shared their possessions (10:34).

But now, the writer says, their growth is stunted and they've become slow to learn. They should be mature by now, but they're not (5:11-6:1). Instead, this pastor-writer fears that the church is in danger of falling back to their old ways, in the days before they came to know Jesus. They're in danger of letting go of their commitment to follow Jesus hard, with all their heart. In the face of persecution and possible martyrdom, they're in danger of giving up their faith altogether.

Circumstances hindered them and weighed them down.

Sin tangled them up.

1 Paul J. Achtemeier, *Introducing the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2001, p. 473.

2 *Introducing the New Testament*, p. 470.

They were growing weary and losing heart.

And even though our circumstances here are different, I wonder if we're in danger of doing the same.

Like these early Christians, do we really understand that following Jesus *is* a race, which requires discipline, and determination, and – really – our very selves? When we sign up to join a church, or make profession of faith, or baptize our babies, do we realize that it means signing up for a long road, and that it requires endurance, and that – at times – it's going to hurt? Do we realize that there are obstacles and dangers along the way? Do we know that we're called to go out and run...for a long time...along a course that's difficult...and that our muscles will ache and we'll want to give up...and that there'll be so many reasons along the way to say, “This is *not* worth the pain of running”?

Sometimes we forget.

Sometimes, we can concern ourselves more with the “religion” of “Christianity” than with knowing Jesus, and following him, and doing what he says – even if it requires a long and sometimes difficult obedience. Sometimes we forget that there's a race involved at all.

Or we live our lives the way *we* want to, and fit following Jesus into the course that we've already set up for ourselves.

We can think that the Christian life isn't that big deal, nothing's really at stake, and we can squeeze it into everything else that we already have in place.

We forget how important running is.

Our pastor here in Hebrews says that there are things that hinder us – that there are obstacles along the way that'll trip us up.

Like these early Christians, it *could* be persecution. There are some people who will hate you because of Jesus. They may label you, and judge you, and make this race you're running really hard.

Sometimes, though, we may be hindered by the fact that things are going really well. So well that we can pretty much run on autopilot, soak up all the good things coming our way, and not see why anybody would want to take up training for a run that's long and hard.

Sometimes we're hindered by uncertainty about decisions we need to make today, or tomorrow...and our preoccupations keep us from seeing the bigger picture, and the goal.

And doesn't sin so easily entangle?

Ungratefulness?

Entitlement?

Disobedience?

Selfishness?

Lack of faith? Lack of trust?

Trying to run our own race, our own way?

Looking to ourselves – or anything else – rather than Jesus?

See, when we forget there's a race, we can get tripped up by circumstances, and tangled up in sin. We can grow weary, and lose heart. We lose sight of where we're going and what it's all about. And then, why would we keep running at all?

And you know what? If this race was really all up to us, a lot of us here probably really would drop out. A number of us might not have even made it this far – might not have even made it *here* this morning.

It's so hard to keep running.
And it's so easy to grow weary and lose heart.

How is it that we can run with perseverance, and with courage and passion?

One thing: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.”
Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Not anybody – or anything – else.

Our focus passage this morning follows a whole chapter about people who lived their lives by faith. People often refer to chapter 11 as the “Faith Hall of Fame.” But we're not supposed to fix our eyes on *them*, and they're not even mentioned here as an example we're supposed to follow.

Our pastor here this morning says that they are merely a great cloud of witnesses. Witnesses don't draw attention to themselves; they point away from themselves to something else. They're not pointing to the race *they* each ran; they're pointing to the one who they ran for. They're pointing to the one who they ran *to*.

And they had struggles, and temptations, and sufferings on the road, too. They may have wanted to give up, too. They bear witness to Jesus. They bear witness to the one who set their course. And they bear witness to the one who led *each* of them to the finish line.

How do you keep running this race? Fix your eyes on Jesus.

He is the Author of our faith.
Our faith has its beginning in him.
If ever in our lives we believed, it's because of Jesus.
We don't produce it from within ourselves. *He's* the one who puts faith in us.

And he's the Pioneer of our faith.
It turns out, the course we're called to run isn't one we need to clear ourselves as we go. It's not for us to wander around and try to figure out the way.
As Pioneer of our faith, Jesus has gone ahead of us.
“Jesus has blazed a trail that his brothers and sisters are to follow.”³
He cleared a path that we could not have opened ourselves.

So the race we run is not our own. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We run where he's run. Jesus' course went through suffering, and obedience, and faith, and love, and joy.
And that's our course, too.

³ *Introducing the New Testament*, p. 482.

Jesus' course went through service, and mercy, and dependence on the Father, and guidance from the Spirit...and so does ours.

Jesus' course went through birth, and baptism, and table, and picking up a cross, and really dying, and actually, literally rising from the dead...

...and as Christians – little Christs – that's the path that he leads us on, too. (Don't you recognize some of those markers? Haven't you already crossed some of them?)

And just as surely as we *have* passed some of those markers, so he'll lead us through the rest, to the very end.

Because he's not only the Author of our faith (the Pioneer)...he's also the *Perfecter* of our faith.

The one who sets our course is the one who leads us to the goal.

We don't begin except by him...and we don't cross the finish line except by him.

And listen to this, people of God: he *always* finishes what he starts.

The one who *began* a good work in you *will* carry it on to completion.

So...are you worried about and burdened by many things?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He *will* provide what you need.

Are you hindered or cramped or tripped up or barely hobbling along?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. When you need it he'll carry you, then teach you how to walk – and run – again.

Are you tripping and all tangled up in regret, and mistakes, and head deeper and deeper into sin?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. The life he offers is better. (And the only way to life and joy.)

Are you weary? Have you grown faint along the way?

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He'll not only lead you in this race, but he'll also refresh you.

He is the Author, and the Pioneer, and the Perfecter of our faith.

Even of *your* faith.

You don't have to summon up your own strength, because *he* is the one who'll provide it.

You don't have to clear your own way, because he'll lead you step by step, marker by marker.

Even this morning, right to the table.

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

He will lead us on, every step of the way.

Put your hope in him.

Amen?

Thanks be to God!