

1.28.2024 Septuagesima (1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

Fr. Richard Cecil, an 18th century Anglican priest, once said that some people choose to live their spiritual lives by the Eastern proverb, which states, it is better to walk than to run, better to stand than to walk, better to sit than to stand, and better to lie down than to sit, but such is not the teaching of the Gospel. It is a good thing to be walking in the ways of God. It is far better to be running. You might even say, running for your life, making real and visible progress, growing day by day in knowledge, wisdom, and love for God and neighbor.

Every Christian is called to run, and not simply to run, but to run toward the kingdom of God in a very particular way. That's one message we find in the Epistle this morning, in which St. Paul wrote, "*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain it*" (1 Corinthians 9:24). In this statement, St. Paul isn't telling Christians simply to *run that you may obtain it*, but to run in a particular way. Run like a victor - run to win!

The image these words would bring to mind for Paul's original audience is very similar to the image his words bring to our mind. We can picture the stadium filled with spectators rising to their feet to cheer for the athletes. We can picture the runners on their mark, every muscle flexed, waiting for the signal to start. We can picture the race, and the one who makes their way to the front of the pack, who runs to win that they may obtain the prize, and of course, we can see that prize. In our day, perhaps a medal hung around the neck, and in the place and time that St. Paul was writing, in first-century Corinth, the prize would be a wreath of pine leaves worn on the victor's head.

As these images fill our minds, we can't help but recognize the parallels that St. Paul wants us to draw between the races held in Corinth and the Christian life, the great race for the eternal prize offered so freely by God to the dedicated runner. Consider the course, the massive stadium in Corinth is to us, a picture of the course every Christian is called to run. It's important to note the Christian life is not set on an unplanned or careless course, the boundaries of the race we run are clearly marked and measured by faith and obedience, devotion to God, service to others, and above all things - love.

Every race has a starting point and a goal, and our starting point is the Cross. Our race begins there, and our goal is the kingdom of God.

Consider the spectators. At Corinth, it was the presence of visiting dignitaries from every part of Greece that provided such honor and prestige to the games, and in the Christian race the parallel is revealed in the book of Hebrews, where we learn that “*we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses*” (Hebrews 12:1). As we run, the saints on earth, the saints above, angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven cheer us on as the Good Shepherd himself leads us “*on paths of righteousness for His name’s sake*” (Psalm 23:3), and those who cheer us on are not simply spectators who’ve never set foot on such a course. Instead, they’re those who are either running the race with us here on earth, or those who have “*fought the good fight... finished the race... kept the faith*” (2 Timothy 4:7). The examples of the heroes of our faith, their witness, compels us to run the race to win.

Consider those who run. At the games in Corinth, gifted athletes who were born to run brought the crowd to its feet, and in our day we recognize the role of genetics in sports. When children are picking teams on the playground, there’s a reason why some are chosen before others, but the Gospel passage we read this morning tells a different story. Jesus began the parable we read today by declaring, “*The kingdom of heaven is like...*” (Matthew 20:1). Our Lord then described the kingdom of heaven, the heart of God, by telling a story about the Master of the vineyard, who at the end of the day, paid all His workers the same generous wage despite the fact that some were chosen first and therefore labored all day, while others were hired last and worked only an hour.

Through this parable we recognize the truth that in the great race toward the kingdom of heaven our time on this earthly course will certainly differ from person to person. Some of us will run a lifelong marathon, some a sprint, others, by the grace of God, will take a single step to cross the finish line, and yet, because Salvation is God’s gift to us, His generous gift of grace that cannot be earned, all who finish this race, all who die in friendship with God, will receive the same reward - eternal life with Him in His heavenly kingdom.

Consider the strict, disciplined way of the victorious runner. In the first century, and still today, those who run to win, bring their body, as St. Paul stated, “*into subjection,*” or as another translation reads, “*I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should*” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Athletes are disciplined. They deny themselves many pleasures and endure much pain. Here, Paul reminds the Christian of the need for spiritual discipline, for the Christian life is not one of ease and self-indulgence. As you know, we are called to deny ourselves, to take up our cross daily, and to strive to follow the perfect example set by our Lord (Matthew 16:24). Like athletes, this one thing we do, *forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, we press on toward the goal to win the prize*, and our prize is not a medal or a wreath. Our prize is life eternal. Our prize is “*God’s heavenly calling in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Consider the prize. In the games at Corinth, it was a wreath of pine leaves worn on the victor’s head. In many of the games in our day, the prize is a medal hung around the neck, and in a culture that places such a high value on sports these prizes are a great honor. However, great as they are, they’re an earthly treasure, as St. Paul wrote they are “*a corruptible crown*” (1 Corinthians 9:25). Such crowns wither and fade, the applause ends, and the victor’s name is soon forgotten, but the prize for which we run is an *incorruptible* crown - a crown that will never fade away. It is, according to the New Testament, the “*crown of life*” (James 1:12), the “*crown of glory*” (1 Peter 5:4). the “*crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award... to all who have loved His appearing*” (2 Timothy 4:8). Take a moment to imagine that Day. We’ve all witnessed the tears of joy that flow in this world when the victor stands on the podium and is awarded their prize. Imagine the moment in the world to come when the nail-scarred hands of Lord will award you, the faithful runner, the crown of life, saying, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord*” (Matthew 25:23).

My friends, it is a good thing to be walking in the ways of God. It is far better to be running. Running for your life, making real and visible progress, growing day by day in knowledge, wisdom, and love for God and neighbor. By the grace of God may we run like a victor, may we run this race to win!