

Sermon Feb. 12. Oscar Lied, Parish Assistant

Please pray with me:

O Lord my God, I cried out to you. And you restored me to health. Amen.

In the passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes about running the race for Christ. I like Paul's metaphor, because I love to run. I am not particularly fast, nor have I ever run in a race, but running is my primary form of exercise. I love the feeling of literally running away from my worries, homework, responsibilities. I feel like I have no worries in the world, in fact, it is perhaps the only time that I am actually doing what Jesus says: Do not worry about your life. Do not worry about tomorrow.

I want to take you all on a little run. So if you like, close your eyes for a second, and imagine going on a run today. It's fairly cold outside. You are cold too, and as you start running, you may think: why am I not staying inside today? But nonetheless, you keep running. Your body warms up, and you settle into a nice pace, not too fast, not too slow. After a little bit you hit a hill, and you run up the hill. As you do, you have to slow down, because it's so steep. You get short of breath, you feel sweat starting to trickle down your face, your legs feel tired, but you push on. And then you get to the top. Then you circle back, and arrive at Bethesda Lutheran Church. Without expecting it, you suddenly feel great. The endorphins are kicking in, and you are proud of yourself, because you have just run up a huge hill. You are thirsty, and have a drink of water. The water tastes very good, and life seems suddenly very good. You then go back into the Sanctuary. And you may open your eyes again.

Let's compare running to following Christ. Because that is the way that Paul talks about it in today's passage from 1 Corinthians.

Running is so liberating for many people because it is simple. When you run, that's the only thing you do: you run. There is a wonderful simplicity. You don't have to talk to anyone, you don't have to do come up with solutions to problems or face difficult decisions. You just run. It's not necessarily easy, especially if you do it a long time it can be really hard, but it is simple.

It is similar with following Christ: It is not necessarily easy, but it is simple. Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you. They will be given. It's simple: put Christ first in your life. You don't have to come up with solutions to all of life's problems. God doesn't ask you to fix all the problems in the world. When we run the race for Christ, we are doing one thing: putting Christ first in our life. That is what Paul is talking about. Nothing more, nothing less.

Yet, we are not very good at that, are we. We tend not to put Christ first in our life. We are not very good at running the race that Paul is talking about. In fact, we can't really do it. Not by our own strength.. Paul writes in Romans 7: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.... Although I want to do good, evil is right here with me."

We are weak human beings. There is always something that comes in the way. Careers, judgment of other people, jealousy, money, selfishness. Even if we have good intentions, we tend to mess things up. Suddenly, we are running, not for Christ, but for ourselves.

So we are supposed to run for Christ, yet we are not very good at it, we are crippled, so to speak. Yet we are not the first people with this problem.

For example, think of the disciples of Jesus. In the gospels, they basically do everything wrong. They continually don't get it, they try to prevent Jesus from doing miracles and from helping people, Peter – who is supposed to be the rock – denies that he knows Jesus, in the hour that Jesus needs friends the most. The turning point for the disciples is in Acts chapter 2, when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, in power and in healing. That is when they begin to do things not out of their own strength, but out of God's strength in them. They are enabled by God to run the race for Christ, after proving that they cannot do it on their own.

A somewhat different example is in today's Old Testament lesson. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram, wants to be healed. He is willing to go into enemy territory, into Israel, but he wants the healing to happen in a certain way. He wants Elisha to do a specific thing for him, and when Elisha doesn't do it, he gets angry. It is only when Naaman submits to the authority of Elisha that he is healed.

We can sometimes act a little similarly to Jesus' disciples and to Naaman. We want things to happen our way. Like the disciples, we need strength from the Holy Spirit to run the race for Christ. If we try it by our own strength and wisdom, things don't usually turn out that well. We are enabled by God to run the race for Christ, since we cannot do it by our own strength. It is God who gives us the strength to run in the first place.

The first time we receive the strength needed is in baptism. Later on, however, we also need to continually receive strength from God in order to be effective Christians, in order to run the race for Christ. Jesus talks about living water and bread of life. There is something about that metaphor that is meaningful because of how often we need to eat and drink.

When we run, we get thirsty, and hungry sometimes, if you have run really far. In order to run the race for Christ, we need to drink living water, and eat the bread of life on a regular basis. This can mean many things in practice: have time with God, pray, have other people pray for us, read the Bible, on a regular basis, seek communal worship, participate in the sacraments, and do other things where you feel you find God. The point is to do them with some regularity, to continually draw upon God's spiritual sustenance.

This is not something to do because we have faith, but something to do in order to get faith and grow in faith. Often we think of faith as a choice, something we do by our own will. I think is much more faithful to the Bible to think of faith as a gift, something that God crafts within us. It is something that we can ask God to give us. In fact, it is one of the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12, just three chapter after today's passage.

Another gift of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12 is healing. Just as we can grow in faith by drinking living water and eating the bread of life, so we can receive healing. Today, after communion, we will have two healing stations, on each side of the sanctuary, where you can come and receive anointing, and prayer for healing. You are welcome to share a specific prayer request if you have one, but you don't need to, we will pray for you anyway. One way to receive sustenance for the race of Christ is to receive prayer from other people. I believe very strongly that there is always something that happens when we pray. We don't necessarily know what, but something.

Let us, drawing upon strength, power and healing from God, run the race in such a way that we may win it. Amen.