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Proper 15C: Hebrews 12:1-14 (BCP)/ Hebrews 11:29-12:2 (RCL)
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Coaching Number One

In today's Epistle lesson we hear the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews encourage a group of Christians to persevere in their life of faith, despite difficulties. "Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." The writer says they have begun a good thing in being Christians. He wants to encourage them to finish strong in what's been started.

I like to run. I'm not fast, but I enjoy running. I enjoy the movement, getting to be in some of the beautiful surroundings my running has led me to, and the fitness it helps me maintain. Participating in marathon races has given me another experience I have enjoyed about running. In marathons, elite runners and normal mortals like myself get to compete in the same race. I think it's neat. I will never find myself on the same tennis court with Venus Williams. If I were ever to toss a football, none of the Ravens would be there to receive it. But, when I ran the Chicago Marathon, I (and 25,000) other runners lined up at the same starting line as Khalid Khannouchi, who holds the third best marathon time in the world. We ran the same course. We passed the same cheering crowds.

But I guess it's the finishing that really makes the difference. Mr. Khannouchi and the other elite runners were crossing the finish line when I was about half way through the course. He had about two hours for refreshments, rest, press interviews, and a massage, while I still had about 13 miles of one foot in front of the other to reach my goal, and was wondering if I really would make it. But the beauty of the marathon, and any running, is that each of us gets to set our own goal. For the elite runners, this is their vocation and business. For the rest of us, the real competition is with ourselves, striving to use what we have to the best of our abilities. Just finishing is an accomplishment. All of us can line up at the starting line, but will we finish the race?

Marathon running really is just fun and games. No one has to run a marathon. What the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is talking about really is important. But his question is the same. Will we finish the race? These Christians, his brothers and sisters in Christ, have begun the race. They have made a beginning in faith. Will they finish? Will they persevere? Or will they run off course, or give up? As Christians, they faced the same obstacles and hurdles that we do: life in a world that finds our beliefs irrelevant, sometimes even offensive; the temptation to make our faith a personal thing only, something private to be kept to ourselves, so that people don't even suspect we might be Christian; the problems of figuring out which beliefs are actually true to the God we know in scripture and experience, and which are twistings of faith, beliefs that do not lead us to the wholeness and richness God wants for us; the daily struggles we face as humans, earning a living, relating to other people, dealing with sickness and aging.

The writer, like a good coach, gives four pieces of advice about how to finish the race. To finish the race: Recall who surrounds us. Remove what weighs down on us. Rely on strength within us. Remember who goes before us.

Recall who surrounds us: He writes, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” He wants us to picture ourselves as athletes in an arena. As we strive toward our goal, the finish, peace and holiness, we run surrounded by people. The arena is full. Who are the people in the stands?

These are people who have demonstrated faith – faith that persevered, who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race. These are people of the Bible, the women and men of the Church throughout the ages, people known personally by you and by me whose witness encourages us.

The author calls them witnesses, not just spectators. There is a huge difference between witnesses and spectators. A spectator watches you go through something. A witness, in the biblical sense, is someone who has gone through something herself, and in the root meaning of the word, a word from which we get the word ‘martyr,’ someone who may have given his life going through it. We have witnesses around us, not spectators, people who have gone through what we struggle with, people whose testimonies and experience of what strength God gave them can, in turn, give us strength and example and courage. It helps me to know I have witnesses rooting for me, and I know you have witnesses cheering for you, weeping with you when you stumble, calling to you when you wander, urging you on to finish the race.

Our coach tells us to also remove what weighs down on us. Have you ever seen a track star run wearing a heavy winter parka, or with weights tied to their ankles, or with a backpack full of bricks? “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,” says our coach. What attitudes and actions, what past behavior and present entanglements weigh us down? What weights of sin and brokenness do we carry that cause us to stumble rather than sprint? We can set those weights down. God is ready to take them from us. God is ready to forgive and heal whatever we let get between us and God, whatever has come between us and another person, whatever wrongs we do to ourselves.

We need to recall who surrounds us, and remove what weighs down on us, and we can also rely on strength within us. The author exhorts us to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” When the going gets tough, when the road is difficult, when the miles drag on, or obstacles continually come up around every bend, when every stretch of the road seems like another steep hill to climb, we can rely on spiritual resources within us – spiritual resources we develop in training: in gathering with other Christians, in hearing and reading God’s word, in participating in the sacramental life of the church.

The word translated as “perseverance” can also be translated as “patient endurance.” Endurance is one thing. We can endure and whine and complain all at the

same time. Patient endurance is another. Patient endurance looks like praying without ceasing, for yourself and others. It looks like encouraging others even in the midst of difficulty. It looks like saying something kind, or saying nothing at all, when something unkind comes more readily to mind. It looks like giving generously of time and talent and money, even when you're not sure what's ahead for you. It looks like saying, "Alleluia," even by the grave side.

To finish the race, we can recall who surrounds us, remove what weighs down on us, rely on strength within us, and most important of all, remember who goes before us. We can look "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." We can and will finish the race strong in faith if we look to Jesus, if we keep our eyes focused on Jesus, not being distracted by other thing along the way that can cause us to lose our direction or our footing, and stumble. Jesus has gone before us, has shown us the way that leads to victory. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, we will not only make a good beginning in faith, but we too will finish and win the race.

Not just start, not just finish, but win the race.

One of my favorite race experiences was in Park Forest, Illinois. After the 10 mile race for adults, they held a children's race. The course was about a block long. You could see all the children lined up at the starting line. When the starting gun went off, the children started moving forward, some at a sprint, some at a jog, some very slowly. Some were just startled by the noise of the gun. In races, you usually get a number to pin to your shirt. Usually the lowest numbers are given to those most likely to win, elite runners, or last year's winner. As the children came down the block, one girl held a commanding lead. She was fast, and the number 1 showed on her shirt. Then came the next two fastest children, giving it their all. It took a moment, but then I realized that they too were wearing the number 1 on their shirts. Sure enough, as the slower children came past, they too were identified by the gratifying number 1. All of the children, even those not sure they were heading the right direction, those who in the end had to be carried by their parent to the finish line, all of them were number one in the eyes of the person handing out the race numbers. When they crossed the finish line, they all received medals. They all had their pictures taken. They were all greeted by people so proud of them. They were, each and every one of them, not just starters, not just finishers, but winners, number one.

That's how all of us look to God. Our race is not something in which only the swiftest will finish and win. All of us are wearing number 1 in God's eyes. And God is calling each one of us, surrounding us with a great cloud of witnesses, asking to remove whatever weighs us down and holds us back, training us in patient endurance, and sending Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith to run for us and with us every step of the way.

May we keep running until the prize is ours, and we hear God say to us, “Well done!”

Amen.