

Running for More than Celery

Isaiah 40: 21-31 & 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27

Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 31st August 2009

For decades, Professor Donald Macleod taught preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. I had occasion to know him well, even though he retired by the time I arrived on campus in the late 1980's. He died last year, well into his 90's. He retired to Charlestown and attended worship at Catonsville Presbyterian, including the Sunday I candidated here in June 1999. He was also Dr. Jewett's preaching professor when he was a student at Princeton.

Dr. Mac, as he was known, liked to say that a sermon title should get your attention. It should cause you to take notice while sitting on the bus going down Fifth Avenue in New York City, enticing you to satisfy your curiosity by attending worship on Sunday. He was referring to the sign-board of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. I'm not sure what he would say about my title. I've wondered what folks driving along Frederick Road have been thinking all week. You're probably wondering — what kind of sermon title is that?

All the eyes of the world turn to China a few weeks ago for the Beijing Olympics. Athletes from around the world have descended upon that ancient of cities to fulfill their dreams of being a medal winner, to stand on the winners' platform, hearing their country's national anthem as the flag of the winning nation rises above them. It's the part of the pay-off, the prize for years of sweat and tears.

The opening ceremony two weeks ago, my favorite part of the Olympics, spectacular, majestic, and uplifting. All the participant nations marched in the stadium so full of joy, anticipation, and hope. I have a great deal of respect for them, primarily because I was never, ever good at anything athletic, after many tries. But more than that, you have to respect their *dedication, discipline, and drive*.

There are plenty of people who feel that the Olympics have become one big consumer-driven extravaganza in which Coca-Cola and McDonald's are the real winners, where the golden arches are more important than gold medallions. The media was criticized for praising a country's culture and heritage, while relatively silent on the contemporary human rights abuses.

But consider all those athletes from around the world gathered together for the opening ceremonies. Just think of all the hours of training they represent. It is quite amazing. Think of Michael Phelps from Maryland, alone, or Usain Bolt from Jamaica. They didn't get to be so good and fast by just showing up at the pool or track whenever they felt like it. Just think of what these athletes have been through, how they have trained their bodies, of muscles that needed to be stretched, then broken, then healed again in order for growth and strength to occur, of minds that need to be sharp, clear,

focused; all this must be done for years in order to reach this level of excellence. Consider their *dedication*, their *discipline*, and their *drive*.

Yes, consider their dedication, their discipline, their drive – *says Paul!* – because the same characteristics are essential for the Christian life.

Nothing less than years of training,
of endurance and sacrifice,
of lives that are stretched and sometimes broken and then healed,
yielding growth and strength;
of minds that are sharp, clear, focused –
yes, all this must be done for years after many setbacks, failures, and
disappointments, in order to reach a level of excellence,
of reaching what Paul calls “mature” Christianity,
of running in love’s “still more excellent way (1 Corinthians 13).”

The only goal, same for everyone, is the love of Christ.
The characteristics and skills of being an athlete are not dissimilar to what’s involved in following Jesus.

Paul loved to use athletic metaphors throughout his epistles. From his jail cell in Rome, Paul wrote to the Philippians, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3: 13-14).” The image is that of a runner who has his eyes set on the finish line,

body straining forward toward the goal,
not looking back or to the side, not worrying about what others are doing,
mind focused, reaching for that prize
which is the upward call of God,
this God who is calling to set our sights higher and broader in Christ,
to set our eyes on him and then give him your all.

Set your eyes on Christ and then literally *throw* yourself toward him, toward the finish.

What’s significant about this passage is that the prize is not, as we might think, living happily ever after with God. Instead, the prize *is* the *call* and the call of God *is* the prize. The prize is not getting to heaven. And everyone who has been baptized is called. What is the call, what is the prize?

It’s the prize of living a life that is pressed into the service
of someone and something higher than oneself – beyond egotism and
selfishness.

It’s the prize of living a life that is heaven-bent on achieving, straining after the glory of God in all that we do. The prize comes when we live in conformity with what God wills for us. The prize is the immeasurable *pleasure* that comes when we’re running this way.

Do you remember the movie “Chariots of Fire”? It’s the true story of the Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Eric Liddell (1902-1945) and the English Jewish Cambridge student Harold Abrahams (1899-1978) who ran for Great Britain at the 1924 Olympiad in

Paris. It is one of my favorite movies. The well-known opening beach scene was filmed at 4:00 a.m. in St. Andrews, Scotland, it is actually the West Sands of St. Andrews, a place I know very well. (If you look closely you can see the house where I stay in St. Andrews, including over the sabbatical.) There's a scene in the movie when Eric is preaching before a crowd after a qualifying event in Scotland. He says, "You came to see a race today. To see someone win. It happened to be me. But I want you to do more than just watch a race. I want you to take part in it. I want to compare faith to running in a race. It's hard. It requires concentration of will, energy of soul. You experience elation when the winner breaks the tape - especially if you've got a bet on it. But how long does that last? You go home. Maybe you're dinner's burnt. Maybe you haven't got a job. So who am I to say, 'Believe, have faith,' in the face of life's realities? I would like to give you something more permanent, but I can only point the way. I have no formula for winning the race. Everyone runs in her own way, or his own way. And where does the power come from, to see the race to its end? From within. Jesus said, 'Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you. If with all your hearts, you truly seek me, you shall ever surely find me.' If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, then that is how you run a straight race."

And Eric has to convince his sister Jenny that he's going to stay in Scotland instead of returning to mission service in China. The two of them are walking near Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh, talking. He feels called to train and compete and run for Scotland. She wants him to return with her to China. But he says he can't. "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure." When I run, Jenny, I feel [God's] pleasure."¹

You see – that's the prize, the pleasure. Being a Christian isn't easy. It's tough. No one is perfect at it and no one does it alone. But in order to go for it, we have to be trained.

This is why the athletic metaphor is so useful for Paul. He didn't just use it because it was helpful; he used it because his readers would have been familiar with these images, even as he was familiar with them. Athletic training and competition, like now, were integral to the educational, formational process of all children and young adults in Paul's time. Then, like today, athletes were superstars. The Roman writer, Juvenal (c. First to Second Century), complained that teachers didn't receive the kind of respect they deserved. In his *Satire*, he "bitterly calculates that musicians and popular athletes earn more in a day than the teacher does in a year."² Sound familiar?

Paul writes to the Corinthians using athletic metaphors because he knows the Corinthians. Remember Paul founded the church in Corinth and spent a lot of time there. Paul knew that just down the road from Corinth were the massive track and fields of the Panhellenic (Greek) festivals in Isthmia.

¹ "Chariots of Fire," Engima Productions, 1981. Quotes from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/quotes>

² Cited in Albert A. Bell, Jr. *Exploring the New Testament World*. Foreword by Bruce M. Metzger (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 239.

We often think of the ancient Greek games being based in Olympia. The Olympian festival was the oldest and most prestigious. Hence our contemporary reference to the Olympic Games – although they were able to pull theirs off at a fraction of today’s cost, saving a lot on uniforms alone. But there were three other sites for these Panhellenic festivals: the Pythian festival held at Delphi, the Nemean festival held at Argos, and the Isthmian festival held at Corinth. They were also called “stephanitic” festivals; *stephanos* means “crown” or “wreath” referring to the prize awarded to the winner of each event. Each site offered a different kind of crown. At Olympia the winner received a wreath of wild olive, at Delphi a garland of bay leaves, at Nemea a wreath of fresh celery and at Isthmia a wreath of dry, wilted celery – yes, *celery*.³

When I was in Greece several years ago, I went to Isthmia, it is one of the more recent archeological digs in Greece. The site contains the remains of the temple of Poseidon, a theatre, and baths. Most amazing for us was to see the actual starting line for the track in the stadium – easily visible – along the starter’s pit behind the starting line line. There’s a fascinating museum there which has a mosaic depicting a wilted celery wreath around an athlete’s brow and tied with a knot or ribbon behind the neck.⁴ There are also large, stone tributes to many athletes with wreaths of wilted celery over their heads.

Now you might be wondering why I’m going on about celery. *Because Paul does*. Listen to this text again, imagine the people of Corinth listening to this letter, think of them walking down the road to Isthmia, seeing the athletic fields, observing the competition and games, watch how Paul used these everyday occurrences as a way to bring life to the gospel. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.” Hear the allusion to celery?

Those athletes are disciplining and training their bodies to go after a “perishable crown,” a wilted piece of celery! But what *we’re* training for, friends, is a crown that will not wilt, that is imperishable, that will last! Now, whether we will all be walking around in glory with crowns is beside the point – it’s a metaphor – the point is that the *goal*, the *prize* that we strive after and strain for as Christians is better than any athletic prize or any other prize given in this world subject to rust and decay and corruption.

What are you running for? Is the prize you’re after worthy of the race, especially if it’s a rat-race?

Unless we put the effort in, unless we are *dedicated, disciplined, driven* in our following of Christ, running the race that Christ sets before, trained in body and mind, then we run the risk of losing our crown. This doesn’t mean that our salvation is

³ See the review by Bernard Knox in *The New York Times Book Review*, August 8, 2004, of Nigel Spivey, *The Ancient Olympics* (Oxford, 2004) and Stephen G. Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (Yale, 2004).

⁴ Cf. Clyde E. Fant & Mitchell G. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 44.

somehow in jeopardy. This is a *metaphor*. The point Paul is making here is that we can't say we're a Christian without following Christ, without demonstrating with your life the power of the gospel at work in you, without demonstrating the presence of the Risen Christ in us, without being a witness to the transforming power of God's love in our lives. All of which were critical problems in the Corinthian church, where they were saying one thing on a Sunday and doing another the rest of the week, claiming to believe one thing only to have their actions betray them.

We can't just talk the talk, we have to walk the walk. And we do it together. Someone got very mad at me once when I said you can't be a Christian by yourself. It's true. Being Christian requires others, it requires community. We need one another to run this race, to run the race with everything we have! We can't do it alone. Following Christ is not as easy as some think. It requires nothing less than the *dedication*, the *discipline*, and the *drive* of an athlete.

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