



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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9th Sunday after Pentecost

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Crossing the Finish Line

Philippians 3:4b-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ* and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved,* I do not consider that I have made it my own;* but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly* call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Last Sunday I addressed the issue of faith from a corporate perspective, using Paul's analogy of a building to understand the nature of our congregation's calling. Today, my message speaks to our personal faith and spirituality. Once again, I will be using an analogy of Paul's... running a race.

The use of athletic imagery, particularly running a race, is not foreign to the biblical message. The Old Testament reading from Ecclesiastes declares that the fastest does not always win the race. Paul, in particular, used athletic imagery in his letters. The best known comes from 2 Timothy 4:7. He wrote "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

I would like to beg your indulgence for a few minutes because my opening illustration is personal. Five years ago, my family was visiting a dear friend in Utica, NY. He was in his 80's and was the only grandfather my daughter knew. The nursing home where he was a resident was adjacent to a large public mall area. On that particular day it was filled with tents and booths, because on the following day there would be a half marathon and a 5 kilometer run (3.1 miles). We took him in his wheel chair over to the park and naturally started talking about the big race. Out of nowhere he said, "Brent, you should run in it." I didn't want to think about it, but casually replied, "Sure, Pop". Four months later, he died.

At the memorial service, I recalled our last visit and the promise that I made, albeit casually. I vowed at that time to make good on that promise.

In the spring I began to train. An elder from my congregation, who was a personal trainer, offered to run with me and help prepare me for the 5K run. My daughter, who had completed a triathlon agreed to run with me in the race. I remember optimistically telling her that I hoped to run in top 25th percentile of my age group. My daughter replied, "It's not about winning. It's about finishing. Everyone who crosses the finish line wins."

A week before my 60th birthday I lined up with 5,000 other runners to run my first 5K. The elder trained me well and I was still running comfortably when I hit the 2 ½ mile mark. I had not walked to that point, but I was beginning to think about it. And then I heard the voice of one of the spectators. He was a tall man with dreadlocks, and he was shouting, "Run! Old man, run!" I looked around to see who he was shouting at, and realized there was no old man near me... he was yelling at me.

I kept running and crossed the finish line. I wasn't first... but my daughter was right. I won.

The apostle Paul used the imagery of a runner to reflect upon his life. His words: "this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Discipleship is like a race. I have four points:

1. You have to be in shape.

Rare is the person who decides to run a long distance without some training. I spent four months getting ready to run. It was a gradual process of conditioning that was approved by my physician. There were times along the way when I had my doubts, but it prepared me for the longer race. There were no short cuts, and no quick ways to do it. It required discipline, commitment and a routine. Discipleship requires discipline, commitment, and a routine.

I recently received a "Fitbit bracelet" as a gift. I wear the bracelet and it records my physical activity during the day including: the number steps I have taken, the miles I have walked or run, the water and calories I have consumed, and even the quantity and quality of my sleep. These bracelets are very popular and I have discovered that they do provide additional motivation for me to pursue a healthier lifestyle.

What if there was a spiritual "Fitbit?" A bracelet that we could wear that would graph our spiritual progress... our times in prayer and meditation, the time we spend singing and worshipping, the time we spend helping others. I wonder how popular it would be.

Discipleship requires good spiritual conditioning. Easy discipleship will not prepare you for the race of life. Spiritual conditioning takes commitment, routine, and discipline. We seldom use those words in our spiritual lives. Routine is boring. Commitment is costly, and discipline limits the freedom we covet and it places limitations upon us. We want our spiritual lives to be flashy, exciting, fun, and most importantly, on our terms. We need a regular discipline of prayer, worship and study. We need the commitment to active discipleship, even when we prefer to take it easy. We need to spend time in the spiritual disciplines. The race of life has no room for out of shape disciples. Remember: the word "disciple" comes from the same root as discipline!

2. You can't do it alone.

I know that I wouldn't have finished training for the race if I didn't have someone who made sure that I got out three times a week for a period of four months to run. There is something important about having someone who counts on you to be there. It motivates you to get out. Many a morning I did not feel like training, but went because I knew that someone was at the track waiting for me.

Discipleship can't happen alone. We need to realize that others are depending upon us and we on them. This is accountability and we need it in our spiritual lives. A simple thing to do is to have a prayer partner, in the same way you would have an exercise partner: someone who is depending upon you to be there in prayer. The importance of studying the bible in a group is vital, because it is in community when we learn from each other and there we get support from each other.

We also need to encourage each other. "Run old man! Run!" was the encouragement that I needed to give that last kick to finish. In life, and even in the church, we are very good at being critical. We are not as good at being supportive. We need to be cheerleaders for each other. A while ago, I went to the hospital to see a member. At the conclusion of the visit, I held his hand and offered prayer with him. I concluded the prayer and he still held my hand, and then he proceeded to offer a prayer for me. I left his bedside energized and ready to continue. We need to encourage each other and pray for each other.

3. You can't look back.

If you look back when you are running you are surely going to slow down, lose your rhythm, or worse, trip over something or run into something. You can't look back in life. Remember the story of Lot's wife. She looked back on Sodom and Gomorrah and she was turned into a pillar of salt. History is important to study and understand... but we cannot look back on it with a sense of nostalgia and allow the past to control our future. More importantly, we cannot allow our individual histories, to control our lives. I have done some pretty stupid

things in my life: things I regret and moments that embarrass me now. All of us have. These events can control our lives. We know the expression: "Once a bum, always a bum."

When Paul wrote, "forgetting what lies behind." He meant that bums like you and me can change. We can move ahead beyond our sinful past. Discipleship may have a rear view mirror, but it does not have a reverse gear. We need to focus our lives on where we are going. Where God is calling us to? We need to heed God call, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" – crossing the finish line.

4. The final victory is finishing the race.

Christ won the race for us! Consequently "it is not about winning, it is about finishing. Everyone who crosses the finish line wins." We need to remember this as we continue our personal journey of discipleship. We live in a world of instant this or that. In this world that values speed and instant success, we need to remember that discipleship is a marathon, not a 40 yard dash. There will be slow days. There will be days when we are weary and discouraged. There will be days when we think that we can't continue. There will be those days when we hit the proverbial "wall". It is part of running this race we call life. Keep your eyes on the finish line, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

The victory that we seek is oneness with Christ... and when we cross that finish line, we will know... we will know for sure... that he was running with us all of the way. This is the good news. Amen.