

Finishing Strong
Hebrews 12:1-15
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
May 13, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

I don't know about you, but I am a little wary of preachers who use sports metaphors. I get a little tired of folks who tell me that I'm supposed to "hit a home run for Jesus" or "knock one through the goal posts of life".

So, if it were up to me, we wouldn't be doing this. Not on mother's day, to be sure.

That said, of course, it's NOT up to me. You'll recall that we're walking through the so-called "Letter to the Hebrews" and we have discovered, among other things, that it's not so much a letter as it is a sermon. And last week, the preacher took us in Chapter 11 through the "Faith Hall of Fame", where we were reminded that faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not a spectator sport, but rather an adventure that requires every aspect of our lives.

At the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12, however, you can just about hear the wind going out of the sails of the congregation. The preacher has given it his best shot, and this congregation that is full of tired, struggling believers blurts out in unison, "But it's so hard! Why is faith so difficult? We didn't think it would be like this!"

And they are right, of course. Having faith can be difficult. Do we remember that? Do we acknowledge that there is some kind of "cost" for those who believe?

Sometimes it's a social cost. I would imagine that there are those in this room who know that experience: everyone is at the lunch table laughing and having a good time and when you sit down, there are a flurry of quick glances exchanged...the conversation dies down and someone asks about the Pirates or how things are looking for the little league team. There are times when being a person of faith means being excluded from what a group of your friends is doing, and that can hurt.

There's a financial cost to following Christ. If you've been a Christian for a while, maybe you don't even think about your tithe, but the reality is that if we are being faithful, we make choices about our money that have a real impact on our lives.

There's an emotional cost involved with being a Christian. You come to church. You get to know someone, and then they've got a little bit of trouble. Then they've got a whole boatload of trouble. And they look to you to help them. And you listen. And you help. And things seem to get better. And then it happens again. And again. And again. People that Jesus asks us to love can wind up sucking the energy and the life out of us. Being a Christian is dangerous

work, my friends. I don't want to be too hard on the congregation from *Hebrews* because I know how spent and worn out I have felt – and I'm sure that the things I've gone through are nothing compared to the kinds of distress and persecution that the early church faced.

So why not just give up? Why not simply “throw in the towel”, to use one of those dreaded sports analogies? I'm not talking about being some sort of “anti-Christian” or anything. I'm not suggesting going out and joining the National Association of Atheists or anything. But why should that congregation stay? Why should any of us stick around?

The late Rev. Samuel Shoemaker spent years of his life working in some of the roughest parts of New York City. His health was failing and he was faced with discouragement when a friend wondered, “Why not just get away from it all, Sam? You're going to kill yourself.” Shoemaker responded by saying “I would like to run away from it all, but a strange man on the cross won't let me.”¹

Even when times are tough, we look to Jesus and are encouraged not to lay down or give up, but rather to continue to struggle. The preacher to the Hebrews reminds his congregation to look at Jesus, who was not afraid to keep running the race even when he was persecuted.

Now I want us to be very careful as we read the next few verses in Hebrews. I want to remind you that the preacher here is not attempting to provide a biblical theology on the question of pain and suffering. His congregation did not say, “Why did six million die in the holocaust?” or “what's going on with AIDS in Africa?” The congregation says, “Does God even notice our pain? Does our suffering matter at all to God? Or are we wasting ourselves here?”

Make sure we hear that, friends. The preacher is responding to a pastoral situation – he's not trying to explain a theological mystery. Does God see me over here? Where is God when it hurts so badly? These are the questions that this passage is answering.

Verse 8 reads, “Endure trials for the sake of discipline.” I prefer the reading in the NIV: “Endure hardship as discipline”. The hearers of this scripture – including you and me – are invited to see their lives as laboratories for grace. The preacher says, “Look at your life! Is it possible that God is present in the midst of the difficult situation in which you find yourself? Is it possible that in this trial, you can learn something about yourself or about the Lord? Is it possible that you can grow from or at least grow through this?” Time and time again, the preacher uses the word “discipline”. I want to point out that he is not talking about “punishment” (with the exception of one time where he's quoting from Proverbs 3). He's talking about “discipline”, which comes from a word that

¹ Quoted in Thomas Long's *Interpretation Commentary on Hebrews* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) p. 132.

means “teaching” or “training”. If the pain that his hearers feel is meaningless, it will destroy them. But if it is somehow useful or meaningful, then it will make them stronger.

And so he reminds his hearers – as I remind you – that you are God’s child. That is the fundamental truth of who you are – you are a child of God. God is crazy about you. You belong to him.

Because God is crazy about you, God longs to form you and to perfect you. God desires that you seek his face in each situation of your life. I’m not saying that God SENDS every situation into your life – as if the reason you have cancer or are lonely is because God wants to see how you react to cancer or loneliness. Rather, God is saying, “you are not defined by your physical or emotional health. You are defined in relationship with me. Can you see me through the cancer, through the pain?”

And in the process, God reminds you that there is an end-point and a goal. Some cultures believe that history is cyclical – that life just keeps spinning around and that there is no purpose to history. Believers, however, can embrace the truth that history, and suffering, and experience – all have an end point. As we grow through difficult times, the preacher says, we find that we are mature and that we know God and ourselves better. It’s not pleasant at the time, but it can produce fruit.

And that, my friends, is where he gets to the sports analogy. “Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees and make straight paths for your feet...” I have to say, he sounds a lot like my High School Gym Teacher, Mr. Widdoes. It didn’t matter what happened – if you got hurt in class or on the field, Mr. Widdoes had one answer: “All right, all right, it looks like that smarts a little. Rub it, and then walk it off.” It didn’t matter what the injury was – if you got hit in the face with a soccer ball or fell and sprained your ankle: “All right, all right, it looks like that smarts a little. Rub it, and then walk it off.” “But Mr. Widdoes – I think that she broke her leg!” “Yeah, well, rub it, and then walk it off.”

So many times in life, when we are hit with something unexpected, something tragic, something incredibly painful – we just want to give up. We shake our fists at God and we think, “forget it. I’m done.”

But in this race, if we give up in the face of pain, we are finished. We can never be the people God intends us to be – the people we were born to be – unless we are willing to work through the pain that life brings.

I would imagine that you’ve never heard of “adhesive capsulitis” I hadn’t either, until I was talking about this passage earlier this week with two of your favorite physical therapists, Leslie and Kayla. Adhesive capsulitis is also known as “frozen shoulder”. You get it when, for whatever reason, you hurt your shoulder or your arm. Then, instead of stretching and trying to promote healing in your shoulder, you shield that arm from further pain. You know what I mean?

Your arm hurts like crazy, and so you decide that you're not going to move that arm. You hold it here, like it's in a sling. Before too long, that shoulder joint will lock into place and you'll lose the motion and strength there – because even though it hurts, you've got to work through it.

Let me risk one more sports analogy that, frankly, makes me wish it were Father's Day instead of Mother's Day. But, it is what it is.

American Quincy Watts won the gold medal in the Men's 400 meter race at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. But if you saw those games, you don't remember Quincy Watts. But I bet you remember Derek Redmond.

Derek Redmond was a British athlete who had already won two preliminary heats and was getting set in the blocks during the semifinals. I'd like to ask you to direct your attention to the video screen as I narrate what happened next.

You see that he got out of the blocks in good shape. He's in the best condition of his life, and as he comes around the first bend, he is the picture of controlled power. But then, as he would later say, there was a sound almost like a gunshot. "He tells himself to focus and tries to regain the rhythm but something is badly wrong. His left leg is painful and no longer working. His face becomes a twisted grimace as he slows to a stop." His hamstring has popped. "He crouches with his head in his hands as the seven other athletes race into the distance. Redmond begins to hobble down the back straight. It is obvious his race is finished but something inside drives him to continue to run using his one good leg. Only when he looks up to see the other athletes have finished does he accept that he is beaten.

What happens next is unforgettable. As he continues to hop towards the finish line, his father bursts out of the crowd and comes to his son's side. Redmond said later, "Everything I had worked for was finished. I hated everybody. I hated the world. I hated hamstrings. I hated it all. I felt so bitter that I was injured again. I told myself I had to finish. I kept hopping round. Then, with 100 metres to go, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was my old man."

"Jim Redmond waves away the officials blocking the way and takes a step back to watch his son finish the slowest 400m in Olympic history. They exit the track together and head towards the changing-room area..."²

We don't remember that scene because it's the slowest 400m in Olympic history. We remember that scene because it reminds us that we, too, have a Father who is ready to bring us across the finish line when we encounter brokenness and pain. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – the God who calls us to live for and serve him every day and in every circumstance – he

² All dialogue and narrative quoted are found in the *Observer Sports Monthly*, Jan 7, 2007. See <<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/osm/story/0,,1981874,00.html>>

will not leave us out there on the track, hobbling on our own. He will come to us and walk with us until we are able to stand again on our own.

Where is God when it hurts? He is there, beloved. He is next to you. Trust him. And keep heading for the finish line. Amen.