

“Finishing the Race”  
Hebrews 12:1-2  
Memorial Service Sermon  
Annual Conference  
June 11, 2015

This evening we remember and give thanks for our brothers and sisters that have finished the race. We celebrate their lives and ministries because we know that the race they have now completed, the race of following Jesus in this world, is not a short jog in the park. It's a marathon, run in often difficult conditions. There is some amazing scenery along way. We can find no greater love, no more complete joy, and no deeper peace than we find in this race. But there are long, painful stretches, too, with many trials and temptations.

We celebrate this evening because those whose names are read have triumphed! They were spouses, parents and grandparents; pastors, pastor's spouses and leaders in our churches. So many lives, our lives, have been blessed because of the way they have run the race!

Their witness reminds us that the Christian faith is not as concerned with how we start as much as it is with how we finish.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Abraham started as a liar, but he ended up father of the faithful.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Sarah started as childless, but she ended up the only senior citizen in the maternity ward.

It's not how you start; ***(you know where I'm going with this) it's how you finish.***

Moses started as a baby in a basket and fled Egypt as a criminal, but he ended up leading the Hebrews out of slavery.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Rahab started as a prostitute, but she ended up in the family tree of Jesus the Messiah.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Peter started as a cussing fisherman, but he ended up as the Rock upon which the Church was built.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Paul started as a violent persecutor, but he ended up as the apostle to the Gentiles.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

The history of God's people is not a story about how good respectable, religious people do great things.

It is a story about how God uses the most unlikely characters to accomplish God's plans.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Those of us with a few gray hairs know the importance of finishing well. We do the math and we realize that there are more days behind us than ahead of us. We want to grow closer to Jesus every day.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

This message is for those that are younger, too. None of us knows when we will reach that finish line. It's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

The early Christian writing known as "The Letter to the Hebrews" is really a sermon to a church in crisis. The pastor who preached this sermon remembers a time when they were cheerful, generous, and caring. But now, members of this congregation are being ostracized by their neighbors. Some are being imprisoned or even martyred. Many have dropped out and fallen away. They had started well, but this preacher isn't sure they will finish. In faith we know, it's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

Perhaps you can relate to those who first heard this sermon. You may not be facing the same hardship, but you've got some obstacles of your own.

This past February, just a few days after his beloved wife died, Peter Storey, a faithful Methodist pastor from South Africa that our daughter Rachel knows, preached a sermon entitled, "Sunday after Elizabeth's Death." He knew and loved the congregation that had invited him, and so even in his grief, he kept the engagement.

His sermon was filled with brutal honesty. In it he shared some of the questions he'd been wrestling with in the days following her death.

"Is there a school where people can study how to live by themselves after 54 years of being together?"

"Can someone tell me what those pills were that Elizabeth used to hand me every morning?"

"How do I cope with reaching out and finding that she's no longer there?"

Some of you may be wrestling with some heartache like that. You may be facing some trials in your own life, or in your congregation, and you wonder if you can stay in the race you are on. Here, in Hebrews 12, we are given four sound pieces of advice for finishing well the race we are in.

**The first is this:**

**Remember who is around us.**

***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses."***

The word, "therefore," serves as a hinge, calling us to look back at where we have been and to look ahead at where we are going. Looking back we find Hebrews 11 and we hear the great roll call of heroes and heroines of the faith. After hearing **their** names, we look ahead and the focus is on those of us running the race now. The setting in which we run is not an auditorium. It's an arena. As we run the race, we are surrounded by this great, invisible, but very real sea of faces.

It is important to emphasize that those who surround us are witnesses, not just spectators. There is a profound difference between a spectator and a witness. A spectator sits on the sidelines and watches you go through something. A witness is someone who has been down on the field where you are. They have run the race you are on. They have met the challenges of the living the disciplined life. They have made the sacrifices required of those whose first love is Jesus. The preacher declares that we can finish the race; we can hold on, if we remember who is around us cheering for us.

The witnesses named in Hebrews 11 are in the crowd, as are many others who have gone before us in Christ.

Last year in his sermon at this service, my brother Tom Salsgiver recalled the first time he attended a Memorial Service at Annual Conference. For me, it was 35 years ago, in 1980, the year I was ordained Deacon. At that service the names of those who had died in the previous year were read. And, like Tom, I didn't know a single person, but I had this wonderful sense that I was part of a great movement that began long ago and would extend into eternity.

As the years have rolled quickly by and I attend this service, each year I hear more and more names of people I have been privileged to know and love.

This evening as I gaze into the crowd, I see Edna, reunited with her husband, Leon. When I was just out of seminary Leon and I served in the same cluster. Whenever we pastors and our spouses met, Edna and Leon always encouraged Betsy and me with a hug, and a warm smile and a funny story.

I also see Barton. I served as his district superintendent when his church broke ground a few years ago and built a new building. He persevered for ten years to lead the Hope Eternal Church in Newport to complete that project. He also persevered through sickness, and never gave up hope that one day he would return to lead his church to the next faithful step.

There is Louis. He was one of my predecessors as superintendent of the New Cumberland District. More than that, he was a friend. I saw him and his wife Jo at the Post Office in Mechanicsburg last year. He said, "I'm turning 90 next year, but I can still preach if you need me!" He was eager to serve the Lord!

I look up and I see Gloria, spouse of my Dr. Paul, who was at first my professor in a religion course at LVC, and then chair of BOM when I came through, and later my district superintendent. I remember some conversations with Gloria over the years, and her quiet spirit, her warm smile and her love of music.

There is Connie, who traveled with her late-husband Pastor Marty, on numerous trips to the Holy Land, and returned to show pictures and tell stories that deepened our understanding of Scripture.

And, I see Mabreen, spouse of Dr. S. David. Just last year, Betsy and I were invited into their home for an authentic Indian dinner. The food was magnificent, and so was Mabreen's gift of hospitality.

I see Brian. He and his wife, Lauri, and their children joined the United Methodist Church when I was their pastor in Centre Hall. I rejoiced a couple of years ago when Brian told me of his call to ministry and as he started serving his first appointment. All too soon, he finished the race. Looking on from among the witnesses, I picture his delight in the faith of his children, including a son now in seminary.

What faces do you see as you gaze into the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us?

Friends, as you run the race do not lose heart. Remember who is around us. The saints are cheering us on! They remind us, it's not how you start; **it's how you finish.**

But even with all the applause of heaven, this preacher knows that the race is still hard. A **second** word of advice is given.

We must not only remember who is around us, we must also:

**Remove what is on us.**

***“...let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.”***

Runners do not compete wearing heavy winter coats or carrying weights on their backs and in their shoes. They wear clothing made of special, lightweight material, and shoes that weigh only ounces.

One might also render this phrase, “Let us lay aside every weight and the sin that entangles.” The word “entangles” more clearly depicts what happens to us when we harbor attitudes and engage in behaviors that wrap around our feet and make it difficult for us to maintain our stride.

I don’t know what baggage you may have carried into this gathering. Perhaps you have harbored some attitudes or you have engaged in some behaviors that have been weighing you down and tangling you up. My prayer, brothers and sisters, is that even here, even in this session of annual conference, you will be able to lay aside whatever you need to so that you can regain your stride as a disciple of Jesus. It’s not how you start; **it’s how you finish.**

As we move on, this pastor now adds a **third** word of instruction. We are called to:

**Rely on what is in us.**

***“...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,”***

Some other translations render the word for “perseverance,” “patient endurance.” Some people endure things, but they grumble and complain about it every step of the way. That’s not **patient** endurance. **Patience** endurance is following God’s call, even when you face adversity. It’s being fervent in prayer, even when there seems to be no answer. It’s loving people, even when they disappoint you. It’s serving and giving faithfully, even when it means sacrifice.

Dr. Alyce McKenzie, who was in my Deacon class in 1980, and now teaches preaching at Perkins School of Theology, describes a conversation between a daughter and her elderly mother. The mother, in her early nineties, is still active in visiting the sick, preparing communion elements, and tutoring children at the elementary school. "Mother," the daughter said, "don't you think at your age you could back off from these activities and enjoy a lighter schedule? You've earned it after all these years, and I'm afraid you're tiring yourself out."

Her mother drew herself up to her full five feet tall and answered, "When I decided to follow Jesus, I did not promise to follow him part of the way. I promised to serve him all the way. And that is what I intend to do."

I wonder what this daughter might have said. What could she say? Obviously, this ninety plus year old saint had spent a lifetime with Jesus, and her spiritual well ran deep.

She reminds me of the instructions John Wesley gave:

*“Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. **For as long as ever you can.**”*

We do not get the spiritual wherewithal to serve for as long as ever we can unless, like this mother, we draw regularly from the streams of living water available to us through the means of grace. It’s not how you start; **it’s how you finish.**

Remember who is around you. Remove what is on you. Rely on what is in you. After checking off the items in verse 1, the preacher has one final word of advice. An entire verse is devoted to this one most important thing needed to finish well the race set before us:

**Realize who is before us.**

I appreciate Eugene Peterson’s translation in [The Message](#),

***“...looking to Jesus, who both began and finished this race we are in...”***

Jesus has gone before us. In spite of the horrific pain of the cross, the preacher tells us, Jesus kept his eyes on the prize. Having won his race, he now stands at the finish line cheering for us.

Good track coaches will teach their athletes not to look to the right, to the left, and, by all means, certainly not behind. To keep your momentum and your stride, they will say, fix your eyes on the finish line.

One Saturday afternoon I was drawn into a documentary on television called “Chasing Kayla.” It was the story of an athletic 14-year-old that played on her school’s elite, traveling soccer team. In the early fall of her freshman year of high school, during soccer practice, she began to feel weakness in her legs. Tests were run. A diagnosis was given: Multiple Sclerosis. Kayla’s Mom, a home health aide, was devastated. She had cared for many patients with MS and had seen the effects of this disease. She pictured a bleak future of wheelchairs, hospital beds, and tube feedings.

Kayla had to give up soccer and other sports involving contact. **Instead, she turned to running and a coach that believed she could do it.** Her experience of running defies any label. Because of her MS, Kayla loses all feeling in her legs when she runs. She knows her legs are moving, but she can’t tell how fast or where. She can’t feel pain, but she also had to learn to pace herself.

After a difficult start, Kayla made amazing progress. First, she made the girl’s varsity track team. Then, she became its fastest member. Then, she started training with the boys’ team and then she became one of the fastest girls in all of North Carolina. **The whole time, one voice pushed her; the voice of her coach.** Because she loses feeling in her legs, she is unable to come to a coordinated stop. **Her coach is always there at the finish line to catch her.**

At the beginning of her senior year, Kayla set a lofty goal. She was determined to win three state championships. In the fall she won the state cross country title. In the winter, she won the state indoor 3200 meters, which is roughly two miles. The final race was the 3200 at the state outdoor track and field championships. **Take a look.**

Friends, those we remember this evening have finished their race. Triumphant, they have crossed over and fallen into the arms of Jesus. As we celebrate their witness, we also claim our own.

**Remember** who is around you.

**Remove** what is on you.

**Rely** on what is within you.

And, above all, **realize** that the Lord Jesus goes before you.

You can and will finish the race if you fix your eyes on him.

It's not how you start; **it's how you finish!**