

When Winning Isn't Winning

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge,
at the eleven o'clock service, February 12, 2012.*

The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany.

Based on 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and Mark 1:40-45.

I don't know much about running races, certainly not ones that are run on foot. Running, when walking works just as well, has never made much sense to me. Admittedly this is a stance that took care of the whole tri-athlete consideration question once and for all many years ago. But like probably everyone in this room, I have run in many other kinds of races, winning my share of them and losing a few along the way as well. Also I am most likely not alone in preferring to win. It generally feels a lot better than losing.

"Run," Paul said, "in such a way that you may win it." The Apostle Paul was a complicated fellow. Because he was a convert, not a cradle-Christian (as cradle-Episcopalians no doubt would have mentioned to him), and because he had not been one of the Disciples—in fact had never met Jesus—Paul was always somewhat on the defensive. There additionally is some evidence that he was by nature sort of a prickly guy. This passage is a part of his effort to explain why he was bi-vocational, i.e., why he continued to work to make a living even while being an evangelist. Jesus was remembered as having told the disciples to go forth and be cared for by those to whom they ministered. It was the disciples who remembered this. But Paul suggested that a little work in the real world wouldn't kill anybody—even a minister. Those of us in the professional priesthood generally don't weigh in on this conversation, usually trying to steer it in another direction as quickly as we can. Regardless, Paul made it clear that hard work for those who were teaching about Jesus' way of life was important.

From this and a handful of other references in scripture that also are actually about something else, hard work, discipline, staying the course came to be considered as important attributes of the Christian life. The German sociologist, Max Weber, who coined the phrase "Protestant work ethic," claimed that this connection between godliness and hard work was particularly popular among Protestants. He argued that one of the ways we demonstrate the truth of our being saved is through hard work, which leads to success in the world. It was a different orientation for Catholics, Weber claimed, who see good works as the way to be saved. Both concepts miss the point, I believe, though each undoubtedly has led to some wonderful things being done in the world, even if with dubious motivations.

We live in a city that throbs with the rhythm of people running the race, marathons that exist not just in November but every single day of the year. Whether or not we conclude that the race is some sort of spiritual quest or not, for our faith to be worth much to people like us, it has to have something to say about the race—the kind of race we are running and the cost of running it. It is not a fun-run; it is a race that is literally killing some of us, arguably a good many of us because it has numerous cohorts: addictions to substances, work, and almost anything else you can imagine.

I am always hesitant to use a poem in a sermon because in my mind I can hear my daddy saying, "Lord in heaven, just when I thought the preacher was done and I could almost taste the fried chicken and mashed potatoes waiting for us, out came a poem and three more points." This one by William Stafford is really brief and there is only one point; and it is such a perfect point in this sermon that even Daddy would approve.

The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt

or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

That is the kind of race that I believe we are called as people of faith to run. The defining thread we follow is the purpose of our lives, and how thoroughly that purpose is honored, furthered, protected in the running of the race is what counts.

Let me tell you a brief real-life story that illustrates it. Yesterday, in the course of tweaking my sermon, I had a long conversation with an old friend from another state who is considering a job change within the institution to which he has given a good number of years. As is often the case, the situation is fraught with politics and potential pitfalls in every imaginable direction. One possible way to win involves the proverbial tossing of a longtime acquaintance under the bus. As we talked, though, my friend stated something about himself that I knew to be definitively true. He said, "Loyalty is really important to me. I long ago learned that I can't control how others will conduct their business, but there are certain things that matter to me. Loyalty is one of them." Bingo.

"There's a thread you follow," Stafford wrote. "While you hold it you can't get lost." And neither will my friend get lost. He may have some hard knocks; things might not go well for him; but if he follows *his* thread, he won't get lost—his soul won't be lost—no matter what happens.

My friend is making the choice that Paul encourages us to make: "Run the race so as to win a wreath that will never perish," he wrote, one that lasts forever, one that we receive because we are true to ourselves, to our thread, regardless of who gets first or last place.

This is more than a sweet Hallmark message. It is Paul's (and Jesus' for that matter) way of teaching us that what matters is how we run the race. This issue involves an age-old struggle, the stuff, the mess around and in which we live our lives. What is most important to us? Winning at all costs? Or living lives of holiness and love during which we sometimes win and we sometimes lose? It is never easy, and it doesn't pay to be cavalier about it; but it matters more than anything.

As long as I live, I will never forget Sister Dorothy, a Catholic nun in Jackson, Mississippi, whose blessed presence it was my privilege to encounter. I have told you about her in an earlier sermon. You may recall. In the '80s, long before AIDS became such an A-list disease, Sister Dorothy began to serve the surprisingly large number of men with AIDS in Jackson, many of whom had come home to die. There was no other place to go; even hospitals were afraid and resistant. For more than a decade she moved from house to house, always arriving near the end and then staying through the end, whether weeks or months. I checked on her this week and found that now she is working with parolees from the state prison—and not just any parolees but those living with HIV. Walking away from prison with nothing more than the clothes on their backs, a bus ticket, and a condition that must be carefully and expensively treated, they are among the lowest of the low. And there is Sister Dorothy, still telling them that God loves them and will never leave them and working as hard as she can to find them a way to survive. She isn't running a race to win accolades; she isn't running a race trying to add these lost souls to the church rolls—she is not at all concerned about their beliefs; she is running a race to love as fast and furiously as she can because she knows that the time is short.

And the amazing thing to me is that she loves it; it is not a burden. The circumstances are often hideous and sometimes gross but the thread of her life is as joyful as any I have ever seen. Now, her story is extraordinary, no doubt about it. Our stories are not supposed to be like hers; our stories are our stories. But to find and run the race that is truest and best for us, the one that allows us to live with integrity, goodness, joy and hard work matters more than anything in the world.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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