

Running the Marathon of Faith
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Proper 15c

Jeremiah 23:23-29 – Psalm 82 – Hebrews 11:29-12:2, Luke 12:49-56

I once knew a man who was an ultra marathoner. He ran 100-mile races around football stadiums, over mountain ranges, and through cities. For Michael, the Boston Marathon was merely a training exercise. Every day, he rose at 4:30 in the morning to run for several hours around the sleeping borough of Manhattan. Afterwards, he showered, dressed, ate breakfast, and headed for the office. When I asked him why he ran like this, he replied: "Because it's there to be done; it nourishes me and gives me the energy to live."

Whenever I read this morning's passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, I think about my friend Michael, Elaine Thompson, Katie Ledecy, Mo Farah, Michael Phelps, and all those other marathoners and dedicated athletes whom we are watching perform in the Olympics this week. They model for me, and I presume for many of you as well, a way of life that involves discipline, determination, endurance, fitness, strength, and good health. I love watching and reading about the lives of these athletes, learning about the stories behind the medals. They inspire and challenge me.

I'm convinced that Jesus was an ultra marathoner of sorts. Over the course of three years, from his baptism in the Jordan River, to his forty-day vision quest in Judean wilderness, to his ministry in the Galilean countryside, Jesus ran a marathon of preaching, praying, teaching and healing. After running up the steps of the Temple to confront the thresholds of religious and political power, he walked with a cross on his shoulders to the end of his race at a place called Golgotha where he would die – a tired and yet determined athlete. And then, God raised him to a throne, placing upon his head the crown of victory, and around his neck the medal of eternal life.

If Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of the race, those who have continued this marathon form the "great cloud of witnesses" that surround us on all sides. Was Peter not a marathoner who returned to Rome to be crucified? Was Paul not an athlete as he hung in prison chains? Wasn't James the Fisherman more than a son of thunder; was he not an athlete who died by the sword in the name of Jesus? Were not Perpetua, Felicitas and all those martyrs who died in the arena not the super stars of early Christianity?

This extraordinary relay race has continued over the centuries with faithful men and women offering up their lives to the great marathon for peace and justice. Joan of Arc was a fiercely fought for religious freedom in name of God. Martin Luther relentlessly hammered for reform on the door of the Catholic Church. Dietrich

Bonheoffer and Maximillian Kolbe were daringly strove against fascism and anti-Semitism. Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King ran the race for racial equality. Cesar Chavez and Oscar Romero carried the flame of justice in a journey begun by others.

Think of the list of people – saints if you will – that we honor throughout the year in the church’s calendar. These individuals (and others whose names we don’t remember) are indeed the great cloud of witnesses – the marathoners of faith.

The marathon – the great race of endurance – is, in fact, the life that we as Christians, resurrected people of the Spirit, are called to live. This is precisely what the author of Hebrews is trying to say: “...let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...”

Everybody’s race is different. Some of us are runners, some swimmers, and other cyclists – so to speak. Running, swimming, cycling, even walking – can be exhausting and yet extremely satisfying activities. When you run, swim, bike, or even walk really hard, it hurts. All of your muscles start to ache. Your pulse increases as your heart pumps more blood to demanding organs. Your body sweats and tingles as you burn away calories. And then, if you can hold out, if you can run, swim, bike or walk through the pain and exhaustion, there is a moment of exhilaration when it all makes sense. In this moment, the pain is transformed into power, and the exhaustion gives way to new energy. This moment is known as the runner’s high; it’s what keeps the marathoner going.

And so it is with the Christian life. As you know, living in the Spirit of God is both painful and exhausting at times, and yet extremely satisfying and exhilarating at other moments. Walking in the Spirit, embarking on the journey of discipleship, is a solitary decision to follow the way of the cross to work for what one believes to be true. It is a decision in favor of life and against the forces of death. It is a decision to struggle with salvation colleagues in the complete-yet-not-completed redemption of the world. It is a decision to stand up and be counted, and to pay the price for one’s commitment.

Today, in the church’s calendar, we remember Jonathan Daniels, a marathoner for racial equality and justice, whose race was cut short (as is the case in too many witnesses and martyrs of the faith). Jonathan might have been a classmate or friend of someone here as he attended Harvard in the early sixties and entered the Episcopal Theological Seminary in the fall of 1963.

For those of you who don’t know or remember Jonathan’s story, this young seminarian joined Martin Luther King’s 1965 march in support of voting rights in Selma, Alabama. In fact, when news of Dr. King’s request for volunteers reached the ETS campus, Jonathan asked for a leave to work in Selma with the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity.

Jonathan went to Selma where he was jailed for joining a picket line. After being unexpectedly released, he walked into a small store. As one of his companions, sixteen year-old Ruby Sales, reached the top step of the entrance, a white deputy sheriff appeared cursing her. Jonathan used his body to shield her, and as a result, he was killed by a blast from a 12-gauge shotgun. A jury led by a former senior warden of the local Episcopal parish acquitted the killer. Jonathan Daniels – seminarian, martyr and God-bearer – is remembered each year on this date (August 14) the day of his arrest and murder.

Like Jonathan, when we become one who continually reads the signs of the times in the light of God's continuing revelation, we join the great marathon of faith. Upon us falls the mantle of Elijah and the prophecy of Jeremiah. We become the disciple who chooses to speak and live God's word faithfully and not to hide from God in secret places. And like the ultra marathoner, the lone runner in the middle of the night, we are transformed as people out-of-step with society, not fully understood, and never really knowing whether or not what we do is right, but believing that we must do it because "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

As the race continues and the road grows long, some runners give up, throwing their hands in the air saying: "I can't do it any longer." Many will drop out of the race, some with broken limbs, others with cramps of exhaustion, and still others who simply say, "It's not worth it; I quit."

The same is true in Christian living. Throughout the generations, there have been those who have given up the faith, who have lost the vision, who for one reason or another have decided they no longer believe, they no longer care, they can no longer continue. There have been those for whom the light once shined very brightly but times changed, they changed, and something got lost: the preacher who no longer hears the voice of God; the couple who can no longer find love in their hearts for each other; the parent who can't see the joy in parenthood, the teacher who can't stand the kids; the social worker who starts hating the clients; the labor organizer who takes a bribe; the fellow who decides to take his life. These are those for whom the marathon has become overwhelming, overbearing, and no longer worth running.

For her endurance, I am in awe of Mother Teresa. When asked why she kept going and kept doing her ministry of compassion, even during periods of great doubt, she said: "Because in all these people, I see the image of Christ: his wounded hands, his weary eyes, his loving heart." Or Nelson Mandela, who spent over a quarter century in prison and yet kept alive his vision of peace, justice and reconciliation, and was able to become president of his nation. His marathon was nourished and sustained by his memory of freedom.

Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and others like them are marathoners who do not give in to defeat but they keep them going. As the prophet Isaiah said: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint.”

In his autobiography, *The Long Haul*, labor and civil rights organizer, Myles Horton described the importance of building one’s life with a good back log – the piece of wood that actually keeps the fire burning. Horton described it as the angst, determination, hope and faith to keep going – even when you really want to give up.

Running the marathons of life is not easy. It demands endurance, strength, discipline, and commitment. It also requires faith – faith in oneself. Running the race that is set before us as people of the Resurrected Spirit is also not easy. It too demands endurance, strength, discipline and commitment. And it too requires faith – faith in oneself – yes, but more importantly, faith in one’s God: faith that we will not be abandoned on the road, faith that we will be given the courage to continue and the map to find our way, faith that the race is worth running.

So today, the first day of the rest of our lives, let us renew our commitment to our long race, particular to our own circumstances, confident that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have run the race before us and passed on the baton, and by Jesus, who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith – the ultimate, ultra marathoner.