

RUNNING THE RACE

October 25, 2009

Texts – Jeremiah 31: 7 - 9

II Timothy 4: 1 - 8, 16 - 18

There aren't many sports analogies in scripture. When you find one, a friend of mine used to say, you better pay attention. Paul presents one in his letter to Timothy. "*I have fought the good fight,*" he says; "*I have finished the race . . . Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day.*" [II Timothy 4: 7-8]

I am not a runner or a racer of any kind. In my youth I did participate in a number of competitive sports – swimming, football, even a little basketball and baseball. I wasn't very good at any of them, but my inadequacies have never gotten in the way of my enjoyment as a spectator. That's been especially true of sports during the month of October this year, but I won't go into that just now (!).

How about you? What are your favorite sports? What races have you run? Are there any of which you can say, "*I have finished the race*"?

I can almost say that of the one that is called "parenting." It's a marathon event some of us are invited to participate in, without benefit (in my case at least) of any real training or preparation. It started for me thirty eight years ago next Tuesday (October 27, 1971), when my first child was born. I used to think that I had finished that race when my youngest graduated from college. "He doesn't live here anymore," I said to a telemarketer who called our home one night shortly after Dan's graduation. Donna overheard me. "You've never admitted that before," she said. She was right.

I wanted to say, "*I have finished the race,*" but of course you never really finish. They grow older and live far away, but you're always their parent come what may. It's a life-long vocation, but the intense part . . . the day in and day out, twenty fours a day, seven days a week part . . . that you do finish.

Some of you, I know, are still in the midst of that. You have my sympathy (!) and my admiration. Lots of us know what it's like. We have our own memories. But none of us can know exactly what it's like for you. It's a different field for each contestant. As you run, I hope you can hear us cheering you on.

"*I have finished the race,*" Paul says. What other races do we run? One that Donald Levinson named some thirty years ago is entitled "Becoming Your Own Man." It's a process, he said, that every male in our society undergoes. You start out trying to be like your father. Then acceptance by your peers becomes all important. When that ceases to satisfy, he went on, you try to fashion a self that is pleasing to those you admire and respect – your parents, your spouse or partner, your colleagues and friends, your mentors and heroes. Finally, Levinson argued, you reach a point where all of that has been done, be it successfully or unsuccessfully . . . it doesn't really matter any more. Why? Because you've become your own man, your own person – a person unlike

any other. Oh, most of us incorporate parts of others into the selves we are, but the mix of that in each one of us is unique. The goal, he said, is to become your own person, and to be comfortable and at peace with the self you are.

Levinson suggested most men devote themselves to this task between the ages of 30 and 40. He called it a “stage” or a “developmental process,” but the image of “race” works just as well. I’m a little slower than most guys. I’m over 60, but I think I can finally now say: “I have run this race.” How about you? How are you doing with it?

“I have fought the good fight,” Paul says; *“I have finished the race.”* He never ran the one called parenting. He did succeed in becoming his own man . . . but note it well – it was not easy for him. He started out a fanatic prosecutor of Christians, and spent the next twenty years embroiled in sectarian controversies. It wasn’t until his late 50s that his writings finally began to demonstrate a sense of being at real peace with the person he had become.

So parenting and personhood are races that many of us run. Are there other challenges we face that also feel like a race? Well I haven’t mentioned the whole career thing, have I? Is that a race for you? A contest? We call it, sometimes, a “rat race” – not a very affirming image for “career development,” is it? One of my favorite quotations says, “If you want to get to the head of the pack, be prepared to run like hell!” A lot of folks do.

Are there others? Those who are students know about the race to get good grades – to build a transcript that will open the door to the college or graduate school of your choice, to say nothing of the scholarships and grants without which a letter of admission can be meaningless. There is also (isn’t there?) the race to achieve not just emotional but financial security. Truth is, it is one of the hardest races of all, because the finish line keeps moving.

When your youngest child finally finishes school and moves out on his or her own, the race is over, ready or not. And when you wake up one day and see, as though for the first time, a wrinkled face and thinning hair staring back at you in the mirror (to say nothing of a receding hair-line!), the race is over, ready or not. And when you finally walk across that stage and they hand you your last diploma, the race is over, ready or not.

“I have fought the good fight,” Paul says; *“I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.”* What’s that about – “Keeping the faith.” Is that a race too? Paul certainly makes it sound that way. “Keeping” – it means “holding onto . . . persisting . . . enduring.” Sounds like work, doesn’t it? Some things are like that.

“When I fall in love,” an old song says, “it will be forever, or I’ll never fall in love again.” Trouble is, forever is a long time. Falling in love is easy; being in love “forever” is another matter. Takes some effort, doesn’t it? Some “holding onto” . . . some “persisting” . . . some “enduring.” Some would say it is not easy at all, but that it’s worth it. It’s worth it.

“I have kept the faith,” Paul says. And then he goes on to talk about how hard it has been, and how lonely. We skipped over some of those verses in our reading. *“Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica,”* he writes;

Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me . . . Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus . . . Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm (he says) . . . Beware of him yourself . . . At my first defense no one took my part; all deserted me. [II Timothy 4: 10-12, 14-16]

I don't hear bitterness in this, nor self-pity. This is just the way it is, he seems to be saying. It hasn't been easy.

Keeping the faith. Holding on to it. Persisting in it. Enduring with it. Not an easy undertaking. Not for Paul . . . Not for any of us.

Parenting can drive you to the edge of letting go, can't it? It did me at times. Three o'clock in the morning, and there's nothing more to do and you've already been up walking and rocking and singing for what feels like forever . . . Don't you just want to give up? Don't you ever want at times like that to say to God – "This is too hard! This is too much! I don't understand this! I thought this was the most wonderful gift you had ever given, but Lord I've about had it!" If you've never said that, then get down on your knees and thank God. But if you have, then you know what Paul is talking about here, don't you?

"*No one took my part,*" he says; "*all deserted me.*" It feels that way. It's hard. I can remember one night, when the colic was particularly strong, saying out loud in desperation, "I quit!" But there was no one there to take my resignation, and I felt foolish and ridiculous and guilty, so I just kept keeping on, holding on, persisting, enduring.

"*But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength,*" Paul says. How does that work, do you suppose? That's the real question. Is that kind of help available to me . . . to you . . . or is it something only special people like Paul receive?

I want to try and answer that question this morning, but before I do, let me lay out two pre-conditions. I want to say, first of all, that if strength is available to us from God, then it must be available to all of us. It's all, or it's none. Let me hasten to add that this is not "Bob Lee's Condition;" this is simply the Bible's own supposition. "*God shows no partiality,*" we read in Acts 10, verse 34; "*but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*" So it's either all, or it's none.

That's one. Here's the second – If strength is available to us from God, then it is available to us in every time and in every place, in every endeavor, in every race. God does not engage in triage. God doesn't say – "This one's easy, you can handle it by yourself; but this one's a little tougher, so I'll lend a hand here." We think that way. We act that way. But that's not the way of the Divine as it is described in the pages of this old book. The Lord is "*good and forgiving,*" the Psalmist says, "*abounding in steadfast love to all who call . . . In the day of my trouble I call on thee, for thou dost answer me.*" [Psalm 86: 5, 7] "*The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down,*" the 145th Psalm says; "*the Lord is near to all who call upon him.*" [Psalm 145: 14, 18]

So by it's own terms, if there is help from the God of this old book – it is as available to one

as it is to all, and it is offered to us in every race and in every place. Could that be true?

What about this race called parenting? I will testify to God's grace and strength in that place. Yes I've known the desperation of colicky nights, and of heart-breaking parent-teacher conferences. I put my hours in at the hospital and in the emergency room. God help me I also went to the police station a time or two. I felt overwhelmed, inadequate, humiliated, despairing, but . . .

But I also experienced unspeakable joy, tremendous pride, and surprising grace. Sometimes what it took to get to that other side was something as simple another person reaching out with a kind word or a refreshingly truthful observation. Some of my greatest allies and God's most effective angels were the teachers of my children – especially those who helped me to see them without all the distortions and complications of my own projections wrapped so tightly around them.

Did I mention prayer? Oh, I did on more than one occasion pray that Erma Bombeck prayer, "Lord, don't let me kill my children!" But I also prayed in calmer times . . . prayed for strength, for guidance, for protection for each one. Time and time again, that praying helped me. Did it miraculously change them? No. What it changed was me – my attitude, my spirit, and therefore my mood, my words, my actions. I know I didn't run the race flawlessly. I know I didn't parent perfectly. But I can say with great satisfaction, "I have finished it, and it is good." I can also say without any hesitation whatsoever, "I did not run that race alone; God *stood by me and gave me strength.*"

You won't be surprised, I'm sure, to hear me say that the same has been true for me in those other races I've mentioned – the journey toward personhood, the quest for education, the search for career, the pursuit of material sufficiency. Were there times when I felt abandoned? Alone? Utterly cut off? Sure there were. But in it all and through it all there was another standing by me, walking alongside me, holding me up when I was ready to fall, picking me up when I stumbled. Sometimes God's help came through the voice of a friend. Sometimes it was the warm embrace of my mother or father. Sometimes it was just remembered words whispering in my ear – I love you and will never ever abandon you.

Was prayer part of it? You bet. Spoken and unspoken; formal and informal. Prayer expressed in words, both in private and in public, and prayer as it is communicated with "*sighs too deep for words.*" But note it well – public worship was also part of it . . . an absolutely essential part of it. Coming Sunday after Sunday – sometimes willingly, eagerly . . . and sometimes reluctantly, not really feeling like it but coming anyway. Letting the words of scripture speak to me and challenge me. Allowing the music to wash over me and sometimes carry me. Our anthems and hymns are prayers you know: prayers that speak at a deeper level than intellect alone can do.

Let me close with the old story of a man named Martin Rinkart. He was a pastor in the little town of Eisleben, Saxony, back in the 17th century, during the time of the Thirty Years War. Sacked by Austrians and Swedes alike, the town was crammed with refugees. Plague struck not once, not twice, but four times during twenty-eight years, decimating the population, including Pastor Rinkart's family. He was the only minister who survived and had to do as many as fifty funerals a day. When the news of peace finally came, Pastor Rinkart sat down in his study and penned these words:

"Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices, who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way, with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today."

Paul says, "*But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength.*" He testifies to the grace and power of God to see each one of us through the races we are called upon to run. Martin Rinkart's hymn ("Now Thank We Now Our God") does the same. "O may this bounteous God," he says,

"Through all our life be near us, With ever joyful hearts And blessed peace to cheer us, And keep us in his grace, And guide us when perplexed, And free us from all ills In this world and the next."

It's a prayer, of course, but it is also a promise. I bid you not just to trust it, but to experience it. Amen.