

Hebrews 12:12-17

“Limping Toward the Finish Line”

How many of you have been so tired that you have made a bad decision? Like eating what was on hand – let’s say, ice cream – for dinner, because you were too exhausted to do anything else? Or how many of you have snapped at someone when you walked in the door at home because you were dog-tired from work? Well, then this passage is for you. And me too, by the way!

In the beginning of Chapter 12, The Preacher talks about the Great Cloud of Witnesses that surrounds us. But he moves quickly to comparing our journey with Christ to that of a footrace. Combining the two, the image we have is that of our brothers and sisters in the faith who have finished the race and are at the Great Banquet Table with Jesus, arms outstretched, cheering us on, waiting for us to finish too. What a beautiful picture!

But before we get too excited, The Preacher wants his congregation to know that the great race of the Christian life is not an easy one. And because most of us are not professional runners, we are often struggling at the back of the crowd, like those who bring up the rear at a marathon. The words remind those weary, discouraged, and somewhat out-of-shape Christians to lift their drooping hands and strengthen their weak knees and by the power of Christ, stay the course.

This is how the Preacher starts pulling everything together to wind down his words. He wants us all to remember that when we are tired, we tend to make mistakes, choose poorly and react harshly. Now, I have never run in a race. But I have certainly been tired enough to feel my hands drooping, my knees weakening, and as if my whole body was out of joint. Sometimes just

from a normal day! But one specific time comes to mind where my physical weariness led me to make decisions that were the kind that Hebrews warns us against.

When the children were in their late teens, we took a vacation to California. We had spent our honeymoon in San Francisco and decided to show them some of our favorite spots. We also covered Napa Valley, Monterey, Carmel by the Sea and Yosemite.

While we were at Yosemite, we made the decision to hike to the North Dome, an almost nine-mile hike, round trip that provides a beautiful view of Half Dome. Now, I will have to say that, while it is just under 1,000 foot gain in elevation, it was an exhausting climb for me. Once I outgrew the tree climbing stage at about age 12, the only physical activity I participated in was cheerleading. In the seventies, this simply involved cartwheels, screaming, jumping and some relatively easy gymnastics.

So 30 years, 2 children and more than several pounds later I agreed to “hike up to see a really cool view” as it was presented to me. Friends, I thought I was going to die! However, I have enough stubborn, Scottish genes in me and made it to the top without complaining – much. And I will admit that, once we were at the top, I felt so accomplished, so proud, so elated!

But then, I made a terrible discovery. I now had to WALK BACK DOWN. I will honestly tell you that, during that last mile, only the thought of the building that sold food and drinks at the bottom got me there. And once inside, did I buy bottled water? Did I eat almonds or an energy bar? No! I immediately ordered a cheeseburger, French fries and a nice frothy, adult beverage! I kid you not!

The Preacher warns us about not making such snap decisions when we are tired by comparing our limping faith to Esau. For those of you who don't remember, Esau was the older twin brother of Jacob, son of Isaac and Rebekah and grandson of Abraham and Sara. As the

oldest, he was the recipient of the birthright – the heir apparent as it were. But one day he came in after a long day of hunting, ravenous and tired, and traded his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew.

Tom Wright tells us that this gave him “short-term relief but long-term misery.” His colorful description is this: “At the end of the race when they were handing out the T-shirts, Esau was in the chow line and missed it!” From that time on, everything associated with Esau seemed cursed. He married two Hittite women, which was in violation of both Abraham and God’s injunction. His people ultimately became the Edomites, who were constantly at war with the Israelites, until they were overtaken by the Babylonians and finally mixed in with the Nabataens. If you go the Holy Land next summer, you will get to see Petra, where it is believed that Esau’s descendants died out.

Jacob, though not an angel himself, went on to be listed in the genealogy of Jesus. So, the point that is made is that we should not grab things foolishly or shortsightedly because, in the end, it might not be what we need. Then the Preacher tells us we can avoid such pitfalls during our personal race of faith by paying attention to those around us, making peace with our brothers and sisters in the world and imitating Jesus’ righteousness.

In our world of violence and abuse, we are often warned to take note of our immediate environment for safety purposes, but I don’t think that is what the writer of Hebrews means when we are told to pay attention to those around us. In this context, we are being reminded that being a part of the great cloud of witnesses is a privilege. And with privilege comes responsibility.

Therefore, it is up to us to help keep our fellow Christians on track. If we see brothers and sisters in Christ making poor decisions or taking a path that could cause them to stumble, it

is up to us to steer them back on course. The Apostle Paul told the church at Rome: “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.”

By the same token, just like the witnesses in Heaven who are cheering us on to the finish line, we are to stand at the finish line, encouraging one another in our achievements and our efforts for Christ. But even more importantly, we are to pay attention to those church members who quietly slip out the side door and never come back!

Friends, if you haven't seen someone in worship in a while, give them a call. Shoot them a text. Send them a card. If someone who regularly comes to Sunday School or Circle just stops coming, let them know they are missed. People like to hear from the Pastor, and I try to search for those sheep who are missing from the fold. But think how much it would mean if two or three or SIX people reach out!

The writer of Hebrews also says that, while we strive toward the finish line, we are to live in peace with one another. He even says, “Make sure no bitter root grows up to cause trouble or defile many”. Friends, this verse pure and simple is about forgiveness. This is one of the hardest spiritual practices in life.

I used to lead a women's retreat once a year at the Presbyterian Community when I served as Chaplain. I would transform our Activities Room into a retreat room and between 30 and 40 women in their 70's, 80's and even 90's would gather and learn and share on the chosen topic all afternoon. It was one of the biggest and most loved events of the year.

At the end of each retreat, I would hand out evaluations which included asking for ideas for next year's event. EVERY YEAR someone would ask for a retreat on forgiveness and EVERY YEAR I would ignore it. You see, there was someone in my life that I had not forgiven.

Therefore, I did not feel qualified to teach on that subject. Finally, after SEVEN years of carrying around a grudge, I realized that this person not only had NO IDEA how badly he had hurt me but probably did not care. My inability to forgive was only hurting me.

So the topic of forgiveness is a tough one and deserves its own sermon. And I have preached several times on forgiveness here. But in the context of community, of being a part of the great cloud of witnesses, we really don't want to spend eternity with people that we hold a grudge against. And we certainly don't want to spend eternity holding a grudge against ourselves.

Again, the Apostle Paul says: "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Eph 4:31-32) And while our Lord hung on the cross, dying for your sins and mine, he cried out about those responsible for his death: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

But honestly, these are just words on a page until each individual is willing to do the grueling work which leads to forgiveness. It has been my experience that it takes a true desire to forgive, much prayer, and help from the Holy Spirit each day. Sometimes, I even have to pray to want to forgive before I can begin the process of forgiving. But when the pain of bitterness starts to truly eat us alive, God will help us find forgiveness, even towards ourselves. And I have to believe that just an awareness of our NEED to forgive is enough of a start for God to work with.

I am also aware that The Preacher in Hebrews includes the words to make peace "in the world" and that topic, too, deserves a sermon on its own. But as simple as it sounds, I do not believe we can make peace in the world until we have peace in our own individual hearts. In our families and churches and communities.

Finally, we are told to imitate Jesus' righteousness. This may be the hardest requirement of all. Jesus would NEVER have ordered a cheeseburger and a cold beer at the end of an eight-mile hike. Jesus would not let someone else or their needs slip through the cracks. He spent the majority of his ministry among those who were outcast, foreigners and deemed "less than" by the good Jews who were the religious leaders of the day. Jesus would never hold a grudge against himself. He would go to God, have it out with God, forgive himself and move on and be determined to do better in the future.

But Jesus was fully human and fully Divine. **You and I are fully *human*.** We can NEVER choose as well as Jesus Christ. We can NEVER attain the level of forgiveness that Jesus did and friends, precisely BECAUSE Jesus did, we do not have to. However, we are called to STRIVE each day for it. We are called to be imitators of Christ's words and deeds.

Simply put – we can become more Christlike each day, but we have to do our part. I had a friend whose child was graduating from college and did not have a job. He also had not printed the first resume or gone on the first interview! She finally said, "Will, you cannot just sit in a field and think 'The Lord will provide' and expect a job to fall in your lap."

In the same way, we cannot expect to become more Christlike if we don't TRY to think, act and speak LIKE CHRIST. This takes knowing Christ through God's word, spending time with Christ IN his word and through prayer and THEN choosing the words and actions that we think Christ would choose. This does not come naturally. But the closer we stay to Jesus, the more likely we are to achieve it.

In one of my favorite country songs, Rodney Atkins, teaches how important it is to choose wisely because we never know who may try to imitate us! The song is "Watching you" and it goes like this:

Driving through town, just my boy and me
With a happy meal in his booster seat
Knowing that he couldn't have the toy
Till his nuggets were gone
A green traffic light turned straight to red
I hit my brakes and mumbled under my breath
As fries went a flying and his orange drink covered his lap
Well, then my four year old said a four letter word
That started with "s," and I was concerned
So I said, "Son, now where did you learn to talk like that?"

He said, "I've been watching you, dad, ain't that cool?
I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you
And eat all my food, and grow as tall as you are
We got cowboy boots and camo pants
Yeah, we're just alike, hey, ain't we dad?
I wanna do everything you do
So I've been watching you."

We got back home, and I went to the barn
I bowed my head, and I prayed real hard
Said, "Lord, please help me help my stupid self."
Then this side of bedtime later that night

Turning on my son's Scooby Doo night light
He crawled out of bed, and he got down on his knees
He closed his little eyes, folded his little hands
And spoke to God like he was talking to a friend
And I said, "Son, now where'd you learn to pray like that?"

He said, "I've been watching you, dad, ain't that cool?
I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you
And eat all my food, and grow as tall as you are
We like fixing things and holding mama's hand
Yeah, we're just alike, hey, ain't we, dad?
I wanna do everything you do
So I've been watching you."

God is indeed watching each of us. And it is up to us, in the great cloud of witnesses, to help our brothers and sisters by imitating Christ, in case they are watching us too! So as we limp toward the finish line, being cheered on by all those who love us from centuries before and even in the next pew, let us know that the journey is well worth it. But we have to run the race ourselves. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.