

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity – Vicar Anderson sermon
Hebrew 12:1-2: “A Race to Completion.”
September 17/18 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Oh, Heavenly Father, we come before you asking for endurance to run the race of this life. Give us strength to overcome sin and patience for the road that is before us. Keep us in mind of you, that you have sent your only Son to run the race to completion for us. We pray that we continue on so we can join you and the saints that have gone before us in paradise. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the 12 chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

1. Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us get rid of every burden and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and let us run with patient endurance the race that is laid out for us. 2. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne.

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who has ran the race to completion and his victory counts as ours, dear fellow redeemed:

When I was growing up, I loved to play games that involved running. Tag, basketball, dodgeball, football, and many others. There was nothing better as a kid and being able to burn off that energy. Now as I mentioned games that I loved to play and be competitive at, there is one thing that I didn't mention. I despise running. Yes, I get that I ran around in all of those games, but to run on a track, to be timed on how long it took, what an exhausting affair and I had no fun doing it. My siblings were 4 year varsity track and cross country runners in high school. You know what I did, I golfed! There is a question when it comes to running in these long distance races for me and that question is, Why should I run a race that I can't win? Don't we find ourselves asking the same question when it comes to the race we are currently in. The race of life. Is that not what the writer to the Hebrews calls it? When it comes to this race, we are going to have a lack of training in certain spots. What we need to do is to fix our eyes on Jesus as those who have gone before us have done, for in Christ, this will be a race to completion.

Unfortunately for me, track is one of the oldest sports around. The Greeks and the Romans loved the races and games. The Olympics would take place starting around early 8th century BC. More famous than that is the great Colosseum that was built in Rome in 70AD. At the Colosseum they had many games. It was so well known that many wealthy people would come and watch the games. Like today at a professional sporting event, they even had a seating chart. If you were wealthier, you were up front. The nosebleed tickets still put you up in the nose bleeds. Interestingly when the Colosseum is built, it happens to coincide with early Christianity.

Why is this significant? Well, I have not told you what kind of games they played. They had track, but they also had battles there. It was an arena. Gladiators would fight. They would fight people; they would fight exotic animals. Lots of Christians attended these games. Instead of in the stands however, they were in the arena. They were being executed.

Like the Christians before us, running the race for Christ comes with its challenges. Jerusalem was sacked in 70 AD by Rome. The Jews had been displaced for their insurrection. The early Christians were considered a sect at that point. They were calling them "Followers of the Way". Sects have a hard time belonging in the world. When you are considered as such, people try to remove you. Rome at this time believed in emperor worship. Anything other than that was unlawful. Besides this, Rome would also use rumors to try and stop the spread of Christianity. It is now 2022, and our race still has challenges like these.

Our race here on this earth, our race here in this life, requires lots of training. We have to race against the world as it tries to trap us in sin. The world is a very tough opponent. It flaunts so many things, like the junk food you are not supposed to eat to get in shape for a race. Those habitual sins that we crave most dear are like our sweets. Drinking to much, not caring about the language that comes out of our mouths, finding out the latest gossip, diving onto the pornography site for self-indulgence. See the world plants these traps because once we are caught in them, we don't look like Christians anymore do we? The world can label us hypocrites. We look no better than anyone else. They do not see Christians who fail at times. We have to overcome the attacks that we face for running the race for Christ. This comes with the territory. Jesus told us that this was not going to be easy. *Luke 9:23-25 says, "If anyone wants to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. 25. After all, what will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world, but destroys himself or is lost?"*

Without constantly training, we can lose sight of the fact that Christ won the race. Going to church on Sunday's, reading devotions, and going to God in prayer are the ways that Christians train. How often do we read our Bible? Once a day? Once a week? Once a month? Maybe a couple times a year? Being engaged with God's word allows us to stay focused of the race. We hear Jesus telling us how the race is won. If we get out of our training, if we slow down even for a moment, then we have a problem. We can be overcome with fear in what is to come, we lose patience, and we run the risk of dropping out forever. We have no reason to worry about what the future will bring. We have no reason to lose patience with God, but that is what we do. If we get too far into the future, we worry about the problems to come. When the world attacks, we scream at God where are you. Why aren't you helping me in my time of need! Too long out of our training, and we can start to think, God you must not be there, I don't hear you.

Verse 2 reads, *Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who is the author of our faith and the one who brings it to its goal. In view of the joy set before him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of God's throne.* Christ has indeed ran the race ahead of us and he won it. He began it just like us. He began as a lowly child. He lived a life like the one that we are living now, except he lived his perfectly. He overcame the trials and temptations of the world. The Devil tried every which way to stop his race. He offered Jesus way's out. He tried to show Jesus how it was in his power that he didn't have to finish the race. Jesus fought off the Devil and

willingly lived out our hard earthly life. He became under the Law for us living a perfect life in our place which the Father counts as our life by faith in the Savior.

He became a curse for us and overcame it. He kept his eye on the prize. God couldn't even look at Jesus when he was on the cross. At that point Jesus once again could have said enough. Yet, he carried on, he carried on until the finish line had come. When he saw the finish line, he said, "It is finished". With the earthly world being defeated and Satan's schemes be thwarted, he had the last competitor to beat and that was death itself. He reversed the outcome of death with his death on the tree. Three days later death would be defeated. Jesus would rise on the third day crushing death and crossing the finish line for our redemption.

We have the ultimate plan when it comes to making sure we have the endurance to run this race. To start off, we need to train. That training starts off with daily contrition and repentance. Daily contrition and repentance allow us to start every day fresh and a new in the grace of God. Strengthening us for our challenges ahead. The food or nourishment for the race comes from the Means of Grace. Remembering our baptism with our daily contrition and repentance and we drown our Old Adam. Then our New Adam will rise. Holy Communion gives us the strength and knowledge that Christ death and resurrection paid for our sins. Jesus wants us to fix our eyes on him as he is our example as well as the Saints that have gone before us.

The saints of old show us how to run the race. We see those in Scripture. Moses, Joshua, David, the prophets, the disciples. Here are our examples and they are nicely recorded right in Scripture with their detailed accounts. They show us how to live Christ like lives in persecution and how to pick ourselves up again, as they all were not all perfect. In our gospel text Jesus encounters the 10 lepers. They ask Jesus for mercy and he has it. The Samaritan comes back to worship Jesus realizing he has been cured. He shows his faith as Jesus confirms it made him well. How about the saints that have gone before us that we know personally? A mom, a dad, a grandparent. I will always remember my Grandma Homann as the person who I looked up to, who let her faith shine. We tend to forget about them don't we. We don't think of them as finishing the race, yet that is what they did. They crossed the finish line! The faith of those ahead of us are shining examples which envelope us like a bright cloud in this dark world.

We want to put our faith into practice by helping others and doing works of service. As we struggle with our race, we don't want to forget about our neighbor who also struggles. Some of our neighbors don't even have the training or the nourishment that we have. They don't even have the good news that we have. Therefore, we want to remember what the saints of old did. They left an imprint on us for a reason. They were our example so that we can be an example for others. We can give our time and our efforts. Lots of the time people are looking for help, and like us, we all are stubborn, we all want help, yet we don't ask for it. We want to concentrate on Christ, he is both the start and end of the race, he is the ultimate witness who ran the race and overcame it. He already won the race for us. We must remember that we aren't winning it for ourselves. When we fail, which we will, a lot, he gives us the strength as he already won it.

Running the race can be hard. Over time it can feel that exhaustion will just take over. We do have the training, we do have the strength. We will overcome the persecutions, the trials of this life. The saints that have gone before us give us hope. They finished their legs of the race and

we know for certain that it was not in vain. We will continue and forge on. This race can seem daunting, but it is a race worth running. Christ has already run it for us, and with that knowledge knowing that the race is won, we know for certain we will hoist the gold. We are running the race, but thanks be to God that Jesus has already won it for us. We will cross the finish line, and we will be reunited with the saints and with Christ forever and ever. Amen.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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