

<read text Heb 12:1-13>

When was the last time you saw someone trying to run a marathon while carrying a cooler of beer? It seems absurd, doesn't it? How could anyone really think that would be good idea? All it's going to do is slow you down, it's not going to help you in the slightest. Could someone really be so attached to beer and so ignorant about what it takes to run a marathon that they might try that? Well, clearly not, we've never seen that. But the truth is that all of us come into this life with that kind of foolish ignorance.

Life stretches out before us like a race. The goal, the ultimate finish line, is heaven. Born into this world as we are, not only do we have no idea what the rules are or the best way to run the race, but we don't even know the course. We have no idea which direction to even start out in. Some give up, right then and there and say there's no heaven, there's no God and there's no point in trying. Some strike out in any random direction and say "I'll find heaven on my own, in my own way." But the true course is hidden, it cannot just be found or even stumbled upon, it must be revealed to you. And it is God's word that is the roadmap. God comes to us in his word and sacraments, and gives us the course. It is there that we hear Jesus say, **"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (Jn 14:6) Fix your eyes on Jesus and you will not be lost. Jesus died so that you can have heaven, and he stands there waiting for us. So, knowing the way, run your life toward him.

But it's not quite that simple, is it? Anyone who has run a marathon will tell you it takes more than simply knowing where the finish line is. And the same is true of life. Even though we have the course marked out for us, the going is not easy. And oftentimes as we stand where we are and look down the long road of life, we get disheartened. This is going to be rough. And wrapped up in that self-pity, we can think, "I need something to make this easier on me. Something to make life a little easier." And so like a fool we look around, trying to find something that might help and...Aha! Here's the bottle. Ah, the sweet, sweet comfort of alcohol. Or maybe I'll look for comfort in sexual release, wherever and whenever I can find it. Hmm, you know, I'm always happier when I come home after buying something new, maybe I should just go shopping again. And hey, I always feel better when I can figure out who exactly to peg my problems on and let them have it. Boy that's so much nicer than accepting any kind of responsibility or fixing them. In ignorance, we look to make the journey easier and all we end up doing is loading ourselves down with baggage we don't need that doesn't really help at all. Oh sure, some of these things provide temporary and empty relief. But when we carry on in them to excess, they're all dead weight and they keep us from moving any closer to the finish line.

And by the time we realize it, by the time we see how harmful all these things are and by the time we really see how much they are dragging us down, it's too late. We picked them up willingly but now that we want to put them down, we see that they're chained to us, they've ensnared us because we were too busy focusing on our comfort and not fixing our eyes on Jesus. And now we can't let them go because they won't let us go. No matter how much we struggle and exert ourselves, they prevent us from running the course marked out for us by God. We are tied up in a mess of our own making, unable to free ourselves, only able to lie there and wait and hope that someone notices us and sets us free.

That someone is Jesus. Jesus sees our sorry state. Jesus has pity on our condition. Never mind that it's our fault we're trapped, he still wants to help. Never mind that it's *him* we took our eyes off of to end up like this. He comes by, and to every sin that we are tangled up in and tied to, he cuts us free, one by one, saying "I forgive you," to each. Because of him we can **"throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and ... run with perseverance the race marked out for us."** (v1) The weight is lifted, the baggage is gone and we can run free of them all because of him. And once we are set free from the painful mess he doesn't just walk away and leave us to do the same thing to ourselves all over again. No, our God does everything he can to keep us on that straight and narrow course for heaven. He does everything he can to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus for the rest of our life on earth.

Now, with a perfectly reasonable and rational person, it would be enough to explain to him or her that it is absolutely necessary to give your full attention to Jesus or you will die forever. You would think that would be straightforward enough. But that doesn't work on us, does it? We are not adults when it comes to these things, we are only children. We are constantly distracted by the things of this life, we are constantly taking our eyes off Jesus. And children who are easily distracted and snared away from the task at hand need discipline in order to grow and function properly. So our Father does need to discipline us from time to time. This discipline is almost never pleasant, but it is always vital. So the author tells us here, **"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?"** (v7) The father that never disciplines his children is really saying that he

loves himself more than his children, because that is the easier route for him. This is not true of our God. He loves us, and would not see us lost from the race of this life and so he provides discipline for us as we need it. And unlike our human fathers who could only discipline us as children and only as they thought would be best, our heavenly Father keeps an eye on us our whole lives and his discipline is always exactly what we need. (v10)

And he gives us everything we need to stay strong as we undergo the hardships that discipline us. He gives us the Holy Spirit, which comes to us regularly in the word and the sacraments. The power of the Holy Spirit helps us as we journey along the course marked out for us. He enables us to see things as they truly are. That thing along the path that looks like it would be helpful at first glance...we can now see that is a trap that would only slow us down or lead us off the course. And he gives us the strength to avoid them. Because of him we can run free, free of anything that would hinder us. This does not suddenly make the course free of difficulty or trouble...but he helps to keep us going. He is our personal trainer, showing us the best and easiest way to run with perseverance. He gives us wisdom to see what truly does help. And shows us helps we couldn't ever see before. He comes to us in the scriptures and offers encouragement. Like when he says in the reading today:

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (v2) Jesus had his course marked out for him as well. He had a path set before him by the Father just as we do. Jesus knew there would be trouble along the way, and he knew that near the end there was such torment that awaited him like we have never known. And yet he didn't even consider that torment worth mentioning compared to the joy he had in doing his Father's will. He knew that he would be whipped, beaten, mocked and nailed to the cross...set there to suffer the wrath of God for the sins of everyone, but doing it so that everyone could be forgiven through him. Jesus saw the course marked out for him by the Father but he fixed his eyes on the cross at the end, not for the torment or shame he would endure, but for the joy that awaited him there in redeeming the world and accomplishing the Father's will.

So as Jesus fixed his eyes on the cross and forged ahead, let us fix our eyes on Jesus and forge ahead. Let us **"Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart!"** (v3) By keeping our eyes firmly fixed on the cross as we run out the course; we will be blessed by God. First, by staying focused on Jesus, we will not lose heart in the midst of our trials and troubles along the way. When we are faced with difficulty and somehow think it too much or overwhelming, we fix our eyes on Jesus and remember how much more he suffered for our sake. We are reminded that he is watching us and he is in control of this world. We are reminded of his great love for us and that any troubles we have now are what's best for us and that he is here to help us through them. But more than that, by fixing our eyes on Jesus, we keep our eyes on the prize, just as he did. The joy of doing the will of our God who saved us cannot compare to any sort of temporary trouble we may have to endure here. And it certainly cannot compare to the perfection that awaits us in heaven. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and his cross enables us to truly run free in this life.

And Jesus does wait for us at the end of the course. He has perfected our salvation on the cross. His one final word there, which we translate as "it is finished," declared the work of salvation complete. It was the same word that Greek merchants would stamp on bills that had been paid in full. It is the same word that the writer to the Hebrews uses when he writes that Jesus is the perfecter of our faith. He began our journey of faith at his crucifixion and he will bring it to perfection in heaven where he waits for us now. There we will be confirmed in our holiness and able to sin no more. The course will be run and the troubles will have run out. It will be exactly as described in Revelation, **"...he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."** (7:15-17)

So I leave you with the encouragement of the author to the Hebrews. Cast aside anything that encumbers you or any sin that entangles you. Fix your eyes on Jesus and run the course marked out for you by God. He did not consider any amount of suffering worth even considering when compared to the joy of fulfilling his Father's will. He has set you free from the traps of this world. Remember what he suffered for you and keep focused on the joy that awaits you at the end of the race. Run the course. Run free. Amen.