

Cut Loose  
March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016

Hebrews 12:1-3  
Palm Sunday C

Pastor Robin Zeratsky

<read text Heb 12:1-3>

Have you seen some of the lengths that people will go to in order to win a race? I'm not talking about dirty tactics here, I just mean doing whatever they can to give themselves every advantage. Runners wear light fabric to keep themselves cool and to shed extra weight. Racecars are built to be as aerodynamic as possible to keep wind resistance down when they are cutting through the air at top speed. Male swimmers will even shave their legs to cut down on the drag that extra hair might cause in the water. People who want to win will do everything they can to cut out anything that might slow them down.

Brothers and sisters, do we have that kind of dedication when it comes to a far more important race? The author to the Hebrews compares our journey through life as Christians to a race. The goal, the ultimate finish line, is heaven. Now, we start this process severely handicapped. Born into this world as we are, we have no clue. We don't know what the rules are, we don't know where the course is, we only have the faintest notion from our conscience that there's even a race going on. Some give up, right then and there. Either they claim there's no race to be run or if there is they deny it to themselves. They say there's no heaven, there's no God and so there's no point in trying. Others feel the pressure of the competition but have no clue how to participate. And so in desperation, they 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 by nature, it cannot just be found or even stumbled upon, it must be revealed to you. Only God, through his word can show this to you. God comes to us in his word and sacraments, and he gives us the course. It is there that we find it so plainly and clearly marked as in the words of Jesus, "**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 course marked, we get disheartened. This is going to be rough. And wrapped up in that self-pity, we start to look for ways out. Or ways to make it easier. But instead of looking up where our help truly is, we look around. And we find money that can buy exciting new toys to play with and distract us from the problems. Or we find peace in the bottle that makes us forget what troubles we have. Or we get lost in friends and family that offer us only shallow comfort and platitudes and distract us from the route we have been asked to run.

But these things are deceiving us, whatever they are. They are not lightening our load, they are weighing us down. 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 they are traps, each one that seek to reel us in and trap us. We carry on in them to excess and we lose our way or the will to run forward. 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, they've become chained to us, we're tangled up in them and can't move at all 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.

Thank God there is that someone. 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. By his power we can cut loose of them and run again. 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.

Our Father gives us our greatest ally in this race, the Holy Spirit, which comes to us through 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 nice at first glance...we can now see that is a burden that would only slow us down or lead us off the course. And not only do we recognize them for what they are, he gives us the strength to avoid them. Because of him we can cut loose the burdens, avoid picking up any more, and run like people who want to win. 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 on Palm Sunday is a wonderful snapshot of how we are to run the course marked out for us now that we have been set free. 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 unimaginable pain worth *mentioning* compared to the joy he had in doing his Father's will. As he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, being honored and praised by the people, he knew that by the end of the week these people would be screaming for his blood. He knew that in a few days 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 he would have 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, as our author says, **"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 combined with his power means that any troubles we face now are not only what's best for us in the end, but 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 like we want to win.

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. Through him it is begun, in him it will be complete. 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.

So I leave you with the encouragement of the author to the Hebrews. Brothers and sisters, run like you want to win. In the power of God, cut loose 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 to win. Amen.