

Sermon - June 22, 2008 Psalm 86, Matthew 10:26-39, Romans 6:1-11

Life to its Fullest - Crosses to Bear, Causes to Serve, Blessing to Receive

Those who find their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

If we have been united with Christ in death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his...

Some years ago an Episcopal priest wrote a book about getting the most out of life, and its title was – Are you Running with Me Jesus? Something always bothered me about the title. Are YOU, running with ME, Jesus? It seems to me the title needed to be turned around.

In all our efforts to live life to its fullest, shouldn't the question be... Am I, Lord, are we Lord, running with you, Jesus?

Let us pray...

Lord of this day, in this hour, may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable in your sight, and your good word to us this day in Christ. Amen.

Sometimes, sometimes... life seems like a race that we've got to run, and run to win. Birth – and the starting gun goes off, and our happiness depends on how well we run, how well we get over the hurdles in life, and how many of life's prizes and awards we accumulate.

We're a bit like Big Brown, the horse, the triple crown threat. By our breeding, the care of those around us, our hard work and our good fortune, we are well trained for the race.... But - like Big Brown - we find ourselves limited by circumstances and we never get to really run the race...

And ...often, at the heart of the faith of someone running this kind of race in life, for the prize, is the question - are you running with me Jesus? Will you help me win this race?

But that's not the right question. And the whole idea of life as a race to win, also seems wrong, off key, not quite true. Races are about winners and losers, about one winner and lots of losers. And this not the gospel - that is not good news - and it's not God's plan, and it wasn't what Jesus was all about.

Life, life lived to – or toward – its fullest expression, is life lived not as a race, but as a journey of discovering, and uncovering, the wonder of God and of who God created us to be. And at the heart of our faith is a message of encouragement and hope for all of us, almost all of us, who will not win at life's races no matter how sincere and dedicated our efforts.

I suppose the myth of the American Dream is a good example of how we can miss the point of our faith by mis-focusing - A house in the burbs, 2.2 kids and a dog with money in the IRA for the golden years - there's the race and the prize... Are you running with me Jesus - so we can win this race?

But is that God's promise? Is that the race that Jesus' ran, or calls us to run? Is winning that race the key to happiness, to the fullness of life? Is success at such a race, for those who can run it, even success at all? Is that the definition of fullness of life?

Or is life much more like a journey of discovery than a race to rewards. A sometimes stressful even painful journey - for which there are no cheering crowds at a finish line where prizes are passed out to the winners. Rather the journey has no end, the journey of life is, by God's plan, its own reward.

In fact the winners in the real race of life, the journey of life, the real winners are - for example - the farmer who stands in the middle of his new lake in Iowa, that sadly was once his 1,000 acre farm. And - faithful - his life washed out - he is in Church this morning and he is singing praise to God that he and his loved ones live, and live for a new day.

Real winners are found in the cancer wards of our hospitals, where persons live with courage seeing far beyond the diagnosis of terminal. Winners, too, are those in the unemployment lines in Detroit, where, in the face of it all, people of faith say - thanks be to God who is my health and my salvation.

And winners are the veterans of the war in Iraq whose bodies have been shattered, and won't ever be put back together again, but whose spirit of hope and courage to make the best of things cannot be broken. That, nor that of their families.

Life TO the fullest Not Life IN the fullest. Life as a journey, a journey of discovering in ever new ways God's will for us, and presence with us...

Winners in life? Real winners in life? Are the men and women who see life as a journey that knows no earthly end. As a race that has already been won, and whose course only needs to be run faithfully.

Winners are those whose cry is - Am I running with you, Jesus?.

Martin Luther, the humble German Priest of the 16TH century who challenged the Roman Church for its worldliness, and faithlessness..... wrote these lines..

This life.... Is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, ... we are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished.. This is not the goal but it is the right road... At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.

At present everything does not gleam and sparkle - ask anyone along the rising banks of the rivers in Iowa and Illinois and now the rest of the Mississippi... Or in California – ask those whose homes have been brush fired to ashes and ruin.

Or former autoworkers who have been bought out and whose long hard work has been sold out. And yet, whose hope is not lost, whose faith promise is still valued and whose future is secured by Jesus Christ. “So that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life....

It is no easy thing to walk in newness of life - to be at peace no matter what... to be joyous in all circumstances. We do want such faith - such peace of mind, such trust and confidence...

And the truth is we each have had some wonderful moments when, in fact, God has seemed very very close and our faith very strong. And Christ like living very possible.

There was a moment like that the week we hosted SOS. After the storms had put on a spectacular display of lightning across the lake and sky, when one of the homeless guests, said... It's wonderful isn't it, what God can do. And what God does for us.

What God does for us. Those words from a homeless person – who knows life is not a race he will likely win, but a journey – of obedience, trust and faithfulness to one who has already won through..

But such moments - when it seems possible to fully focus on God and God's presence in our lives, pass all too quickly, and the daily demands quickly call our attention back to whatever race we are trying to run in the world.... At our jobs and their demands, family needs, even the tasks the church has for us.. And there are health concerns and worldly conflicts....

But all our efforts, with all our might, to make things right in this world .. will not bring us the peace we seek. Nor will our asking, praying, again and again, , upside down... are you running with us Jesus....?

And it is hard, hard to be more self-aware, self-reflective, to examine what we are doing to see if it squares with what we think Jesus would have us do

It somehow seems easier to ask - are you running with me Jesus... than to ask Am I running with you – Jesus?

We are not called to be Christ... we are called to be ambassadors for Christ, witnesses to him and his truth and his goodness and his love... to his way...

We bear crosses - in obedience to him and to his example.... Taking on the burdens of others even as he did... Sharing what we have even as he shared so much of himself....

And we serve causes that serve his call to us to feed and clothe and house and visit.
It is the very heart of the life of our church this month - Here opening our space - and in Pontiac building space - helping to house a family - and re new a whole area of that city...

It is a part - a substantial part of every offering to bring - and send on.... And it is the promise of this space... And it is a challenge to our lives as citizens - seeking those to lead us this fall, people who will call us to live beyond our self-interest and for the best interests of a world Christ called us to love.

And - it is the order of our days - this running with Jesus way of living into the fullness of our faith. It is beginning the day clear that the day belongs to Jesus.... And ending the day aware of the ways we have been less than we set out to be, but finding rest in the knowledge of God's grace and mercy... and new life giving love.

Life to its fullest? Not something for us to achieve - but a peace of mind and heart and soul we find in following the one who has forgiven our sin, covered our weakness, and granted us the blessing of his forever love.....

Life to its fullest? Nothing we can find no matter how hard we try... but a way we can live, in trust and obedience to the one who wills to be our Lord and Savior...

Who guides us to deeper faith by his words of instruction, if we will listen for them, and directs our actions by the indwelling power of his spirit if we can make room for it in our daily lives.

It is the power of this word whose meaning we can measure by the guidance it gives and the good news it promises...

Life to its fullest? - Are we running with you, Jesus? Amen.

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