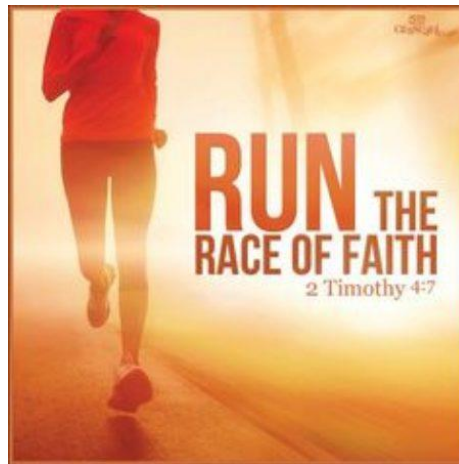


Sermon – October 23, 2022
“Finish the Race”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, and fill our hearts anew. Anoint your words, making them a transforming blessing that is conforming us to Christ's image and guiding us to fruitful labor with Jesus in his mission right here, right now. Amen

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ our Lord to each of you this day and all of the days of your lives to come. Let me give thanks this morning that the church has developed its budget and leadership plan for the coming year and is trusting God to provide for His church. The progress made on these items is a light for our congregation in a time of uncertainty, a light that brings hope that God's work in this community will continue through the members of this church and their willingness to be part of Jesus' mission. There are a few additional items to highlight in the life of our congregation this morning. We continue to work after school in the Good News Club at Northumberland Elementary School with children who are attending, and as they do, they are learning about Jesus. This week, Fairfields is hosting the families who are part of the club for dinner after the meeting on Wednesday. If your heart is stirred to help, I am sure that we can find a job for you, or you can come and sit at a table with those who come and share in a time of table fellowship. I would expect people to be here starting around 4:45 p.m.

On October 29th there will be a Called Conference of the Virginia Annual Conference to vote on the disaffiliation requests from thirteen churches. Please keep the delegates and these churches in your prayers as they are experiencing stress as they move through the rigors and challenges of disaffiliation. Many other Methodist churches in Virginia and throughout the U.S. have begun conversations about disaffiliation. Please keep all of these congregations in your prayers, asking that the love of Christ will be extended to all as they meet and make decisions. Now is a time for prayer in all of our churches, asking for God's will and guidance for the people called United Methodists.

As background for this morning's sermon, we should remember Paul's life goal, given to him by God for his ministry or work for Jesus. Paul's goal is found in Acts 9:15-16. Let me read it this morning. As a reminder, Holy Spirit is speaking to Ananias, sending him to Saul. "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'" Paul's life, captured in the scripture, is seen by him as a race to fulfill this goal. Now not every Gentile will hear the Gospel directly from Paul, but he is a key runner in the ongoing race of Jesus' mission to all people and especially to Gentiles. As Paul has run the race to achieve this goal under the guidance of Holy Spirit, he has taken the Gospel to Jews in Jerusalem and in many cities of the world. He has shared the good news of Jesus Christ with Gentiles in the places he has been led, and now it seems Paul has stood before the emperor, or will shortly, and when he does, he will share the Gospel with kings.

From the text, we can grasp that Paul believes he is nearing the end of his life. We read his view of himself being poured out like a drink sacrifice. Paul may be awaiting another trial or hearing before the Roman leadership that will determine his fate, but given what is happening to other Christians and from the outcome of their trials in Rome, Paul is not optimistic that the outcome of a second hearing will be favorable. Whatever the situation, it is clear from his writing that Paul is of the opinion that the end of his sojourn on earth is near, and at this point in the letter, he is commissioning Timothy to continue the work Paul has begun.

In this part of the letter to Timothy, Paul is reflecting openly to Timothy as one who knows his death is coming soon. We might also view Paul's instruction to Timothy in the letter as a parallel to what Jesus did with his disciples as his own death on the cross for our sin drew near. Jesus spent some of the last hours of his life reminding his disciples of his teaching and

what they would experience as they moved into the void in his mission to all the world that his approaching death would leave. In John's Gospel, we find these last instructions and prayer for his disciples most prominent. Paul's own life summary is that in this life his goal has been reached. Churches have been started in many Gentile cities, and Paul has elders in charge of those churches who are committed to moving Jesus' mission forward. Timothy is a clear example of such leadership.

Paul uses the imagery of an athletic contest in other letters to give an example of what it means for followers of Christ to be part of Jesus' mission. He uses that image again here to remind Timothy to fight the good fight, to run the race, and to keep faith. At first glance, only the first two of these ideas (fighting and running) seem to be related to athletics, with faith seeming to be an odd part of Paul's guidance. We should recall that in Paul's letters, the concept of faith has many definitions. It is used as a noun to express "the faith" or the objective of Christian belief. Faith is also used as a verb to speak of the act of believing in God or Christ. We also find faith used as an adjective to speak to how believers respond in life situations. And we can find faith expressed as an adjective that speaks to sayings being trustworthy or faithful sayings about Jesus.ⁱ The term has broad use in Paul's letters. The context here is of an athletic nature and the idea of faith would most likely take on the idea of Paul's running of the race having been faithful to the rules and constraints that Jesus has identified. It is in this definition of faith that Paul's use of an athletic example is maintained across all three of these descriptors. Paul has been faithful in his running of the race and has been faithful to Jesus' rules for the race. He has been faithful to Jesus' call and plan for Jesus' mission and faithful to the assigned goal Paul was given by Jesus. We also are those who are called to be part of Jesus' mission. We may not be called to stand before a king or leaders of an empire to boldly testify to the good news, but we each are given a charge to keep. Listen to the words of the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."ⁱⁱ It is clear that we are those sent into the world to share the Gospel. We are to follow the guidance of Holy Spirit and be led into the mission field of people around us who are searching for Jesus in the wrong places and lead them out of those places and into the kingdom of God. We each are to be those like Paul who are running a race that we as believers are called into, striving to finish strong, being those who

leave all we have on the playing field and are giving our fullest effort with no plan for defeat or turning back. Each of us are to be those who are investing the love we have received through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus into lives gathered around us by Holy Spirit. We are all called to be part of Jesus' mission to all people. We are to be runners in the race that we have been called to complete. We also need to remember we are not just to be running this race by moving quickly from person to person, but we are to run to those who are struggling to connect with Jesus and journey with them until they have made their own connection to Jesus and are able to run on their own to others. Our role as a runner is to come alongside others and to encourage them as we run our races together, races that are far more marathons than sprints. We are called to come alongside others and be with them as we run our races in this life. As we join with others and come alongside them, we are to witness to them, nurture them in faith, help them to grow in Christ as we share our own testimony with them, and above all love them as Jesus loves us. These are people whom Holy Spirit leads us to until our own time to be poured out as a libation arrives. One of our biggest challenges in our race is not being kept in a prison as Paul is, but just waking up to God's call into His mission to all people. We run the risk of not getting into the race, of missing the start of our race. Instead of running well with all of our heart, soul, and might, we risk being found as those who are asleep, sitting on the sidelines watching the game, but never getting onto the playing field that is Jesus' mission. To prevent such a tragic outcome in our lives, we are to seek to be those who have hearts opened by Holy Spirit to reach out to people and run along beside them for a season. We should be praying for a new person to run with whenever the one or ones we are currently running with come into the kingdom of God. Our prayer to God should be a continuous asking for our eyes to be opened so that we might see the needs around us, asking for our ears to be opened so that we are allowed to hear the cries for help in our community and for our hearts to respond in love to those we are called to run alongside for the next leg of our race.

Let's see if we can move some of what Paul is writing to Timothy out of the first century and into our own time. What does Paul's idea of running mean for us today? I know we don't write many letters these days, but think for a moment, if we were to pull out a blank sheet of paper, lay it out in front of us, and take a pen in hand to write the letter of our upcoming end of life, to whom would we address our letter? Whose name would be on the first line? Whose address would we put on the envelope when we are done? Who is the person we have invested

some of our life into nurturing them to take our place in God's mission when we have joined Jesus in heaven? If we can't readily identify someone, then we need to spend time praying to God, asking for Holy Spirit to guide us so that we might share what we have received with another so that they would become ready to continue the race and bring other people into the kingdom of God. The reward that Paul speaks to at the end of his race is not salvation, but the crown of righteousness. That crown does not come with salvation but from fighting the good fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith.

When Paul uses an example of an athletic contest, he speaks to the reward a runner receives for winning the race. The runner, for all of the training and work needed to prepare and win a race, receives a wreath made of material that dries out and falls apart. By comparison, when we run the race in faith and secure the crown of righteousness, we do not receive a perishable crown, but one that lasts for eternity. Runners for God who finish their race, keep the faith, and stand before Jesus the righteous judge on the last day, the day of judgment, will receive the crown, not one that fades but one that lasts for all eternity. Paul is clear as he writes that all who have longed for Jesus' appearing, who have participated in the race of Jesus' mission, receive this crown.

What does it look like to run our race in faith with someone? How do we take the gift we have been given and leave behind our comfortable seat on the sideline and get into the race and do so in faith? Kay and I were blessed and honored this past Friday night to attend the annual Gideons International Pastor Appreciation Banquet. The speaker had the gift of evangelism and shared many examples of his giving Gideon Bibles to people, showing them the plan of salvation in the back of the Bible, and their accepting Jesus as their Savior. He was excited to share the Gospel with people and share some of his life race with others. If we have this gift, we too should be out fishing for people with God's word. But not all of us have the gift of evangelism or if we have it, we are asleep. So how do we share Jesus? We have to share Jesus out of the gift we have from Holy Spirit. I came back from this year's New Room Conference with a prayer approach that I think will help us. When we are confronted with challenges that overwhelm us, like we are to begin sharing the Gospel or we want to know where we might enter the race, we can start by turning to Jesus and admitting we don't know what to do and then ask Jesus to help us become someone who is in the race, running alongside of another person. Our prayer to God begins by simply praying, "help or help me." Our help is asking Jesus to come and help us do

what we understand we are to do, but do not know how to do. Next, we need to realize that for most of us to participate more fully in Jesus' mission, we need to be changed. We need Jesus to do a work in us so that we can be used by him in his mission. In response to our need, we pray a simple prayer of surrender, which we can sum up as "change me." And then we end our prayer by asking Jesus to lead us into his mission, praying for Jesus to "lead me." We can summarize this into a simple but powerful prayer of "Help me, Jesus. Change me and lead me." After we have prayed this prayer, we listen for the guidance of Holy Spirit in our hearts and obediently follow his direction. When we pray this prayer, we are opening our lives to Jesus to take what God has placed in our hand and change us to use it in our race for our work in His kingdom. We are saying to Jesus, let me get into the game and use the gifts and graces you have given me for your kingdom. Put me in the game, Lord, put me in! And once in the game, we run with all we have until the game for us ends and we leave behind others to continue the mission of Jesus, right here, right now.

Pray with me: Jesus, we desire to be those who are running the race alongside those you would have us love into the kingdom of God. Lord, help, change, and lead us so that we might gain the crown of righteousness and become those who leave a legacy of love that will continue your mission to all people. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we pray. Amen.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission

ⁱ Towner, Philip H.. The Letters to Timothy and Titus (NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT) . Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ NRSV