

Running Our Race
Heb. 12:1-3
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Today is the close of the Olympic Games in Paris, and what a couple of weeks it has been. For me, it's so moving to see the whole world come together in the spirit of competition to celebrate the greatest athletes on the planet. Do you know how amazing these folks are? For comparison, in the 1988 Olympics, Carl Lewis won the 100-meter dash with a time of 9.92 seconds. This year, Jamaica's Oblique Seville finished with a time of 9.91 seconds...and came in last in the finals. I marveled at the skill and athleticism on display, empathizing with their pain as I stretched my body beyond its limits to reach the remote that had fallen on the floor. No guts, no glory.

I once thought I was going to be an Olympic athlete. I ran pretty fast as a kid, so I dreamed of one day standing on the podium accepting the gold medal while they played "The Star Spangled Banner." That dream died quickly when my girlfriend Candace challenged me to a race. I was 12 at the time. I had a well-developed sense of chivalry, but not of women's equality. When the race started, I decided to take it easy on her. But when she lapped me, I started to get the idea that I wasn't as fast as I thought.

In hindsight, that's OK, because I'm not sure I have what it takes to be an Olympic athlete. Can you imagine the amount of focus and dedication it takes to become one of the greatest in the world at your sport? Think about the amount of time that Katie Ledecky has spent in the pool or Simone Biles has spent in the gym or Lee Kiefer has spent practicing her fencing. Every athlete in Paris has spent countless hours working on their skills to bring them to this pinnacle of their athletic career. Only through tireless dedication and countless hours have they become the best in the world.

The fact is, to become good at anything takes practice, and that includes having faith. We sometimes talk about faith as a one-time event, like once you have it you never need to do anything else. But that's like saying once you buy a car, you never need to take care of it anymore. If you're going to use something often, even on a daily basis, you have to take care of it, feed it fuel, give it a checkup every once in awhile, so that it's ready to perform when the road gets rough. Having a living, breathing, active faith takes practice, it requires us to build up our spiritual muscles and hone our God-given skills. We need to continually dedicate ourselves to practicing our faith in order to become spiritual Olympians.

Paul knows a little about this dedication and discipline. In our first reading today, he uses a running analogy to talk about a life of faith. I'm thankful Paul doesn't emphasize speed as an important quality in our race of faith. Julien Alfred from St. Lucia won the women's 100-meter race in 10.72 seconds.. Sometimes it takes me 10.72 seconds to get up off the couch. To grow in our ability to do anything takes dedication.

But our race of faith is not based on speed; as the author of Hebrews says, it's based on perseverance, a word that has as much importance for us as it did for the original readers of this letter. The Hebrews were struggling in their faith, not sure or not if this character Jesus was truly the messiah, not sure what that meant for their lives if he was. Some were considering dropping out of their new-found Christian faith and

returning to Judaism or paganism; others were facing serious persecution because of their beliefs.

But the author of Hebrews has a message to speak to them: “Keep running.” Perseverance. He shows them the Spiritual Hall of Fame – Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses – and says that if they can run their race, we can run ours. They surround us now as a great cloud of witnesses, cheering us on to the finish line. We’re not called to finish first or fastest; we’re just called to finish faithfully.

Easier said than done, right? Living this life of faith can be a challenge, especially when things happen that cause us to doubt our beliefs or question God’s goodness. Hebrews says, “throw off everything that hinders and the sin that entangles” and run the race set before us. But sometimes we feel so weighed down. I spent some time with a church member this week who shared with me a litany of what she is dealing with, and with each revelation I could feel my shoulder slumping. Aging parents, difficult relatives, declining health. Sometimes life is a weight that can keep us from walking, much less running.

I have a vivid and bizarre memory from the Olympic games in Athens in 2004. Vanderlei de Lima of Brazil was leading the race at the 22-mile marker when he was attacked and forced off the road by a lunatic in a red kilt – a former clergyman, no less! To me, that is what happens to us sometimes in our race. We’re running along just fine when we’re suddenly surprised or attacked by something that threatens to slow us down or knock us off course. So often we get entangled in something that’s keeping us from running our race.

Sometimes these are things of our own doing, bad choices we make, sins we commit. On the old Saturday Night Live there was a commercial spoof of Wheaties. In it, John Belushi, not a small man, was shown in a track outfit winning sprint after sprint. And then we see him at the breakfast table eating of bowl of his “secret training ingredient”: little chocolate donuts, the breakfast of champions. The irony is not lost on me that I write my sermons, including this one, in a donut shop. I have met the enemy, and it is iced with chocolate! How often do we weigh ourselves down with bad decisions that keep us from running our race?

Other things that weigh us down are things out of our control, things like deaths and illnesses, job losses or broken relationships, anything political that brings out the worst in us. And these things can be so devastating, so demoralizing, that we just don’t feel like running anymore. When we are the most down on ourselves, we are tempted to look at other people’s lives, at how blessed they are, at how unentangled they seem to be, and we wonder, “Why isn’t that my race?”

But as we all know, everyone faces obstacles. Everyone. Hebrews tells us that the race we run has been marked out especially for us. This is the race we’ve been given to run. It may not be the perfect race, it may not be the smoothest track, we may not understand all the turns and obstacles. We can be frustrated by failure and hamstrung by hardships, our bodies may be aching, and everything seems to falling apart, but this is our race. I didn’t want my race to include some of the things it does, but I can’t change it. All I can do is run it the best I can.

You may not know the name of Marwa Bouzayani, but she was one of five athletes in Paris to wear a hijab, a traditional Muslim headcovering, while competing.

Marwa ran in the women's 3000-meter steeplechase. She finished sixth in her heat, not making the finals. She wasn't fast. She didn't win. But she ran her race. She finished.

For us Christians, the strength to run our race comes not only from the cloud of witnesses that has come before us, but from Christ, who has gone ahead of us, blazing a trail and clearing the path. "The Message" translates Hebrews 12:2-3 this way: "Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!"

You think you have it tough? Then you probably do. There may not be a lot of people who can understand how you feel. But Jesus can, because he's been through it. If you are facing a challenge, Jesus already faced it, took it to the cross, and beat it. If you feel that no one else knows what it's like, Jesus knows. He's been there and he is there now, right beside you.

Vanderlei de Lima didn't give up. Instead of letting his attacker ruin his race, he got back up and kept running. Although now in third place instead of first, he entered the stadium with his fists in the air, running with both arms extended up like an excited little kid. When asked why he was filled with such joy, considering he had been robbed of the gold medal, he said, "Most athletes never have this moment. I was able to medal for myself and my country. I'm happy with my medal. It may be bronze, but it means gold."

When we run our race, no matter whether we finish with a flourish or merely limp across the line, it means gold, because we are following in the steps of Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. I know it gets scary sometimes, but don't lose heart. Your race today may be one simple step in a new direction, but don't all races start with a single step? May the belief that Christ completed the race first and the promise that there is a cloud of witnesses cheering us on be the adrenaline for our souls that keeps us running and running and running. We're not called to finish first. We're simply called to finish faithfully.