

## **“Run for Your Life”**

A Sermon Preached at Duke Chapel on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

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Philippians 3: 3-14

*“For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh- even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.*

*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:*

*circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*

*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.*

*More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

*For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish,*

*in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,*

*not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,*

*but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*

*I want to know Christ*

*and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,*

*if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

*Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;*

*but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*

*Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own;*

*but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,*

*I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.”*

The name “marathon” comes from the historical legend of the Greek runner/messenger Pheidippides. Around the year 490 B.C. a gigantic Persian army landed on the plains of Marathon, menacing the city of Athens just 25 miles away. The Athenians prepared for a climactic battle that would determine the fate their civilization. Against all odds, the vastly outnumbered Athenian army defeated the Persians in battle: it was an unimaginable victory, a down-to-your-last-strike Tampa Bay Rays kind of victory, the kind of news that sends people running with joy. (Unless you’re on the other side – I’m sorry Red Sox fans). So, after the battle, in a story more likely fable than fact, a runner named Pheidippides was dispatched carry the good news of the victory to the terrified residents of Athens. Pheidippides ran the entire 25 miles across the plain of Marathon to the city, not once stopping for a fruity red energy drink. When he arrived, exhausted, dehydrated, saturated in sweat, panting, Pheidippides burst into the city assembly, and with his last breath he shouted, “Rejoice! We conquered!” And then he collapsed and died. The poet Robert Browning, writing much later, imagined that Pheidippides died with a smile on his face, that his heart gave out not so much from exhaustion as from sheer bliss: from pure euphoria at the victory, from overwhelming happiness at reaching his destination, from ecstatic joy at sharing such good news with the people he loved.

The Greek word that the Bible uses for the “gospel” or the “good news” was a word that referred to headline, ticker-tape-parade, battle-of-Marathon-type announcements about a great victory or blessing. And like the news of the battle of Marathon, God’s victory won in Jesus Christ is the kind of news that sends people running. It sends some people running for their lives, like the mysterious unnamed young man in Mark’s Gospel who, when he is nearly grabbed and arrested alongside Jesus, sheds his clothes to wriggle free and dash into the night- thus inspiring countless generations of campus streakers. Or, the news about Jesus sends some people running off in hot pursuit as seekers of truth, who beat the bushes to try to find out exactly what has happened, what he means: think of the way Peter and John sprint like Usain Bolt to the graveyard on Easter morning amid the confusing reports that Jesus’ body is gone, wanting to see the empty tomb with their own eyes. And there are

others whom the good news of Jesus sets running out of sheer joy at what they have found and out of desire to share the joy with others– think of the women who run away from Jesus’ empty grave in “fear and great joy” to tell his friends; or think of the Apostle Paul, the Pheidippides of Jesus, proclaiming even from his jail cell to the Philippians, “Rejoice! The Lord has conquered.”

In Philippians, Paul imagines his whole life as a kind long and arduous marathon, and he imagines himself as a runner hitting the wall and straining forward to break the tape at the finish line, trusting that it is all worth the pain and the burn: “forgetting what lies behind,” he says, “and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.” The Greek word which we translate as “press on” in this passage has the connotation of chase, of hot pursuit, of even hunting down. Paul is chasing after Christ. Of course, Paul had been hunting after Jesus for a long time – but at the start, when the news about Jesus first set him running, he was running *after* Jesus’ followers, trying to exterminate them. He was an Ahab-like hunter/persecutor of the church, on safari to bag Christians and take them off to jail for their wrong-headed ideas.

During that time in his life, Paul had been running towards a different prize. He wanted to be a religious success. He wanted to be holy. He wanted to be good. He wanted to follow God’s Law. He trained hard, and by outward measures, he succeeded. He lists his spiritual resume or CV (and CV is just short for curriculum vitae, which in the spirit of the running theme means “course of life”), and the CV goes on for pages. Circumcised on the eighth day after his birth (not a convert, but a life-long member of the faith), born of the tribe of Benjamin (a blue-blood with a good family name), a Hebrew born of Hebrews (dyed-in-the-wool fluent in the native language), as to grades at following God’s law, accepted into Phi Beta Pharisee.

Then, suddenly *Jesus* hunted Paul down on the road to Damascus. Then, in his weakness, Paul met and was cared for by one of Jesus’ people, Ananias. And then Paul came to a new understanding of Christ and his relationship to God’s Law – and the spiritual CV was torn to pieces.

Paul realized that he had been running for the wrong prize – that he had been running in the wrong direction.

In a 1964 National Football League game, Minnesota Vikings defensive lineman Jim Marshall scooped up a fumble by a San Francisco 49ers’ receiver and saw daylight ahead of him: none of the opposing teams’ red uniforms stood between him and the end zone, sixty yards away. So he took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go, churning in his purple helmet, purple pants, and white jersey, dreams of a touchdown dancing in his head. He heard the crowd roaring around him. He saw his teammates running alongside him waving their arms on the sideline. He cruised the last few yards into the end zone, and celebrated his touchdown by jubilantly tossing the football up into the stands.

Then a player on the other team walked up and gave him a hug. His eyes were opened. You see, Jim Marshall had just run to the wrong end zone, and scored two points for the guys in red. When you watch the television replay, you hear the announcer yelling, over and over, “He’s running the wrong way! Marshall is running the wrong way!” The only person in the stadium who didn’t realize Jim Marshall was running the wrong way was Jim Marshall. Marshall was like the man driving down the highway whose wife called him on his cell phone to tell him to watch out, because she had heard on the news that there was a crazy person driving the

wrong way down that same highway. The man replied, “You’re not kidding, honey – there’s not just one crazy person going the wrong way, I can see hundreds of them!”

Paul realized he had been running the wrong way. He had reached the end zone, he had been “successful” in running the wrong way – he thought. But his were Pyrrhic victories – the kind of successes that if you keep having them going are going to leave you defeated in the end. Then Christ knocked him on his keister, and Ananias came and gave him a hug, and his eyes were opened to the truth. Paul had always thought that God’s Law pointed one direction, and devotion to this man who called himself Messiah, Christ, pointed in another. Now he realized that Christ wasn’t the enemy of the Law, Christ was the fulfillment of the Law, the reason behind it. The Law was a means – Christ was the end. The Law had been a wonderful map: but now God had done something even better, had brought the Law to life by sending a faithful guide in Jesus who embodied, in the flesh, what the Law was all about, and who made it available to all people – all people. The Law, the map, as wonderful a gift as it had been, was always something outside of Paul – but this Christ, through the Spirit, could live within and through him, within and through God’s people, and enable them to be and do what they could never be or do on their own. What God wanted was not law-abiding citizens who played by the rules to justify their identity as God’s people, but what God wanted were sons and daughters who fulfilled the meaning of the Law because they had the heart and mind of this man Jesus – and now, through the Spirit, that could really happen in human lives.

So, Jesus wasn’t the one who had gotten lost and departed from the Law – Paul was – and Jesus was the one calling him to the new, surprising thing that God had done. And so Paul did what you do when you realized you’ve lost the trail and have been running the wrong way in your life: he repented, which means he turned around, made a 180. The stone that the builder had rejected, suddenly was made the cornerstone. Where he wanted to go, was *that* way. Goodness wasn’t going to be found going against Jesus, but by following after him. Goodness *was* Jesus.

Paul now had a new prize that he was running, chasing, hunting after. “I want to know Christ,” he wrote. He had a new focus, and a new way of understanding his life now: life had become the Marathon of the Messiah. None of the old status symbols or scoring systems on his spiritual CV mattered anymore. It didn’t matter how many committees he had served on, how many service projects he had done, who his family was, how well others respected his work. What mattered now was running after Christ, knowing Christ, being like him.

It wasn’t that those old ways and habits of success were bad things in themselves – it’s just that knowing Christ was so much better than anything else – of “surpassing value,” Paul says. On the day Brennan Manning joined the Franciscan order, an older Franciscan brother said to him, “Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable.” And this is what Paul discovered, what we discover, that truly knowing Jesus does not rob us of our fun or make us miss out in life, but that it is better than anything we can imagine – that it is the pearl of great price, worth more than all the other pearls combined. It doesn’t make us less than who we are, it makes us more than who we are.

C.S. Lewis wrote once that we human beings are far too easily pleased. We content ourselves with Spam when free steak is on the menu. We fool about with little things like “drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the beach.” Once you have seen the ocean, can you ever be satisfied again playing in a muddle puddle? So, too, Paul writes that even the things he has lost by following Jesus pale in

comparison to all he has gained – to the extent that he dismisses all those other things, good as they might be, as garbage-disposal stuff in comparison. (The actual word he uses is “rubbish”, but I can’t say that word nearly as well as Dean Wells – only a Brit can say the word “rubbish” with the right tone of being contemptuous and dismissive. You can’t twang “rubbish.”)

Paul is running towards a new prize now, a prize that is worth it: towards Christ. “So, forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the prize of the heavenly call of God in Jesus Christ.”

But there is something more. Paul doesn’t just run in a different direction now, he runs in a different *manner* as well. It’s not just about where he runs to, but *how* he runs – because he knows that all his life he hadn’t just been running the wrong way, he had been running *in* the wrong way.

Paul had believed that righteousness or goodness was something that he could achieve through hard work and dedication, through his own efforts and gifts. If he just gritted his teeth and tried hard enough, he would succeed. He just needed to have enough willpower, which my daughter’s Frog and Toad book defines as “trying really hard not to do something that you really want to do.” Paul’s vision of the race of life was one that turned his days into a grim and grueling guilt-wracked grind, a kind of never-ending death march where you have to justify your existence and self-esteem every day, a joyless jog up a never-ending hill in cold and rain. Life was a battle in which he must conquer.

But that had been running in the wrong way.

In the book *Born to Run*, author Christopher McDougall argues that most of us have been running in the wrong way – literally. We view running as merely a means to an end, like getting in shape or living longer, and when we run we try to protect ourselves against injury and pain by padding our feet with the latest high tech running shoe. McDougall looks to the Tarahumara Indian tribe of Mexico to show us a different way. The Tarahumara have honed the ability to run hundreds of miles at a clip without rest or injury. Part of this, McDougall says, is because when the Tarahumara run, they wear only very simple sandals, and so from a young age they learn to run upright, on the front pad of their feet instead of on the arch or the heel, the way our shoes encourage us to run.

But beyond this, the Tarahumara run the way they do because they understand that running is a way of life. It is part of what it means to be human, and at the heart of how the human body evolved in the first place: why else would so many crowds of human beings get the crazy idea to get together and run for 26 miles, unless they were made for it, unless it was somehow in their DNA? The Tarahumara understand intrinsically that the human body is born to run. They don’t view running as a chore, as a means to an end, or as only a battle of willpower, but as a gift, as a worthy end in itself.

There is a scene in the book where a well-known track coach is watching two Tarahumara runners compete in an ultra-marathon of a hundred miles through the mountains. The track coach is studying the runners, watching their technique, trying to figure out what makes them tick, and what lessons he can take back to his own track team. But what strikes the track coach the most isn’t the Tarahumara’s technique, *it is the joy with which they run*. These Tarahumara runners race up one of the course’s most heartbreaking hills and they are still laughing, churning up the slope like kids playing in a leaf pile.

What makes the Tarahumara special is that they haven't forgotten what it means to love the act of running itself.

Students of Philippians marvel at how often Paul's letter sounds notes of joy, even while he is in prison. Paul is running the race, pressing on, straining forward for what lies ahead – and he is doing it, laughing. He is running in a different way now than before. He is running with the freedom of someone who has nothing to prove. This is not another battle he must conquer by gritting his teeth and trying harder– because now the Marathon-like news has reached him that God has already conquered, that God has already won the battle. Christ has done for him what he could not have done for himself. He no longer has to justify his existence by his achievements in the race through life: Christ's sacrifice for him has justified his existence. The atlas-like burden of expectation on his shoulders has been removed. Life for him is no longer a meritocracy, but a mercy-ocracy.

Now the race ahead of him, however hard it might be, is not a grind of guilt but a race of grace. Now he is free to choose to run. He runs now, not because others have told him to, but because he *wants* to. He follows Jesus not because he must, but because he *may*, because he *can*. Paul runs towards Christ not because he has to, but because now he *has* to. He knows now that this race is not something foreign to him, but that he was *born* to run. He hits the hill with a smile because forgiveness has set him free to lose or to fail or to disappoint expectations, because when all is forgiven, all can be risked. He runs this race sweating drops of joy because he loves the act of running itself, runs because there is nothing better than knowing the beauty of love and Christ and letting it flow through you to others; he runs because all the way to heaven is heaven, because the Christ who is the prize the end of the race is also, mysteriously, the pace-setting running partner at our side, meeting us stride for stride.

This race of grace is not a grim test of willpower or personal worth anymore– it is a joyous jaunt across the plains of Marathan with good news filling up your soul.

Where does your confidence really lie? What are you chasing after? What is getting you up in the morning and putting you in motion? Are you running the right way? Are you running in the right way? Do you want to know Christ and be like him?

If so, there is good news: “Rejoice! The Lord has conquered!” Love has won. So run, for your *life*. Run this race because you were born to run this race. Find some running partners - join the millions of other Christians around the world today celebrating World Communion Sunday with us. Forget what lies behind. Strain forward to what lies ahead. Press on towards the goal. Keep your eyes on the prize.

Because the race and the prize is Jesus-

*and he is worth it.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.