

Matthew 6:25-34 Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2 August 21, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

In February 1982, Julie Moss, a 23-year-old grad student at Cal Poly University in San Luis Obispo, entered The Ironman World Championships as part of her senior thesis research on the physiological effects of a triathlon on the human body. Although she grew up swimming in the Pacific Ocean, had run two marathons, and cycled regularly, she had never competed in a triathlon and hadn't particularly trained for the event that day. Nevertheless, she managed to build up a 20-minute lead over the second-place racer, Kathleen McCartney.

Less than a mile from the finish line, Moss's legs collapsed as her glycogen levels dipped dangerously low and dehydration set in. She fell a few times, only to get up and keep running and walking as best she could. However, less than ten yards from the finish line and victory, Moss fell for the final time and Kathleen McCartney raced past her to win the event. Julie Moss dragged herself across the finish line 29 seconds later. The dramatic finish was televised by ABC Wide World of Sports.

Thirty-six years after that painful second-place finish, Julie Moss reflected on what she had learned. "Something broke inside of me at that moment," she said. "I was brokenhearted when I realized I wasn't going to win because I thought winning was the mecca. It only took me two heartbeats to say, 'There's more to this.' I let my head drop and surrendered to the disappointment and the pain. Then that inner voice said, 'Just crawl!' That forward movement showed me the meaning of being victorious. It wasn't about beating someone, it was about finishing."¹

After calling the roll call of the heroes and heroines of the faith -- including Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Hebrew people, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets -- the writer of the letter to the Hebrews turns his attention to second-generation believers and to us 65th-generation believers in Jesus Christ and says, "Let **us** run with perseverance the race that is set before us." And, as we all know, this race we call the Christian life, is not a sprint, it's a marathon!

Before my knees and my doctor told me I'd better quit running if I wanted to walk when I got older, I loved to run four or five miles a day. I knew I would never win any races and I never ran any marathons. However, from time to time I would enter what might be called "fun runs," just for the sheer pleasure of running with a bunch of people. At the end of seminary Greek school in the summer of 1979, I went to New Orleans to visit my grandfather. I heard about a run at Audubon Park on Magazine Street, so I signed up. On the morning of the race, there were quite a few runners lined up at the starting tape. When we took off running, my goal was to enjoy myself, clock as good a time as I could, and finish the race. As the runners neared the finish line, we were funneled into a single lane so our times could be recorded. As I was slowing down,

suddenly another runner elbowed me out of the way, jumped in front of me, and said something about beating me. I remember thinking, “Whatever! More power to you, bud!” I was just glad to have finished on a hot, humid New Orleans summer day. [And it’s not as if pushing me out of the way helped him win – we weren’t even close to the lead runner!]

When it comes to describing the journey of faith, running the long-distance race that has been set before us is a good example. Along the way, it’s good to have that great cloud of witnesses cheering us on and shouting encouragement, especially when we remember that everyone in that great communion of saints has already run the race. Granted, their challenging hills and potholes and ups-and-downs might have been different from ours, but the goal is the same – to reach the finish line faithfully and find Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, standing there to greet us.

The apostle Paul often used athletic imagery to describe his own Christian journey of faith and to encourage other believers in their races. As he neared the end of his ministry and his life, Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:7-8) And here’s how he described his Christian life and motivation to the believers in the church at Philippi: “Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection from the dead] or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my 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 toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

On July 20, 1968, the first International Special Olympics Summer Games were held at Soldier Field in Chicago. They were the culmination of the dream of Eunice Kennedy Shriver who in June 1962 started a summer camp in her back yard for young people with intellectual disabilities. According to the Special Olympics website, “The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.” The motto of the Special Olympics is, “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.”

With a bit of tweaking, the Special Olympics mission statement can describe the life-long journey and race of the Christian faith, which can give us continuing opportunities to demonstrate courage, experience joy, and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills, and friendship in the body of Christ and with the communion of saints. And the Special Olympics motto sounds a bit like the encouragement in Hebrews 12:1-2. We may not “win” the race by coming in first, but if we persevere and finish, we will certainly achieve a wonderful victory. Meanwhile, along the way, if we cannot win, let us be brave in the attempt.

Hebrews 12:13 has always been a verse close to my heart: “Therefore lift up your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.” It’s been forty-two years, almost to the day, since my doctor said, “If you want to walk in your sixties, you need to stop running TODAY!” So, I stopped cold-turkey that day. A few years ago, when my orthopedic surgeon asked me what I wanted to be able to do after my knee replacement surgery, I told him, “I want to be able to run four or five miles a day.” He said, “That’s not going to happen. What else?” I said, “I want to keep riding my bike.” He told me I could ride as much as I wanted to.

On Saturday, June 18, Hope Turnbull, Matthew Coltren, Greg Maready, and I rode in the Tour de Blueberry with 600 of our closest friends! As Greg and I were riding along out on the road somewhere in Pender County, we heard, “On your left!” and a line of riders zipped by us, going much faster than we were cycling. Greg shouted, “Have fun, boys!” and then looked at me and said, “There was a day, but that day is gone. We’re doing just what we want to do!” Along the 22-mile route there were people shouting encouragement and, when we finally arrived back where we began at the Burgaw Middle School, riders who had already completed the route were clapping, cheering us on, and congratulating us for finishing the course. In some ways, a fun run or the Tour de Blueberry pales in comparison to the lifelong journey of faith. Then again, the comparison is a good one: running the race with perseverance, keeping your sights set on the goal ahead, and being encouraged by Jesus Christ himself, and all of the others who have run the race before us, that great cloud of witnesses, the communion of saints.

Last Monday Frederick Buechner died at the age of 96. His many books and sermons inspired people in their faith journeys for years. In 1991, he published *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*, in which he wrote, “Who knows what ‘the communion of saints’ means, but surely it means more than just that we are all of us haunted by ghosts because they are not ghosts, these people we once knew, not just echoes of voices that have years since ceased to speak, but saints in the sense that through them something of the power and richness of life itself not only touched us once long ago, but continues to touch us. They have their own business to get on with now, I assume – ‘increasing in knowledge and love of Thee,’ says the Book of Common Prayer, and moving ‘from strength to strength,’ which sounds like business enough for anybody – and one imagines all of us on this shore fading for them as they journey ahead toward whatever new shore may await them; but it is as if they carry something of us on their way as we assuredly carry something of them on ours. That is perhaps why to think of them is a matter not only of remembering them as they used to be but of seeing and hearing them as in some sense they are now. If they had things to say to us then, they have things to say to us now too, nor are they by any means always things we expect or the same things.”²

I have shared this story before, but it remains one of the greatest stories of endurance and perseverance. Here’s how Bud Greenspan, the great Olympic documentary maker, told it: “At 7:00 p.m. on October 20, 1968, only a few thousand

spectators remained in the Olympic Stadium in Mexico City. In the darkness the last of the men's marathon runners was being carried off the track after completing the exhausting 26-mile, 385-yard run. The winner from Ethiopia had finished more than an hour earlier.

“As the spectators were getting ready to leave the stadium, the people sitting next to the gates where the marathon runners entered were startled to hear sirens going off and policemen blowing their whistles. Suddenly, a single runner entered the stadium. His name was John Stephen Akhwari, from Tanzania. His leg was bandaged and bloody, because he had injured his knee in a fall. He hobbled around the final 400 meters and finished the marathon, the last competitor to do so.

“The crowd rose to its feet and the spectators applauded Akhwari as if he were the winner of the marathon. When he crossed the finish line, he walked off the field without even looking up at the cheering crowd. When John Stephen Akhwari was asked why he had not quit, since his task was so painful and he had no chance of winning a medal, he said, ‘My country did not send me 7,000 miles away to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it.’”³

In the words of Julie Moss who crawled across the finish line, “That forward movement showed me the meaning of being victorious. It wasn't about beating someone, it was about finishing.”

To quote the marathoner's mantra: “To finish is to win.”

In the words of encouragement to believers in the first-century A.D. and in the twenty-first century A.D., “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Let us pray: Lord, guide our feet while we run this race; for we don't want to run this race in vain! Amen.

NOTES

¹This information is taken from two sources: Sarah Wassner Flynn, “Recalled: Julie Moss Gives Triathlon Its Breakthrough Moment,” June 25, 2020 at www.triathlete.com and Pam Kragen, “Ironman vet Julie Moss recounts her 1982 ‘Crawl of Fame’ in new memoir,” October 2, 2018 at www.sandiegotribune.com.

²Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991).

³Bud Greenspan, “The Greater Part of Glory,” *Parade Magazine*, April 21, 1991, p. 6