

"Run to Win"

2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

& Mark 1:40-45

February 15, 2009

There are so many great moments - so many great lines in our scriptures today. I would love to know what images stand out for each of you. A leper is cleansed and told to tell no one — so he goes and tells everyone. An older man [Paul] with what we have to imagine to be limiting medical problems tells his readers to get up and run a race that will demand self-control. In the Old Testament lesson, I just love the image of a king that is so concerned about one of his military leaders that he got personally involved in finding a way to cure his illness - some have suggested that his personal involvement in terms of the gold silver and clothes that he sent with Namaan would have had a current value of around \$2,000,000. That was some investment in the health of the king's general - a gift which Elishah turned down, by the way. Namaan must have been one of the really good guys - not only is the king trying to help him find a cure for his leprosy but so is his slave girl - a girl that had been abducted in wartime and now seeks to help the man who was in charge of the war.

Yes - there are so many great images in these texts - so many things that would be worth our time to ponder. As I think about many of these things, I find myself stuck on one image that seems to tie to so many of the others. I find myself coming back over and over to Paul's comments about running the race. Specifically, the comment that seems to haunt me is that we are called to run in such a way that we may win the race.

I like the thought. On the surface one might say that all Paul is really suggesting is that we must be diligent and dedicated to our running. We might imagine that he wants us to understand that, like any athlete, we need to train and practice and work hard at doing what we are called to do as the children of God. An athlete needs to be self-controlled in his or her whole life if that person hopes to compete well in the race. - It is good stuff - a good reminder to all of us who seek to live a Christian life and run the race that is set before us. Still, the image troubled me. 'Run to win', Paul tells us. Unfortunately, we do know that only one wins the races. One wins and everyone else ... Well, everyone else loses. Somehow, that is troubling to me as I think about Paul using this image for the Christian life. Do we run to win?

I find myself wondering what Paul means when he talks about winning. Certainly, he does hold out the fact that in a foot race only one crosses the finish line first and

only that one receives the victors crown or wreath. I am reminded of how well we understand the concept every time I drive into town past the sign that announces the girls basketball state championship statue for 2008 ... 2007....2006 1999. We understand what it means to run the race to win. But it almost seems as though Paul is making a bit of a contrast with the race Christians run and the ones in which a perishable victors crown is awarded. We are called to run so as to win ... But not as in crossing the finish line first. We run to win the race - not as in holding up the first place trophy but as in claiming the one prize that can never be lost, stolen or forgotten in a box stored away in a closet somewhere.

I asked Katie if I could say just a few words about the recent marathon race that she ran. There were literally thousands of runners in that race. I suspect that many, like Katie, took the challenge very seriously. They ran daily - first perhaps only short distances. Later they pushed themselves to run miles at a time - 2 miles, then 4 - soon 6 miles, then 12 or 16. Sunshine or rain - whether they felt like it or not - whether they would rather just sit on the couch eating pizza or not - still with dedication and self-control, the runners prepared to run the race. And when the race time came and conditions were not the best Still they ran. And when the first few miles were past, when the running got hard and they were all too aware that there was still 20 miles to run, they kept running. And then after all of that the moment finally arrived when the finish line came into view and Katie crossed it and won the race. Did she cross the fine first No, but I don't believe that was ever what the race was about for Katie or for countless others - she and so many others had a goal of running the race and crossing the finish line And they won.

'Run so as to win' the apostle Paul admonishes us. It will require self-control and dedication but the imperishable prize is so worth it. Maybe you will never put a trophy on the mantel place but it will always be with you that you will know that you ran the race, finished the race, accomplished the goal, won the victory!

A young slave girl - serving in the house of a military leader for the people who took her away from her home and family ran the race to win. She could have said that it was none of her business that the man who enslaved her was sick for that matter, let him suffer for what he had done to her. But she served the one and only - the God most high. She served a God who called her to have compassion and love. So she ran the race. She gave it her all to step out of her place to try to get her master into the hands of the prophet of God back home. - - - - The king could have dismissed the whole situation or at least told Namaan to find a local cure. But instead he takes two million out of savings and send them down into conquered territory to find an obscure prophet of a foreign God - he pulls out all of the stops in hopes of winning the prize. - - - Namaan, himself was about to drop out of the race when the going got tough and the muddy water of the Jordan River lay ahead. But with the encouragement of friends, he pushed forward and crossed the finish line. - - - The leper in the gospel text knew the proper boundaries that he was supposed to keep. Yet he decided to enter the race anyway. He was determined to win the race and approached Jesus and begged. Jesus also knew the boundaries. He knew that

you were supposed to stop 50 yards from anyone with leprosy but He continued on until He actually touched the leper. And the race was won - the victory was theirs - the victory was all of theirs.

Run the race and run to win. How is it that we run to win? What does it mean to win? How do we as the people of God reach for the goal? How is it that we win? A slave girl won by revealing the power of her God. A king showed compassion. A prophet gave freely. A leper turned to Jesus. And Jesus healed. Each won the race. So often we let the world win and give up when faced with the pressures of the world. Too often it is too easy to let the way of the world overpower the way of Christ. Run the race - run to win.

This past week I received some promotional material that really caught my eye. On the cover of the pamphlet in bold print were the words "DON'T GO TO CHURCH". It's no wonder that such a thought would catch the eye of a pastor when we struggle so much to encourage people to 'go to church'. Then I noticed the smaller print under the main heading. It said, "Be the Church". Don't go to church - be the church. Perhaps it is easy for us to come to believe that we have done enough if we just get to church but going to church is really the warm up that we need for the race that is set before us in the world. Run the race. Be the church. Run to win in all of those times when the world would call us to give up and walk away. Run with a slave girl, a king, a leper and Jesus.

AMEN