

Running to Win

It was not too long ago that I discussed my racing plans, which entails then the training that accompanies, and goals for the coming year with Lianne one night. She nicely puts up with this pastime of mine, the endless hours of punishing running in all sorts of weather, the time spent to work on other parts of my body to improve running efficiency and economy as she finds me laboring on my back during the evening hours, and the numerous indulgences by way of magazines, books, articles, cookbooks and the like that have come to litter side tables and bedside stands. As she has said, she has never quite been able to understand how someone can spend so much time looking over different running shoes or that I simply now know when a shoe is worn out (I can feel this in my knees, hips and other places). Then again, I have never understood the way she spends time browsing at the mall . . .

She has come along for this ride as eating, diet, sleeping and lots of other little things have been tweaked as I search for another

few seconds edge. Flax seed, chia seeds, low fat and no fat, honey, whole grains and whole foods, early to bed, early to rise. And in this endless pursuit, which began with a challenge years ago that she laid down, I have run farther, run faster, run longer and trained harder. If you want to get me going, just ask me about my training and other things and your head will be spinning with figures and numbers in no time. It is something I am all too eager to do and all too rarely asked to (thank you, Gary, for your recent interest!). So when this conversation began, which does seem to happen on at least an annual basis, it usually comes to this question – what’s the point? I think Paul sums it up nicely – to run in a way that I may win the prize. The train body, mind and spirit with discipline. That the pursuit is not pointless, but rather for a greater prize of knowledge – knowledge of capability, knowledge of getting to the edge and reaching way down deep to see what you are really made of. Moreover, quite simply, this is where and how I commune. It is my refuge.

But how does this translate into our lives together? Should we all be undertaking such extreme health measures for spiritual awareness and insights? What does it look like to 'run to win' as Paul puts it? First off, I believe that it would be more accurate to call it run to succeed. And it is a reference to the discipline which, similar to an athlete, our lives should take as we live what we say we believe. Of course in relation to success, we generally categorize things by numerical value so then can evaluate after a given time whether it has been successful or not. In running, has the training and diet led to a new PR (best time), achievement of new distance or some other measurable reality? In the local church, have new members come in? Has giving gone up? Is weekly attendance growing? Is participation in other things increasing, like in choir, bible studies, mission opportunities, serving on committees? This is how we quantify success in the church . . . but does it really show that we have been running in such a way that we would succeed? Does it show committed discipleship, disciplined lives, growing in connection to God by growing in connection to one another?

Is that success? Does that show us that the race has been run and won? And if not, as I do not think it does, what should be the rubric by which we gauge our progress? Perhaps we need to think more in relation to scripture, that reality that we see in the Old Testament and Gospel stories of today of the healing, the restoration, the shalom imparted to individuals. In neither case did they take place to chalk up on the bed post statistics of God's miraculous undertakings. Similarly, while I have no doubts that places like the Shalom Zone could provide us with endless statistics on the numbers of people who take advantage of the ministry they have, this is the race they run – how is it that our lives become a mirror of God's compassion and love, shalom? How do the institutions that represent this and inspire it also become the nexus of it? It is not in budgets and attendance, or professions of faith and dollars spent on missions, but the way that we embody this reality to a world that has become sick with insecurities and self concern.

With Jesus we see the inclusion of one who had been excluded. We see outcast become included as ailment is cured. For this man,

he would have not had physical contact with anyone since the onset of this ailment. He was outside of it all. Jesus was moved by the man's pleas. Pity is a poor translation, compassion is more accurate. To be compassionate means to suffer with another. The intent is really in some ways to indicate the 'getting in the skin' of another. It kind-of returns to that golden rule – answering the question of how you would want to be treated if the roles were reversed. Moreover, with that in mind, answering also the reality of what it is to love God and likewise to love neighbor – regardless of who they are, where they live, or what they have. And so we see Jesus 'running to win' as he reaches out and touches this 'unclean' man, which would mean according to understanding at that time that Jesus now shares his 'uncleanness.'

Look at the results! Yes, the man was cured, but also by reaching out in that way, by running to win, Jesus no longer was welcome in towns and villages and rather had to remain out in the desolate places where instead of him taking the news to people, people would now have to go to him. This is not the success of

growth and membership stats that we judge our churches by! And yet we would take this passage as the very heart of the gospel, of who Jesus is, and by extension, who we as followers of Christ are to be. This is what it is to run to win, to race to succeed, to live by faith. To take the risk, to reach out and to know that it might come at the very cost of what our culture holds up highest – how it ranks success.

Jesus shows us the heart of God. Compassion, even though costly, is the way of the Lord. This discipline of compassion is supposed to be the way we run. To suffer with the other, a willingness to express our caring in visible and physical ways. It is certainly true that any form of self-giving is risky and costly. The story of God bending to touch humanity in Jesus has a double ending; his opponents finally killed Jesus, because he touched a leper and many others to life, and because he touched their precious power and influence and showed it up for what it was – not the way to run and win. He lay three days in the grave. But then God touched Jesus into life, proving that not even the violence of our human

hatred and blindness, visited on Jesus, can turn away the love of God. That conquers all.

So let us run in a way that we may win the prize. Let us train the body, mind and spirit through the discipline of compassion. Let us go to the very edge of our capability that we may know what we are truly capable of. And there as we peer over while we are cast aside by the normal standards of success, know that by divine standards we have won. Love conquers all. God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God, our rock and refuge.