



Crazy Enough to Run with You

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn at the Lake Harriet Bandshell, August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

When I was in seminary I took a nice light class called God, Evil and Suffering. In this class we reflected on two primary sources of suffering in life—from natural causes like COVID and tornadoes, and suffering caused by human violence and oppression. But there was a third kind of suffering we touched on, which is the optional suffering chosen by people who are pursuing a goal—for example, people who run marathons. My brother and I are both pastors and both runners, though my brother has run a lot of marathons unlike myself. I once asked him if he thought following the Christian spiritual path was like running a marathon. He said, “No, but I do think it’s like having a lifestyle of running.”

There are many ups and downs of running over a long period of time. There are periods where you fall off the wagon and get back on; races where everything lines up just right, you’ve trained well and the weather is perfect and you just crush it; there are races where everything goes wrong and you can’t even finish; there are periods when you’re really motivated and other times you dread every step. But over days and weeks and years, the discipline of running and probably any other athletic or artistic pursuit is similar to the optional discipline of following the Christian spiritual path. But that still doesn’t answer the essential question, *are we insane? why do we do it?*

This question was at the heart of the passage from Hebrews that we heard a minute ago. In that reading, the author talks about those giants from our faith tradition who were heroic in every way. Some of them achieved miraculous triumphs, and others of them did not but suffered terribly. The author said they were motivated by their faith. But what does that even mean? What does faith mean? The author said that faith is like running a race because of the joy set in front of you. It's about looking ahead to something that is so worth it that you are willing to engage the rigor and discipline of putting one foot in front of another, day in and day out. So what is that something?

The way the author in Hebrews describes it, it's more than the outcome in the individual situation. It's not about winning the race. It's even more than the outcome in an individual lifetime. The joy ahead isn't heaven, it's not what happens after you die—at least, that doesn't seem to be what the author of Hebrews is talking about. It's more like what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King described when he said that he had been to the mountain top, he had seen the other side, which is a world in which his children would not be judged for the color of their skin but the content of their character. He said that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. That vision was his “why.” Because of it he was willing to lead toward justice with the methods of love and nonviolence, and to suffer for it.

We know how his personal story ended; he was like one of the giants from our scripture story today whose life ended too early, of whom the world was not worthy. But he had seen something so joyful, so beautiful, that it was worth his entire life. It was worth the discipline of day in and

day out striving for justice and peace. It was like the discipline of running. It was like the discipline of following Jesus' Way of Love even when it is hard, even when there are not immediate rewards, because there is joy, and trust. There is faith that no matter how sick this world can be, sickness is not its core, and that a world where all can flourish is possible and worth fighting for.

Yesterday I had two experiences that moved me. The first was that I ran a race, a 10k in Stillwater across the St. Croix River called Gopher to Badger. It was just one of many races I have run, but I have not run for a year because last summer I was training for a marathon and I just burned out and quit, and I hardly ran at all for a year. Yesterday I remembered I could do this. Even though my lungs were bursting, and I was slower than I have been in a long time, I crossed the finish line along with many others who had their own reasons for running, and there were people lined up at the finish line cheering us on—the slow and the fast, people were yelling ridiculously for all of us. It felt really good. It reminded me why I do this in the first place.

But far more significantly, yesterday I also got to officiate at the wedding of Leah Guy and Madison Gies, two beautiful women from our church who have not had the support of their whole families in their love for one another or their identities as queer people. In the wedding service they spoke about their long and hard journey of choosing one another even when no one supported them. I don't think there was a dry eye in the place as they stood before us and made their vows to one another. Leah, one of the brides, has said many times at our church that it matters a lot to her to have a positive vision—not just talking about what we are

against, but talking about what we are *for*. Talking about joy and abundance and not just fighting evil and oppression. The joy and abundance she is seeking was evidenced yesterday when these beautiful women declared their public commitment to one another. It was glimpsed in the dream of Martin Luther King. It was evidenced in the life of Jesus, whom scripture called the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

You see, this positive vision that we call faith *isn't* signing on the dotted line underneath a statement about doctrine. It's not as much about what people have traditionally called beliefs as it is about a profound trust that the Creator made this world for goodness, that even your worst enemy was not made for hatred and violence and neither were you. All you have to do is to look into the face of a newborn baby to know that people are profoundly sacred. No one can be reduced to the worst thing they have ever done. No country can be reduced to the evils it has committed, although we do have to acknowledge them and make amends. And so, if we want to, we can choose to run our race, which is the discipline of choosing to love, the discipline of learning to embody love in every minute of every day.

Now this is optional, and it would be easier to just go with the flow and retract into fear and self-protection and keeping people at arm's length because they and we can be so vicious. But there are moments that shine like the sun in this world, and yesterday for me was one of them. And as the reading from Hebrews says, there is a great crowd of witnesses cheering us on, even if you can't always see them, even if it seems you are alone. They were there in the people at the finish line of the race yesterday clapping their thunderous applause to us no matter if we were

fast or slow. They were there in the people gathered at the wedding yesterday who cheered ferociously when the bride kissed the bride. They are here with us, these giants of the faith whose stories live in our hearts and scriptures and traditions. For Christians, the original Jesus—not the name that has sometimes been manipulated to justify all kinds of evil in this world, but the actual being who was about love and healing and nonviolence—is the joy set before us, the one who shows us the way, in whose footsteps we can follow.

So this week, I invite you to consider the discipline of choosing to embody love in every moment of every day, even when it is hard. What is your why? What is the thing that makes it worth it for you? What is the positive vision for which you are willing to pick up the optional suffering of discipline and make sacrifices for the common good? And if you want a community of people who will be asking these questions together with you, I invite you to come to St. John's up the hill next Sunday at 10am. We'll be there, and we are crazy enough to run with you. Amen.