

“Run With Perseverance the Race That is Set Before You”

Hebrews 12:1-3; Mark 10:35-45

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October 20, 2024

From the Pulpit

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The final baptismal meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, dedicated to Jeff Kinsey and all who are born to run and do field events, especially to Luke and Lila and the whole Bendick Family, to Bill Willis, Sr., to Aurelia Ivy Stadie on her baptismal day, to Hazel on her second birthday, to Acelin Jeremiah Scalf born on October 15, to all the staff members, pastors, and members of First Congregational Church through our 172+ years of life together, to my family, especially, my mother, my late father, my sister and brother, sister-in-law, my four nieces and one nephew, to my four adult children, and our nine grandchildren, all those who have bravely entered our family through the years and finally, to my beloved, Susan E. Sitler who has stuck with me through thick and thin for 39 years of marriage & always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.

Amen.

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Some people are born to run. Others are born to hurdle, to vault, to jump, to leap, to throw, or to put. In other words, in track and field, some people excel in a multitude of events because of the skills, strength, fortitude and endurance they possess. I am not, nor have I ever been one of them – born to run, hurdle, vault, jump leap, throw or put.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1974 at North Penn High School, in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, I went out for track and field, along with a lot of gifted athletes. What does a coach do with the least talented athlete in Track and Field? In the case of Coach Jim Gullick, he put me in the two mile race – eight times around the track. Since I had run Cross Country the fall before, it made sense. But, I discovered that running through the fields, the woods and the rolling hills of Southeast Pennsylvania was much different than running eight laps around a track.

When our first duel meet arrived, we lined up for the two mile. The gun fired and we took off. I labored through the laps, getting dizzy running in so many ovals as we went around. Then, as I was coming around to finish my seventh of eight laps, the crowd rose and started clapping. I thought, “these folks are so supportive. They are so amazing. On their feet at the beginning of our last lap.” Then it happened. Jeff Kinsey flew by me, finishing the race in first place. Jeff had lapped me. I still had one lap to run, and the race was literally over.

I was running in an event – and would for ten more meets – in which my captain and my two-mile teammate was the fastest man in Pennsylvania. The cheers were for the soon to be state champion in the two mile – Jeff Kinsey. By the time I reached the finish line, the track officials were nervously looking at the wrist watches – not their stop watches – knowing they had to clear the track for the next event, and I was holding everybody up. By the time I reached the finish line, the fans (or perhaps Jeff’s college recruiters) had left. No cheers. Nothing but people nervously waiting to set the hurdles in their appropriate positions for the next race for which I was causing a delay.

That would have been the day to quit track. That should have been my retirement cue from running. But, I am a hard-headed, big-hearted German American Christian. I was not designed to be a runner. I was also not designed to quit. It’s not in my DNA to quit. If you met my ancestors, you would know that. None of them were quitters.

We are warriors – some are warriors in war, some in peace – but all of us are warriors for what is right, and fair and just. And we fight for what is right, and true, honest, and just. My people weren't necessarily fast, but they all ran with perseverance – against all odds. The great cloud of witnesses that have surrounded me and uplifted me all the days of my life have no quit in them and neither do I.

Besides all of my ancestors, most important of all – there has always been Jesus – my Savior and my pacesetter in the race of life. He truly has always been “the pioneer and perfecter of my faith.” Jesus – who laid his life down for those he loved rather than run away and into the Galilean Hills. Jesus – who walked with, taught, and healed people rather than taking a ship across the Mediterranean and sailing away from his own people and those he loved and cared for. Jesus – who faced his accusers and spoke the truth in love rather than giving in to their ridicule and bullying.

Like my ancestors before me – I follow Jesus – and Jesus never quit. He has always inspired me, and more importantly, I hope and pray he has and will inspire you – to fight the good fight; to stay disciplined and keep training and running – even when you are running on empty.

50 years ago, in the Spring of 1974, with Jesus in my head and heart (although not in my legs and feet), I started to work harder, train harder and reset my goals and aspirations for the two mile (which mercifully – for everyone involved – was my only event). We didn't have things called Personal Bests back then. We were either winners or losers, and I was the biggest loser in the two mile.

So, I set a goal. My goal for the rest of the season was “not to be lapped by Jeff Kinsey.” It didn't happen all at once. But by the sixth meet, I had “outrun” Jeff Kinsey. In other words, I had reached the “line to gain” for seven laps before he finished the race. The first time he didn't run past me I almost stopped thinking “I did it.” Rather than that, I started skipping

around the track and actually skipped across the finish line – which was a sight to behold.

When the season ended, my friend, my mentor, my hero in the art of running, senior captain of my team and the Two Mile Champion for the State of Pennsylvania in 1974, Jeff Kinsey – told me how proud he was of me. Jeff said, “you never quit. You ran with perseverance.” Those words of affirmation may have been kindest and most powerful words this young man received an early age – “you never quit. You ran with perseverance.” They were words that I have hung on to for 50 years.

This morning as the runners made their way uphill on Broad Street – headed into the rising sun and a downhill up ahead – hundreds in wheelchairs, 7,000 runners in the full marathon and 11,000 in the half-marathon passed in front of First Church, they didn’t see the words, “Enter to Worship, Depart to Serve.” They were focused on the next step and the next breath. It was 48 degrees out there and people were racing, rolling, running, jogging, skipping, and walking east on Broad Street. By the end, I am sure more will be walking, limping and crawling. But I am also sure that all will be moving with perseverance.

Running is mentioned 65 times in the Bible. Running is associated with strength, discipline, endurance, suffering, patience, faith, encouragement, hope and perseverance. However, running with perseverance is only mentioned once in scripture. In today’s passage in Hebrews 12:1-3, the author offers a determined challenge to the faithful:

Therefore, 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, 2 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. 3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

So what about you? Are you going to run the race that is set before you? Are you going to move forward with perseverance? Or in the words of Jesus in Mark, are you going to humble yourselves and be a servant to all?

Running with perseverance has a special quality, since perseverance itself has a special quality. It comes from Latin and finds its rootedness in “tenacity, endurance, steadfastness, and constancy.” To move with perseverance has all the makings of victory – even though you might not ever finish first. It means giving everything you have, all the time, everywhere, in everything you do. Running is the means. Perseverance is the ends.

So, Aurelia Ivy (on your baptismal day) Hazel, Benton, Rylan and Emryn, (and Ethan, Aaden, Axel and Acelin) – always move through your life with perseverance. To everyone here and out there – if you can’t run, skip. If you can’t skip, walk. If you can’t walk, waddle. If you can’t waddle, roll. If you can’t roll, crawl. If you can’t crawl then move to the field events of life and vault, jump, leap, throw, or put. And if you can’t do that swing away. But KEEP MOVING. Move forward. Don’t retreat from life – move forward. Don’t wish for the good old days, or wallow in the hard times you have faced, MOVE FORWARD. Move into the better days ahead.

Keep moving forward First Church. Move into a brighter future. Lead us as a community into the pathways of justice for all. Move us along the path of caring for those in need. Don’t wait for someone to move you. Move yourselves. And as you do, may our God, always and forever be your guide. May the Holy Spirit be the power pushing you and pulling you forward.

Move with perseverance into the future that is set before you, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and protector of our faith to be the source of love and strength for you – now, always and forever. Amen.

