

UNCHARTED

Series: Reinforce

(Part 1)

I Corinthians 9: 24-27; Hebrews 12: 1-2

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There is a biblical metaphor about Christian living that I really like and a biblical metaphor about Christian living that I do not like so much. I want to talk about both today.

The metaphor that I really like is “running the race.” Paul, in a number of places, including our lesson today in Corinthians, talks about training for Christian living with the same vigor as athletes training to run a race. They race for a perishable wreath, he writes. We train for an imperishable wreath. Later in his life he talked about not running the race in vain. The author of Hebrews picks up the same theme. For a whole chapter, Hebrews lifts up the faith heroes and heroines that had gone before, those who with faith and courage and often at great costs to themselves stayed with and advanced God’s plan. “Therefore,” the writer says, “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...”

What I like about this metaphor is that it is purposeful, focused, and intentional. Every race, be it a sprint or a marathon, has a finish line. Scripture is telling us over and over – we have a finish line, a goal, a destination. As in a race, our total effort should be on reaching that finish line. Anything that distracts us from moving toward that goal is just that, a distraction, and should be ignored. Thus, Paul writes, “I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air....”

Maybe I like this because it is just so Methodist. You may or may not know that the name Methodist was given to John Wesley and his group of kindred spirits in college because they were so methodical in their living. The name was not meant as a compliment. It was given to poke fun. Those belonging to what the Wesleys called the Holy Club got up the same time every morning and had the entire day completely mapped out in fifteen- and thirty-minute increments. The rigid schedule made sure there was time in the day for devotion, prayer, worship, study, visiting the sick and prisons, and whatever other responsibilities they deemed they had. Others watched them and jokingly called them the Methodists. Wesley, not worried about their intent, thought it a good name, and it stuck.

Later, as the movement grew, Methodists were divided into classes of twelve with a class leader assigned to each. The leader visited each class member every week to, “...advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as the occasion may require.” Class members were taught not to do anything that is not for the glory of God, such as, “The putting on of gold and costly apparel; the taking of such diversions as cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus; the singing of those songs, or reading those books, which do not tend to the knowledge or love of God; and to avoid softness and needless self-indulgence.” From the beginning of the movement until now, every person ordained is asked Wesley’s historical questions. There are nineteen. The last question is: will you adhere to the following directions? These are the directions. “Be diligent. Never be unemployed.

Never be triflingly employed. Never trifle away time; neither spend any more time at any one place than is strictly necessary. Be punctual. Do everything exactly at the time. And do not mend our rules, but keep them.”

How would you like to invite Wesley over for an afternoon cookout on the deck! That would be a hoot. So relaxing! There is a strictness in his teaching that we might actually find amusing today. I would certainly never live up to his standards. Still, Wesley and his methodical followers accomplished an incredible amount, making a positive difference in the lives of thousands, hundreds of thousands. They led the way on numerous needed social reforms, built schools, orphanages, and colleges and hospitals, started religious publishing houses, and sent missionaries around the world. They accomplished great things for God because they were clear on purpose and focused on the race. They did not run aimlessly and they stayed on the same path as the great cloud of witnesses.

There is something to be said for us as individuals, and certainly for us as a church, to be purpose driven and focused, intentional about what we are doing. What is our goal? What constitutes our finish line? What keeps us on that track and what distracts us? These are always good questions for believers and churches.

In my years of moving around the Conference serving and visiting with different churches, I have often heard people saying, “We have a great church, we are so busy. Look at all the programs we have.” I am all for churches being active. Praise God. But I have often thought, being busy is easy. Being focused and purposeful is hard. How many of the many programs matter to the kingdom of God? How much effort is going into serving the Lord and how much into being busy? Busyness and faithfulness are not synonyms.

This is what the scripture is saying to us. Keep your eyes on the prize. Do not run aimlessly. Run the race with purpose and perseverance. We should know where the finish line is and move only in that direction. Running the race is a biblical metaphor that I really like.

A biblical metaphor I am not so big on is that Christian life is like running a race. Wait. Didn't I just say that I like that metaphor? I did and I do. But honestly, I also have some issues with it.

For one thing, while it is helpful to know where the finish line is, there are times we do not. There are times and circumstances in life during which we just are not sure. Right now, or maybe already, at least very shortly, college freshmen will be registering for classes. They are being asked to declare a major. What will your primary study be about? What do you want to do when you graduate? These are questions being asked of eighteen-year olds. How do they know? Oh, some seem to be born knowing what they want to do, and they never waver from that. Good for them. Some think they know what they want, but early on will discover they are interested in something else. Some have no clue. Most will change their majors one or more times in the four years. By the way parents, this can mean that college will take five years instead of four, maybe more, so keep that tuition money coming.

In the same way, even though we believe, we are not necessarily sure in which direction we should run. Focus requires purpose and purpose is not always obvious. On top of that, the purpose of the mission can change and we have to discern again in what direction to run. In a

class I was teaching for new pastors, I had a student from Arizona. She was very discouraged. “The church I serve used to have a large children’s ministry,” she said, “But now we have only a few children and the church is floundering. We have tried everything we know to revive that ministry but everything we try fails.” I asked why she thought that was. She told the class that it was hard because there were just so few young families and children around. The elementary school had closed because enrollment was so low, and four retirement communities had been built right around them because her area had become a retirement mecca. Another student perceptibly asked, “What ministry are you providing for seniors?” She looked confused, even angry and answered, “None. I told you we are focusing on rebuilding our children’s ministry.” That community had completely changed, which means the mission of the church needed to change, but the church did not yet see that. They would have to reorient themselves before they could resume running the race.

Another problem is that, as people, we have the tendency to run the direction we think we should be going, instead of in the direction God wants us to go. Again, that church in Arizona wanted children, not seniors, so ignored the thousands of people living around them. Focusing on the goal is important, but we better always be in prayer asking God what the goal is. If we skip that step, we will run in vain.

My biggest problem with this metaphor, however, is that, with apologies to the Wesleys, rigidity does not allow for surprise. I know it is true for me, and I suspect it is true for you, that some of the most inspirational or productive times in my life have happened in the unplanned moments. I cannot begin to count the times my purposefully planned day was interrupted by what I considered a distraction, and that distraction turned out to be the most important thing I did that day, far more important than all of the planned things I thought were needed to run the race.

I don’t know what Wesley meant by not spending more time at any one place than is absolutely necessary. Some of the moments when I have lingered or stayed a little longer have turned out to be precious moments.

Over the years I have been in hundreds, maybe thousands of church meetings, and periodically plans have been made I thought were whacko. Don’t be insulted. Plenty of committees have thought that the plans I was suggesting were whacko. It runs both ways. My point is that now and then the plans I thought were nuts proved to be exactly what we needed to do.

I guess what I am saying is that it is great to run the race with purpose and focus, but we need to do so with humility. “This is the way to go. I’m right. We have to keep just this way without distraction,” is not what scripture is teaching. This race has twists and turns and side paths and unmarked trails. As Christians we spend a lot of time in uncharted territory, and we run day-by-day by faith. Honestly, much of the time we do not know where we are going and have no idea where the finish line is. We just know that, if we go one step at a time in the direction we believe God is leading us, we will reach the finish line. It can feel as if we are lost. It can seem like we are going in a very odd direction. We might think this can’t be right. You know, sometimes I argue with my GPS. The little voice says turn left but I insist it would be better to turn right. I

am usually wrong and we need a time of recalculating. Well, not only does God move in mysterious ways but also moves us in mysterious ways. They can seem like the wrong ways. But when we follow God's ways, instead of being headstrong about the ways we think we should go, grace and blessing and surprise abound.

Today is Rally Day, a symbolic moment we catch our breath preparing to run again. We do want to run with perseverance the race that is before us. We do not want to run aimlessly and without purpose. But we need to understand that this race is not a straight line, and we will not always know the way we are headed. Consequently, it may take a while to get there. But that's OK. In this race it is not important that we be the first one there. It is better to help each other along the way so that we all reach the finish line. Guide our feet, Lord, because we don't want to run the race in vain.

Amen.