

We're in the middle of the 31st Olympiad, the 31st round of the modern Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

I'm always amazed by the Olympics. As I watch the weight lifters hoisting huge pieces of iron over their heads, or the gymnasts flipping and twirling through the air, I often wonder, "Are they really human? Are they really the same species as me? Because their feats seem so incredible."

Yet the reason these athletes seem so amazing is because of their conditioning. Yes, talent is undoubtedly a part. But behind all of these events are athletes who have spent many years in training to prepare for these games. It's difficult for most of us to even begin to comprehend the dedication it takes to be such an athlete. They have to organize their daily lives around exercise and practice. What they eat and how they sleep will play a part in whether they will be able to win the gold medal.

They invest huge amounts of time and energy, pressing forward towards the goal of competing in the Olympics, and perhaps winning a medal.

In the New Testament, St. Paul famously uses athletic imagery, specifically running and boxing, in describing the Christian life.¹

But athletic imagery also pops up other places in the New Testament. Case in point is our Epistle lesson from Hebrews. And Hebrews uses the imagery of a gigantic stadium with cheering crowds in the stands, and runners competing on the field. Hebrews uses the image of the perseverance of athletes as a model for the Christian life.

Our Epistle lesson today started mid-stream, towards the end of chapter 11. The 11th chapter of Hebrews is all about faithfulness. Last week we heard Hebrews begin to list examples of heroes of the faith. Hebrews celebrates those in the past who have stuck with it, those who have remained faithful to God in many different kinds of circumstances, those who have pushed forward and not shrunk back. Hebrews mentions great heroes of the faith: Abraham & Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses.

In our reading today, the list continues:

The children of Israel crossing the Red Sea.

The Prostitute Rahab who risked her life to hide the Jewish spies.

And the writer of Hebrews continues with a long list:

"Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets..."

And Hebrews mentions what they went through: being tortured, and mocked; being flogged, imprisoned, being stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword.

¹ See 1Corinthians 9:24ff

That's quite a list. And it's not always pleasant. There's a lot of suffering and pain on that list. And yet, Hebrews commends these people for their faithfulness. For continuing forward, and not shrinking back, even in the midst of what is sometimes very nasty suffering.

The writer of Hebrews is telling us that forward momentum is what counts. Pressing forward, following God faithfully, even in the midst of difficulties, pain, and suffering.

And this point he makes explicitly at the beginning of ch12, which was the ending of our Epistle lesson today:

"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."

It's a very rich image. The Christian life is equated with running a race. Not a short sprint, but the long marathon of a faithful life, a life of perseverance.

Of course running that race can be tough. So notice two other things here. First is the wonderful, comforting image that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Who are they? All of the faithful people back in ch11. All those who lived faithful lives. They are the witnesses. And they are witnesses in a double sense.

First, they are witnesses to us of living the faithful life, following God. They testify to what it means to be a servant of God.

But they are also witnesses in another sense. They are witnesses of our running of the race. It's a sports image, an image of a stadium. It's an image of cheering fans in the stands encouraging us who are on the field.

So our ancestors in the faith are examples for us follow as we run the race. But they are also rooting for us as we run the race.

Notice something else here, the middle phrase, "let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely."

No one running a race at the Olympics in Rio is carrying barbells with them as they run down the track. Why should life be any different? Why would you want to run the race of life with excess baggage, excess weight weighing you down? Cast it off, Hebrews is telling us.

And perhaps, as 21st century Americans, a part of what we might need to get rid of is a part of our worldview. Most people in our culture believe that life is supposed to be easy. Things are supposed to go smoothly. We're supposed to be comfortable and secure. Then when bad things happen, we seem to view it as an abnormality, an aberration.

That's such a different view of life from most cultures around the world today, and for that matter, throughout history. Most cultures expect life to be a struggle, to be tough. Heck, the Buddhists even put it right up front. The first Noble Truth of Buddhism is, "Life is suffering."

Maybe part of the excess baggage we need to dump as we run the race is the expectation that everything is supposed to always be rosy or hunky dory. Maybe ease, comfort, and security are not what life is all about.

That's what Hebrews reminds us of next. Let's persevere, let's run the race, "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."

Do you want an example of what life is supposed to be about? Do you want an example of running faithfully to the finish line that God is calling you to? Then look to Jesus as the perfect example of one who has run the race perfectly.

Did Jesus avoid pain? Did Jesus think about himself? Was Jesus after comfort, ease, and security? No. In fact, he embraced the cross. He gave up the excess baggage of pride and honor and prestige. All he wanted to do was God's will. That was the path he followed. That is the course he calls us to follow.

And notice one other thing. Hebrews is talking in first person plural. Let US run with perseverance the race that is set before US. It's not about me. It's about we. It's about us as a people, as a community, moving forward, pushing forward, together.

There's a wonderful scene in the 1982 movie, *An Officer and a Gentleman*. The Richard Gere character, Zach Mayo, is enrolled in Officer Candidate School seeking to be a Naval aviator. Throughout the movie Zach has been a loner, very self-involved, not much of a team player.

Near the end of the movie is a scene with the obstacle course. Throughout the movie the obstacle course has been important for two reasons. 1. Zach has a real chance of setting the all time course record for fastest time ever. 2. One of the other candidates, Candidate Seeger, has not yet been able to climb the wall on the course--she'll wash out of the program unless she does.

Towards the end of the movie, Zach gets to run the obstacle course for the last time. Everyone is cheering him on. He flies by his other classmates while they're encouraging him to break the record.

He arrives at the wall at the same time as Seeger. He makes it over quickly—she's still struggling. And Zach does something unexpected. He stops. He returns to the other side of the wall. And he refuses to leave Seeger's side until he has coached her over the wall.

Zach becomes a team player. All the other candidates are cheering him on, encouraging him. And he in turn forsakes his chance at glory, his chance at setting a record, to encourage Seeger.

That's our calling. Those who have gone before us are cheering us on. And by their example, they remind us of our mission, to follow God and serve others.

"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, 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."

Yes. Life will be difficult at times. The race may be hard. We may have to endure our share of suffering and pain.

God never promises us an easy life. But in Jesus Christ, he's there with us, he suffers with us, he shares in our pain. God calls us to persevere, to run the race, looking to Jesus as our example.

He also gives us the example of those who have gone before us in faith, who are there to cheer us on in our race.

And he calls us to support one another, to be a community, to support one another in comfortable times and in difficult times.

Keep pushing forward. Encourage one another. Persevere. Run God's race.