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WE RUN THE RACE

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Hebrews 11: 29-12:2; Luke 12: 49-56

As the staff and leaders of the church plan for the fall and winter season, I worry. As I work with the various groups, I find myself wondering how we will work together in a way that will offer the ministry of Christ to not only increase our own spiritual lives, but invite others to join us. John Dale and I meet regularly to talk about not only the programming and worship and especially the music that will relate the scripture but how we can then communicate what we're doing with the outside world. How do we coordinate everything that's going on inside the church?

As a staff, we worry. You would be amazed at the various issues we discuss and the areas of ministry to address. With Jen Joy and Betty Briggs joining us, we're able to coordinate even better our Christian Education program with the rest of our ministries. But we worry. We worry about our youth. What do we need to do to encourage our junior and senior high school students to become active in the life of the church, not just what entertainment we can offer them, but how do we offer resources with which to cope with the outside world. We think about the thousands of students at the university and wonder how we can communicate with them and offer ministry that will help them move through these years of learning and temptation.

We worry about our young families trying to raise children when many are working seven days a week or two jobs just to make ends meet. How do we let families know

that we will be here for them, offering their children a foundation of faith that will not only incorporate God into their lives, but in the future as they grow and make important decisions. Thinking about all these needs, we worry. And we should!

But then I take out my Bible and read the scriptures read this morning and instead of worries, I find myself smiling. The language is so incredibly poetic and beautiful. No matter how many translations or versions we read, the words are always beautiful. The author of the book of Hebrews took great pains to list not only the names of those from the past, but to describe their great sacrifices. They passed on the faith from generation to generation. This book tells of the struggle and yet triumph in the face of adversity. The author speaks of throngs of people, heavenly clouds, those who gave witness to the wonders and love of God. Somehow, I find myself comforted. As the versions and translations and language change, it becomes modern. The struggles of those early Christians are struggles with which we can identify. We hear the words: Since they have endured so much and the faith has continued to stand, generation after generation, "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

We are running that same race today and each generation before us has faced circumstances of their particular time, and they confronted and dealt with the issues. Some have been stoned and mocked and burdened beyond measure, and still they continued to run. Did you notice, however, that the author also precedes his message with these words: "Before you run, lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely." I had to think about that for a while.

Have you ever noticed how very little a runner wears? Usually a pair of shorts and a tank top, socks to keep feet comfortable and the lightest and most durable shoes they can find. If you want to make time, you have to sluff off all the extra stuff. I was sitting at a light this past week when a

woman jogged by. It was early and not yet too hot, but I noticed something on her head – an earphone in one ear. At her waist was strapped a CD player, next to that a cell phone with a cord running up to her other ear so she could listen and talk while she ran. As she went past, I saw a water bottle strapped to her waist in back and then, hardly noticeable was what looked like a pedometer, recording her distance. I couldn't help but think, "That's a lot of stuff to be carrying for a run."

Well, that is exactly the point of the author of Hebrews, but he was talking about the weight of sin. The kind of things that weigh down our hearts and souls and cause us to stall out. Ever feel that kind of weight? When my son was in grade school, he was one of the youngest in his class and really struggled at times to keep up. One day, he and Heidi were doing their homework and I noticed that he was very quiet, staring out the window a lot, taking an awfully long time to do what little work had to be done. It was such a lovely day, so I encouraged him to finish up so we could take our supper to the park and have a picnic. Finally, he closed the book and said he was finished. I told him to set it on the table and I would check it when we returned. I packed the car and off we went.

We couldn't get a picnic table that night, so we spread out our favorite blanket on the ground and spread out the picnic. Rob didn't eat very much and said he wanted to go swing. Heidi had found a friend and was playing and I looked over there was Rob, all by himself, swinging slowly with his head bowed. He wasn't having fun. Something big was on his mind. I sat and read, knowing he would eventually come.

Finally he wandered back, flopped down on the blanket and looked up at me and said, "Mom, I did something today. Something really bad." I looked at that sad face and I could see his misery. I asked, "What did you do?" He gulped and began to cry and said, "I couldn't understand our lesson and we had a test. I didn't know it and didn't know what to do so I copied from Robbie. I cheated."

Well, it was out. He cried and explained and we talked about the lesson and what it was he didn't understand and what I might do to help. I told him I would help him and we would go together and talk to his teacher. He said, "I have to tell her, don't it?" I said, "Rob, if you don't, you'll never feel right about yourself. You may get a good grade, but you'll know you didn't earn it. You'll always feel badly. You have to get rid of it."

He did and we worked it out. He did extra work and took another test and worked it out. But before he could go on, before he could be open again to learn anything new, he had to lay aside the weight that was distracting him, causing him such misery. It's true for all of us. If we're going to travel forward, we have to let it to and travel lightly.

Our spiritual lives, and our life in the church, are much like running a race. We run best, feel the presence of God best when we give over to God the things that are hindering our progress, slowing us down, keeping us from being focused on ministry. Whether young or old, our races are marked with difficulties and obstacles, sometimes even tragedies. That's life!

Our scriptures give us a kind of map to help us find our way as we run. We learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. We begin to identify with those very human people of old. If we look carefully, we see in our scriptures much more than heroes. We see those with crosses to bear, challenges to overcome and sometimes suffering to endure. And they did it.

As we read, we find the Hebrews preparing for a long race. They had to have patience and endurance and had no idea that throughout the ages, this race would still be going on in the year 2010.

There is a goal, a finish line but it's not a place where we can stop running. It's a sacred, holy place where we realize that Christ is with us – right here and now. If we fix our eyes on Jesus, we discover that our lives can change.

Our ministry can change and be fruitful. We can incorporate new ideas and ways of following Jesus into our journey.

The Gospels were written much later than those Epistles. Luke's Gospel is the late edition. It contains many more stories about Jesus, using various sources. Those stories connected Jesus to the old Hebrew stories and here, we find Luke telling us about a Jesus who is preparing his followers for what is to come. He knows there is a long, hard race ahead of them. He's been teaching one lesson after another and then he speaks of their gifts and talents: "To whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

That's the challenge of the day. We have been entrusted with the very hearts and souls of God's people. Just as Jesus prepared his followers for division and trouble, we also must take on those very challenges today. If we're going to follow in his footsteps, then we're going to have to strike out and break tradition and bring a new message. Yes, there were some who thought he was crazy, who wanted to be rid of him and saw him as a betrayer of the old faith and traditions. And as times change and our traditions change, we still fight those same battles. But we must fight if we are to bring the message of Christ to a new age and a new society.

Jesus told them that he came to bring fire – a new spirit and a new way. He told them it would be a difficult journey. He asked, "Do you think I came to bring peace? No, division." He knows that families and friends would sometimes be divided – they will take sides and disagree. They will resist the changes from rites and rituals to the love and acceptance of Jesus. Luke writes what he has already seen! He wrote about what was happening all around him in that early church, and that was over 100 years after Jesus had died!

Life as a Christian is not always easy – not if we really set out to follow Jesus. And look even at Christianity itself–

divided in every corner, brothers and sisters arguing over whose religious practices are right. We interpret the scripture and then someone tells us they see things in a completely different way. The Congregational tradition is one of education and exploration, and yet there are those who tell us that they must save us from ourselves. Rather than running together toward creating the kingdom of God, we find ourselves warring with others.

There is a race going on – but some of us are so weighed down by our own needs, ideas, worries, sins and troubles that we don't even participate. We stand at the sidelines and watch others run, With no one there to relieve them. In a way, Jesus is telling them that they could predict the weather and its effect, but could not seem to see a worn out spirit. This week, John Dale and I were talking about how people react to change and newness. We discussed what might be at the core of some disruption over very simple issues, and he used a phrase that was profound. He said, "There has been an erosion of the Spirit" here with the crisis' in the past. It hit me. This happens all the time. When facing a crisis situation, we often lose our bearings and we try to take charge of anything we can control. And so we focus on all the wrong things. Oh, they are necessary, but we tend to focus on the material aspects of the church – the budget, the building, staffing, programming, but not enough on spiritual issues. Jesus knew it would happen. He tried to warn us. You look at the things you can predict, and fail to see the spiritual issues.

As Christians, we are running a race. We run the race with our economy. We run the race with terrorism. We are running and trying to find our way in this complicated world. We're running in all directions. But the race that is most important is the race for our souls. In everything we do, whether as a leader or member of Plymouth Church, or out in the world in our work and social life, we have to ask ourselves: Are we focusing on the right race? Are we running toward Jesus and the life he dreamed for us?

As we work and play and pray together during this time, will you be a partner in the race? Will you run with me and each other, focusing on Jesus, on the church and Christ's ministry to the world, and run along side each other in a cooperative and loving way? That's the most important race that stands before us, isn't it? Amen.