

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

This past week we observed Remembrance Day, thinking of and thankful for those who give themselves in service of our country in the midst of the horrors of war. I tend to observe the week by watching old war movies, but I also watched some old episodes of the tv comedy, *M*A*S*H*. In one episode, the members of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital are challenged by a neighbouring unit to an athletic contest. Each unit will put forth their best runner, and they will run a race—winner take all. The lead characters, Hawkeye and BJ make some heavy wagers, as do most of the members of the camp, because they have been told that a new replacement is coming into their unit: a record-breaking, world-class runner named Jesse McFarland. They know that their rivals have a good runner, but they are sure that their new recruit will be able to defeat him.

The day comes when young Jesse is to arrive at the 4077th. A truck shows up, several people get off, the last of whom is a stocky, unassuming man, who is out of breath as he gets down off the truck—you know, someone like me. Anyway, Hawkeye and BJ are right there, asking if there is anyone else in the truck, because they are looking for Jesse McFarland. The stocky man replies that he is Jesse McFarland. Overwhelmed, Hawkeye asks if he is Jesse McFarland, the Olympic champion. Oh, you mean my son, Jesse Jr., the man replies. Of course, the 4077th is in trouble, because there is no way that this overweight, balding and wheezing man will ever be able to run a race and win.

I think I could be a great runner. There are only a few things holding me back: first, I have bad knees that don't like the pounding that running produces. Secondly, thanks as much to genetics as anything else, my cardiovascular system is not up to the challenge. And last, but not least, I have a bit more baggage to carry in a race than most runners would have. But if I lost 60 pounds, converted another 40 into muscle, had a heart transplant, knee replacements and was willing to train tirelessly for the next few years, I might be able to make a reasonable showing in a Senior's Olympics.

Okay, let's be honest: I will never be a great athlete. Some of you can empathize, because you will never win any gold medals, either. There are those who are good athletes, and I hope you will continue to enjoy and excel in your sport. But even if we aren't all athletes, our text today says that we have a race that must be run. Our Christian life is here compared to a marathon, begun at our baptism, run day by day as we live in faith towards God and in fervent love towards each other. We run that race not against other believers, or even against unbelievers. We run to follow Christ. Some day, by the grace of God, we will cross the finish line when our earthly life comes to an end. Or, if Christ should come before we die, then the race will still be finished, and heaven will be our home. In the meantime, though, while on this earth, you and I are called to have the single-mindedness of an Olympic athlete as we live our lives in Christ. We are to be disciplined runners on a course that is marked out in Christ, not to win our salvation, but to celebrate the victory that is ours in Christ.

We are coming to the end of the present church year, and our lessons all have a theme of discipline and endurance behind them. Daniel prophesies through the Holy Spirit to tell us *“there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.”* (Daniel 12:1, ESV) In the midst of this evil world we are told: *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.”* (Hebrews 10:23, ESV) Jesus speaks of the struggles and trials that will come as His church carries the Gospel into the world. He tells us: *“And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* (Mark 13:13, ESV)

Our text today also speaks of endurance and discipline: *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*. We are in that race right now, but we need to keep on running with even greater perseverance and effort. The race is the Christian life which we live through the power of the Spirit, who has given us new birth as the people of God. As strange as it may seem, this is not a race we run to win the prize of our salvation, but we run because we have that prize through Jesus Christ. We run because of our faith in Christ. It is a race that is getting harder and harder to run in this sinful world. The problem is not that we are

getting older and slower, but that the world is very evil. This past week there was also a day of remembrance for the persecuted church throughout the world. We pray that God would strengthen and deliver those who are being enslaved, tortured and killed because of their confession of Jesus Christ. May God, in His mercy, preserve us from this terrible evil! But there are other things that make it harder and harder to run this race. Our text talks about *every weight, and sin which clings so closely*. It is hard to live as a child of God in an unbelieving world. It is harder to live as a child of God when our own sinful hearts work to lead us away from the race.

In His Word, God gives us all that we need to be prepared to run a great race. He gives us the best equipment, training and encouragement. We should be running a great race but we don't run as we should. So "what's holding you back?" Sometimes our attitude holds us back. I always think it is silly when sports commentators describe an athlete's effort by saying something like, "He came to play", or "He came to win". Why would someone compete if they were not prepared to give their all? What athlete will ever want to give only 50% effort? Yet we often do that in our life of faith. We can become complacent. We lose interest if the race becomes inconvenient for us or gets in the way of our goals.

We can also be hampered, as our text tells us, by the *sin which clings so closely*. You can't run a winning race while wearing a big, bulky snow-suit, with your shoe laces tied together. But that is how sin affects us. Instead of focussing on Christ, we are distracted by the lusts and temptations of this world. We seek what we want, and take our eyes off of Jesus. We listen to the world, and not to the Word of God. We think about, worry about, and strive to maintain the here and now, but forget about the glory that lies at the end of the race. We lie, we cheat, we steal. We do countless things each day that make it harder and harder for us to run the race that is set before us.

But we are called to run that race, and to run it with perseverance. No matter what the devil, the world or our own sinful flesh may seek to do to keep us from running, we are to keep going. We are not to let up, slow down, or stop for any reason. We have to concentrate, to focus on the race. That isn't always easy. There are so many distractions. There is the terrible reality of the devil's temptations, all designed to throw us off course or keep us from finishing the race. There are the things that challenge us—like the cares of life, the uncertainty of the days, and the devil's terrible efforts to make us believe that God doesn't care about us. Yet we keep on running.

As the world gets tougher, and as the race goes on, we may start to feel that we'll never make it to the finish line. But our text reminds us of those who have run the race before us, the great cloud of witnesses who have not only seen the finish line, but crossed it in triumph. And they were triumphant because of the One who ran that race for them—and for all of us. Our text tells us get things in focus as we *[look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*. From first to last, in every step of the life we live as the people of God, it is Christ—His power, strength and the blessings of His forgiveness—that empowers and guides our steps. We can run the race because Christ has already run it for us. He Himself took on those enemies who try to keep us from finishing the race, and he conquered them all. Satan wants to trip us up with his lies. He wants to lead us away from the finish line. But as the wonderful words of the great hymn, *A Mighty Fortress* remind us: *Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us; we tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us.* (LSB 656, st. 3) Satan has been defeated. When Christ ran the race for us, He destroyed the power of the devil. Jesus endured the shame of the cross to put an end to sin and its condemning power. He rose from the dead on that Easter morning so that even death cannot keep us from crossing the finish line. Forgiven through His sacrifice, we are freed from the sin that ensnares us. Empowered by the Holy Spirit we can throw off all that hinders us and focus on Christ. And blessed by His grace, we can run the race that shows His love and power at work in us.

While it is unlikely that many of us will be Olympic athletes, we do have a race to run, the race that Christ ran for us. That race has its moments of struggle. The devil makes the course difficult. Sin still hampers our efforts. But they don't have to hold us back. We run as we live under the Word of God, as we live to show the life of Christ in us, in all we say and all we do. We run to be the best we can be by His grace. At the end of this race we will share in the glory of Christ forever. With all the heavenly host arrayed in white we will raise an anthem of praise to His most holy name. God grant that, as we anticipate the coming glory of Christ and run towards that goal, we all may say what St. Paul did at the end of his life: *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."* (2 Timothy 4:7-8, ESV) Amen.