

Lutheran Church of the Master
580 Kuhn Road, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188
Curt Gerald, Interim Pastor
February 14/15, 2009
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

“Stewardship: Training for the Long Run”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (The Message)

²⁴⁻²⁵ You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.

²⁶⁻²⁷ I don't know about you, but I'm running hard for the finish line. I'm giving it everything I've got. No sloppy living for me! I'm staying alert and in top condition. I'm not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (The Message)

Discipline in a Long-Distance Race

¹⁻³ Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

A Stewardship Series During the Season of Epiphany
"Stewardship: Teaching Stewardship" - Curt Gerald / 01/31/2009
"Stewardship: Teaching Stewardship" - Jim Hollendonner - 02/01/2009
"Stewardship: Freedom & Responsibility - Pat Gerber - 02/07 & 08/2009
"Stewardship: Training for the Long Run" - Curt Gerald - 02/14 & 15/ 2009
"Stewardship: Proclamation" - Curt Gerald - 02/21 & 22/2009

So - Welcome to the Run! This is not just a fast sprint ... this isn't just a matter of "get on your mark / get set / go." This is a matter of being in it for the long run. It isn't just a few seconds ... it isn't just a few minutes ... it is the whole distance.

Our scriptures developed in a time when men (and we realize that in those days it was the men only) knew about athletic events ... and Paul the author of the Letters to the Church in Corinth and whoever the author of Hebrews was/is certainly knew about these events ... apparently they both probably sat in awe as they watched the contestants "in the stadium" (as 1 Corinthians says) ... and maybe they both enjoyed a good run themselves. (It is probably hard to imagine an author of a Biblical text running naked in the stadium, which was the uniform of the sports in those days ... but ... who knows!)

So anyway, both of these lessons are talking about running. But you and I each and all know that they aren't talking like athletic coaches ... they are, after all, theologians or preachers or teachers ... and they are both using the common experience from a stadium to tell their hearers (originally) or their readers (today) about this "thing" which we might call the Christian life.

And what they are both saying is that this Christian life is a long, hard, run ... and they encourage us to "give it everything we have got" ... "to

run to win" ... "to stay alert and in top condition" ... and "to keep our eyes on Jesus."

If I were to select the lessons for my funeral service, these are among the top five, and probably the first two, of the ones I would want to have read. I would even prefer to be buried in running shorts ... and to have that be the theme of my Eucharistic funeral service ... because I think the concept is appropriate. When death is done with me and it can do no more to me, then I hope my family gathered together with my family in faith can say "well done" ... I want to finish this life well ... and I look forward to crossing the finish line surrounded by the hosts of those who have crossed it before me and hear their cheers and join the ranks of all of those who are being refreshed in the Heavenly Stadium.

But until then ... we have this life to live. And I believe that these texts are telling us that in order to run this life fully, we need training and preparation along the way. After all, if you want to make it to the end of 26.2 miles, you don't make your first run on the day of the marathon.

You start with a jog around the block ...
maybe go for $\frac{1}{2}$ mile out and then back ...
and then maybe work up to around a square mile ...
and then you go for 45 minutes out and 45 minutes back ...
and you vary your training routines ...
sometime you alternate between running and walking between
telephone poles ...
sometimes you run as fast as you can as far as you can ...
sometimes you skip a day ...
you probably change your daily schedule ...
some of you run every morning ...

some of us prefer late afternoon ...
you watch your diet ... you lose weight ... you load up on pasta ...

And what Paul and the unknown author are telling us is: if that is what an athlete does ... that is also what Christians need to do.

In the Christian life this is often referred to as "Discipline." In a couple weeks, we will be entering into the season of Lent ... and that is one of the emphasis that Lent has always brought with it ... and this year Mike has prepared a great "Discipline in Discipleship Series:"

February 25 - Ash Wednesday

Theme: THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP

March 1 - LENT 1

Theme: THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

March 8 - LENT 2

Theme: THE DISCIPLINE OF CROSS-BEARING

March 15- LENT 3

Theme: THE SELF-DISCIPLINE OF DISCIPLESHIP

March 22 - LENT 4

Theme: THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

March 29- LENT 5

Theme: "I WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS" - WALKING THE PATH OF A DISCIPLE

So here we are, in the middle of an economic situation which is at the best at the moment "bleak," the likes of which has probably not been seen since my parents' generation almost "four score and seven years ago" ... I guess that simply reminds us that running is not always easy. When you're in it for the long run, you run in snow, mud, rain,

thunderstorms (being careful about lightening), you run through sprinkling systems when it is hot and you run with layers on when it is cold. The point is ... you keep running.

Some are seeing the current crisis more as a correction (necessary though painful) from which our culture and our entire world will emerge having been made more rational and caring and careful. As a good Baptist friend of mine once said, "when our WANTERS are out of control, our NEEDS suffer." Isn't that the case.

So today I offer you what I think is an excellent training tool for that part of the Christian life which is commonly called "stewardship" and which encourages discipline in the Christian life. Once again today I want to invite you, each and everyone, to consider becoming a proportionate steward. In times like these, I think you'll find that proportionate giving is alike a key that will set you free.

At the last council meeting, we were talking about "promises" and I was asked to whom are we promising what in stewardship. My current response is to say that as a Christian I first of all make a personal promise to God in which I say "God, as long as you continue to bless me as you are right now, I plan to return (blank) percent to you through charitable giving in and through my church and other appropriate gifts in the coming year."

To my congregation, I translate that percentage into a dollar amount so that my congregation can know what it can expect to receive during the coming year. (All other organizations can tax it, bill it, sign contracts for it, or print it ... but the Church exists on the promise of God and on the promise relationships within its baptized body.)

One of the "urban myths" in the Church is that what I give is "Private information." "Personal?" Yes. "Private?" Never. This is really the last obstacle of self defense that blocks Stewardship in the life of many people.

You'll find a guide for proportionate giving on the backside of the sheet with today's Gospel readings from THE MESSAGE ... I encourage you to review it ... and I hope you will use it.

And in times like this it will set you free ... because if you are currently married and you are both employed and if your combine family income today is \$150,000 and you've promised God that you're going to return 7% (which would be @\$10,500/year) ... and if one of you goes to work tomorrow and gets that pink slip so that you go from \$150,000/year to \$75,000/year, then that same percentage becomes \$5,250. In a worst case scenario, if you both get terminated tomorrow ... 7% of \$0 is \$0.

Would you car dealership do that?

Would your home mortgage do that?

Would Sears do that with the refrigerator in your kitchen?

Would Best Buy do that with the big screen TV in your family room?

I don't think so.

Of course, it is important to remember that it works the other way too! If my salary or income is doubled, then my giving should probably be doubled too!

When you're in it for the long run, you take advice seriously. You listen to your coaches ... you read the books of the experts ... but believe me, it is all worth it, when you get to those last .2mile of the run ... and you see the finish line in front of you ... and everyone continues to cheer you on ... and you go through that final chute ... and you don't want to stop ... Amen