

# Limping to the finish

## A sermon on Hebrews 12.1–17

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**H**ave you ever wondered what it would be like to do some sort of epic endurance event, like swim the English Channel, bike in the Tour de France, or run the Boston Marathon? Those are events for people with strong bodies, time for practice, and access to money. The winners are the elite of the athletic world. Regular people, with jobs, wrinkles, and flat feet, we are the dreamers, who watch from the couch and only vicariously compete with the best. Maybe we are inspired by what they accomplish, but more likely we reach for the chips and quietly despair, knowing we struggle to run across the parking lot without pulling a muscle.

When we watch elite athletes, we see an ideal. We celebrate winners. We listen to their stories of making it to the top. How-

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ever, reality, for the vast majority of also-rans, is quite different. Reality is the hard work behind the scenes. It may not have visible rewards. It is about coming in fourth or maybe not finishing at all. Sometimes it's about limping while others run past. Reality is slower and much more pear-shaped than the ideals perched on the podium.

The life and work of the church can be compared to an endurance event. It is something we dedicate our lives to; it takes practice and none of us will ever do it perfectly. We may not be recognized for our efforts, but it is worth the work and the sacrifice to make it across the finish line, and we cannot do it alone.

We spend years going to school to learn how to speak and write and think. Our friendships and marriages and work and community are all built on how we talk or do not talk to each other. If we avoid practicing communication skills in any organization, things fall apart. I mentioned that elite athletes represent a

physical ideal for us. What kind of communication ideal do we have that unites us as a church, a team with the ability to make it to the finish line?

I would like to say our congregation gets it right, that we always know how to speak and listen well to each other, but that is not reality, even in a relatively healthy church like ours. The dysfunctions of any church group are often on clear display, part of the regular discussions over a Wendy's burger on Sunday afternoon. We in the church, however, and even people who have nothing to do with the church, still expect it to be a place of love, understanding, and kind words. We expect it to be an organization of people who consider each other's needs and strive to be servant leaders, following the example of Jesus Christ. But as in epic races like a marathon, the overwhelming majority of us simply are not in the winner's circle. Our reality is struggle. Every one of us could tell a story of nasty words spoken or heard in a church foyer, of congregational meeting train wrecks, of misunderstandings and power struggles and the undercurrents of things we are afraid to talk about.

Hebrews 12 picks up on the idea of an epic race as a useful metaphor for the life of the church. And unlike the more familiar piece in 1 Corinthians 9:24, Hebrews doesn't tell us to run to win. It simply tries to get us to finish, whole and somewhat healthy. The Hebrews race is about reality, not unattainable ideals. Here, the Christian runners, the athletes, are a sorry bunch. They need a lot of encouragement, because they are in danger of quitting. Their race has been hard, they have many distractions, and their resolve in the face of opposition has faltered. They are described as needing to throw off the sin that hinders them. They require discipline. Verse 12 says they need to strengthen their feeble arms and weak knees and take care of the lame people limping along beside them.

New Testament scholar Thomas Long suggests that this picture of the Christian church in Hebrews looks like the back half of a marathon: "There we find the ordinary runners, a few more years under the belt perhaps, a little extra weight over the belt, a lot more pausing to stop and sip water and catch one's breath. There are also the contestants on crutches and in wheelchairs, courageously out on the course nonetheless."<sup>1</sup> It is at the back of the

race, where the people are less than ideal, that the stuff the church is supposed to be about can happen. It is the place where healing and hope are visible. Where one runner might falter or faint, others will stop to help. No one should be so concerned about their own success that they run past each other. The runners at the back are encouragers; they want everyone to finish. Back there, it's not about competition, it's about compassion. It's about personal growth and accomplishment, and community for everyone, regardless of the challenges they bring with them.

This is a remarkable bit of scripture. The whole tone of Hebrews 12 is communal. There's almost nothing in it directed toward individuals. Christians are called, strongly, to work together, to make every effort to live in peace with the variety of strangeness and weakness found in the church. The writer talks about being surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who encourage those who are trying. He uses plural language; he instructs us to pay attention to each other so that no one misses out. The hard to

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love, the ones who make bad decisions like Esau in verse 16, are to be encouraged. If they fail, it should not be because they were ignored by others in the race.

This counsel is in striking contrast to Greek culture of the time, which celebrated the individual winner, encouraged fierce competition, and demanded excellence. The idea of limping along at the back of a race or surrendering a chance of winning in order to

help a lesser athlete was unthinkable to the Greeks. To hang back and help out instead of pursuing personal interest was a shocking message, a failing in the eyes of the dominant culture. The church, if it manages to run this way, will be moving against the flow of traffic in society. It will require endurance and sacrifice to finish well and receive the promised kingdom, but more than just one of us will finish. The Christian life is not a solitary pursuit. It is a team event, and that is why the church is so important. Church life is not about the elite; it is about regular people with problems: the stubborn ones, the self-righteous, the lonely, and the addicted. It is about real people with real faults doing something epic, extraordinary—something they could not do on their own.

But this kind of teamwork doesn't happen without communication. When I was in high school, we had a volleyball coach who hammered home the importance of communication. We learned to watch for the setter's signals as she called the plays; we had to call out if we were ready; we had to yell "Mine!" before going after the ball. When we listened and talked to each other, our team played as if we had one mind, and it felt great. When we quit talking, we became a bunch of individuals with separate agendas. We ran into each other, missed plays, and went home grumpy.

The teamwork that makes a church also relies on communication. Hebrew 12:14 says: "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (NRSV). The church is always growing and dealing with different people and evolving issues. It should continually welcome new people and therefore will always contain a mix of us at different stages in the Christian journey. It will feature unique abilities and disabilities, wonderful and difficult people. Basic communication abilities, care for each other, and patience are skills that all of us "church athletes" must keep practicing.

There is a grace-filled give and take needed as we offer and accept help from each other as we run this race. We need to know that our church community is working to be a safe place for us to be able to speak and hear each other. This is always a work in progress in any church, even a healthy one. Years ago my husband Tim and I had been invited as guest speakers to another church. After the worship service, we were verbally attacked by one person in the foyer. It put us in an awkward spot, but then something wonderful happened. A member of that church gently stepped in between this person and us. He directed her comments to a local church leader and called us away to attend to something else. His caring intervention helped both the irate person and us to feel cared for and listened to. We are called, and expected, to do this for each other! We found out later that this person was living with mental illness. Her congregation, by its actions that morning, showed us she was a valued part of their community; at the same time they did not allow her behavior to cause harm to us.

The Hebrews metaphor of being at the back of the race and helping other runners is a great image as we think about how to

work at being church together. Its goals are realistic and attainable; all of us imperfect believers can finish the race well. Eugene Peterson, a pastor and scholar, writes: “The biblical fact is that there are no successful churches. There are, instead, communities of sinners, gathered before God week after week in towns and villages all over the world.”<sup>3</sup> Is the church an ideal model of communication? Definitely not, but we are not called to be

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perfect. We are called to keep learning together with our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. We will never, as a congregation, be able to claim we are the role model for communication that all others should follow.

What we can do, what we are called to do, is to make every effort to live in peace with all. We run this race together, encouraging each other, working to strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees. Our healthiest members run at the back of the pack in order to look out for those who falter and need help.

We learn to accept help from others when we are the ones who are injured or weak. We are a lot like the church described in Hebrews, full of sinners and handicapped by many things. Working together, supporting, challenging, and helping each other, we can run, limp, crawl, or be carried across the finish line. Following Christ, we can succeed in our calling to be God’s church together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, *Hebrews*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.

## About the author

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