

“Let’s Run the Race” Preaching Series: Part 3 – “The Agonizing Church”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

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Any marathon runner will tell you that at the beginning of the race the greatest temptation, because adrenalin is pumping through the human system with excitement and anticipation, is to break out running too quickly. I understand that runners want to avoid sprinting away from the start and becoming so exhausted early on that they cannot finish the grueling ordeal. I also understand that, no matter what an athlete’s conditioning program has been, there always comes a point in the marathon where they hit the wall; where their lungs are burning, their lips are parched, and their legs are heavy and weak. Any spectator watching would easily understand if that runner fell by the wayside and said, “I quit! I can’t go on any more! My body won’t stand it! The agony is too much for me to bear! I simply quit.” At that point, an inner strength is needed ...an ability to reach down in deep, hidden places where a voice is to be heard ...an inner voice that says: “Don’t quit! Keep going! Persevere! Hang in there! You can do it!”

Jesus reached for that inner strength when he agonized over the race God had called him to run, the mission God had sent him to accomplish. He did so in the wilderness of temptation, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross. Like Jesus, the athletic church, the agile church, the accelerating church that is in partnership with God in God’s mission, will have times when it becomes the agonizing church. This is why the church is called to receive the indwelling presence and power of God’s spirit in faith.

“Indwelling” is an important word. Another way to describe “indwelling” is to say that it is important to allow God’s spirit to take up permanent residence in our lives individually, and in the life of Memorial United Methodist Church. It is not the kind of faith that burns hot and fervently in one moment and becomes distant and cold in another. It is an indwelling presence that is consistent and ongoing so that we understand the presence and power of God’s grace in every circumstance, no matter where or what it happens to be. “Indwelling” presence is grounded and rooted in love: the kind of *agape* love that reminds us of God’s unconditional

grace. It is not earned or merited, but celebrated by all God's people. This is what keeps the athletic church going when it becomes the agonizing church; this is what enables individuals and the church to cope in every circumstance.

“Let's run the race,” is the umbrella theme in this preaching series that seeks to lay out more closely the nature and mission of the Christian church. The “race” is God's mission in God's world. “Running the race” involves a commitment to following Jesus and being partners with him in a life related to God and a commitment to servant ministries related to all God's people, indeed, all of creation. To run this race the church must be athletic and agile ...and there comes a decisive moment in the race when the church must accelerate ...when there is a sense of urgency because we are about God's work – the most important work in the world. But running a race is a very earthy and human way to describe our involvement in God's mission ...there is not only excitement and exhilaration ...there is also endurance, and there is pain and agony ...there is even exhaustion. It was like this for Jesus who took the anguish of the world around him seriously. Why should it be different for the church?

A heresy – one of many – arose in the early church. It claimed that Jesus was only divine. Sadly, the church is not rid of it yet. It is important for every Christian, and it is important for Memorial, to affirm the humanity of Jesus. Why? Because it is true. And because it helps us to come to grips not only with the ecstasy of following Jesus ...of running the race, but also the agony. Agony and ecstasy – it is both/and, not either/or when we run the race.

The gospel writer, Mark, emphasizes Jesus' humanity without in any way detracting from his deity. Mark also lays far more emphasis on the deeds of Jesus than he does on Jesus' words. One of the main themes of the Gospel of Mark is, “Jesus went about doing good.” Jesus was not afraid to show his human side ...to show friendship and sympathy to people in trouble. Jesus was One who sympathized with a human heart ...who understood what made life sad or difficult for the people around him. At times, Jesus was moved to tears. In our gospel lesson today we see Jesus having compassion for an outcast leper – a compassion that led Jesus to act, to touch, to heal.

The healing of the man with leprosy reveals not only the humanity of Jesus, but also his divinity. Because mainline or “orthodox” Christian doctrine asserts that Jesus is both truly

human and truly divine, this healing narrative in Mark's gospel teaches us that God in the person of God's Son touches the leper ...that God in the person of Jesus is moved with compassion.

In Mark 1, verse 41, we read, "Jesus was filled with compassion." The word "compassion" suggests deep emotional turmoil and literally refers to having one's intestines turn. Jesus did not merely feel sorry for the man, but was so moved by the man's situation, that he felt sick to his stomach. Here is a picture of Jesus filled with compassion ...overwhelmed by an awareness of the leper's suffering, and filled with a desire to relieve the suffering ...to touch ...to heal.

The agonizing church today is a church that is moved with compassion when confronted with human need around it. The agonizing church takes the pain and suffering into its own body as Jesus took upon himself the anguish and the agony of the whole world. Today, you and I – the agonizing church – are Jesus' hands in the world. We, who in Martin Luther's words are "little Christ's," are the hands of compassion, the hands of mercy, the hands of healing, and the hands of love in a world that's crying out for someone to notice, to care, to love.

When Saint Francis of Assisi related to his fellows human beings, it was through the eyes and the heart of Jesus. One day while riding through the countryside, Francis, the man who loved beauty, who had been so picky about food, who had hated deformity, came face to face with a leper. Repelled by the appearance and the smell of the leper, Francis nevertheless jumped down from his horse, gave the leper some money, and kissed his hand. When his kiss of peace was returned, Francis was filled with joy. As he rode off, he turned around for a last wave, and saw that the leper had disappeared. Francis always looked upon this experience as a test from God, believing that the leper he embraced on the road near Assisi was not only a hideous leper, but also the very person of Jesus, incarnate in the leper.

Our Roman Catholic friends believe that Saint Francis' mystical and deeply personal relationship with Jesus was so profound, that for the last three years of his life, he bore the marks of the crucified Christ in his own body, known as the *stigmata*. According to this belief, Francis was the first person in Christian history to have received this extraordinary gift. Whether we consider this truth or legend, of one thing we can be certain: for Saint Francis, Jesus was present in every human person, but particularly in the poor and outcasts.

We, at Memorial, are being the hands and compassionate heart of Jesus to our Thomasville and Davidson County neighbors through participation in Angel Food Ministry, Cooperative Community Ministries, Communities in Schools, InterFaith Hospitality Network, *Project Agape*, Appalachia Service Project, medical missions, and through ministries to the homebound, the sick, the unemployed, to those on the margins of society, and the list goes on. As we continue running our race with our eyes fixed on Jesus, we will see people hurting, we will see people living with burdens, we will see people afflicted with disease, and we will feel compelled – as Jesus was – to reach out a hand to help, to heal, to lift, to strengthen ...to bring some measure of peace and comfort, healing and hope into those peoples' lives.

We will experience pain and agony during the race we are running because there is suffering all around us. It will not overwhelm us, nor cause us to quit, but encourage us to keep moving ...always moving out with compassion and mercy and justice and love. We will do it because, deep within the life of this body, we will find the indwelling presence and power of God.

Memorial Church – an agonizing church – in the midst of all the complexity, chaos, and confusion of this world, must ache for answers that bring healing and hope, rather than doom and despair, to those among whom we live and work and worship. I suspect that we all (not least preachers like me) will have to resist the temptation to say something merely to stop the pain that will from time to time overtake many people ...possibly including ourselves. There will be many proclamations, I predict, that will continue to try to produce glib, simplistic, pat, saccharine, platitudinous, meaningless and ineffective remedies and answers to the enormously complex problems of our age. May God save you and me from uttering any trite proclamations ...such as: “It is the will of God!” I have a feeling that the agonizing church's call to serve – **Memorial's call to serve – may increasingly be a call to simply feel the pain and loss of others ...to develop a deeper compassion for those who hurt ...to grieve with one another ...and to carry that pain, that hurt, and that grief into our praying.**

Let's run the race! May God keep us faithful to run this most challenging part ...this agonizing part ... of the race with steadfastness, perseverance, and endurance.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.