

## Don't Drop the Baton

### **Hebrews 10:32-11:3**

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. For you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet “in a very little while, the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith. My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back.” But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved. Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

When I think of relay races, I first think of that day at the end of the school year. You know, where everyone plays a bunch of silly games outside. There's a water balloon toss, a dizzy bat race, an egg-on-the-spoon relay... One at a time, your entire team takes turns doing whatever foolish activity your teachers dreamed up.

Of course, if I stretch my brain a little further, I realize that relay races grow up. There are relay races at the Olympics – and no one is balancing an egg on a spoon. There are races in the pool and on the track. Each person completes their leg of the race, usually a sprint, combining to make a much longer-distance race.

Then we get to our Scripture reading this morning, and it seems as though faith is a relay race too. I am by no means an expert on relay races, but I do know a few rules and strategies. You see, it's a little-known fact, but for a very brief moment in my history, I was a relay runner. I was perhaps the worst sprinter on our school track team, but when I was part of a relay team, I wasn't awful. I'm not going to lie and say I suddenly became a superstar, but I was solidly in the middle of the pack. Which is saying something for the girl who came in last place on the 100m.

Being part of a team made a big difference for me. I didn't want to let the rest of my team down, so I had much greater motivation than I did with the individual races. And if there's anything that is a team sport, it's Christian faith. God created us as people to live in community

with one another. Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs. Working as a team means motivation, accountability, and encouragement. It also means that the group can do more than the individuals could do alone.

I overheard a woman last week as she talked about the race she was doing this weekend. It was a 50-mile race. For those of you keeping track, that's almost twice the distance of a marathon! As one person, that's really difficult. Not many athletes can complete ultra-marathons. But if we wanted to cover 50 miles as a congregation, working as a team, we'd each only need to cover a third of a mile!

When you do something by yourself, the benefit is that you are in control. You just have to worry about yourself. But as part of a team, you have to work with others. You have to think about how you coordinate your efforts. And in the case of a relay race, you have to think about how you're going to pass the baton. And here's where the rules and regulations come in.

For most running races, there's a designated location on the track. A passing zone. And you are only allowed to pass the baton in that zone. Do it too early or too late, and you're disqualified. The whole reason for a passing zone is to allow the second runner to accelerate before they receive the baton. This allows them to run their leg of the race with a shorter time. It's why I was much better at the 4x100 relay than the 100m.

And Christian faith is best passed on this way too. If you really wanted to, you could take all the children in this congregation, sit them down, and make them learn all the intricacies of modern theology. We could have them learn the Book of Discipline and memorize the Hymnal. They could start quoting John Wesley at the dinner table. But that's not a good idea. They wouldn't really understand any of it, because children remain concrete thinkers until they

approach adolescence. They might be able to memorize the theological arguments, but they wouldn't understand them. That kind of faith wouldn't mean anything to them.

But we also can't wait until everyone has an advanced degree to start teaching them about John Wesley, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or other Christian thinkers. Because lots of us won't ever earn a high-ranking degree. But that doesn't mean we can't grow in our faith and in our understanding. We just have to work our way up to it.

Paul talks about teaching the early Christians, and he doesn't use the metaphor of accelerating in a race. He uses the metaphor of feeding a child. You don't feed an infant a cheeseburger. You give them milk. And as they grow, you move on to soft baby food. I think Gerber even has three levels of baby food, each one graduating one step closer to table food. But likewise, you don't keep giving baby food to your teenagers. Paul says we all start out needing milk, needing just the basic elements of Christian faith. But we aspire to solid food, to the mental and social challenges of fully living out the gospel.

So we accelerate in that passing lane, getting ready to receive the baton. Getting ready to claim our faith. Guess what? That's confirmation! That's membership! That's when we move from learning and growing to proclaiming and professing that this is what we believe. And at that point, although we continue to carry with us the training and friendship and experience of the runners who have come before us, it is now our turn to carry that baton to the next runner.

One of the rules I never liked about relay races was that if you drop the baton – even if it's an accident, or a bad hand-off, or sweaty palms – your whole team is disqualified. It doesn't matter if you drop it in the passing zone or later down the track. You drop the baton, and it's all over. Imagine for one moment that you are the only Christian left in the world. It is your life's purpose to carry the baton, to keep the stories and songs and rituals intact so that at some point,

you can hand that knowledge off to someone else. Whether it happens on accident or on purpose, if you drop the baton, if you forget or discard the Christian tradition, that's the end of the line. It's gone.

The good news, however, is that you are NOT the only Christian in the world. You are NOT the only one carrying a baton. But every time a runner decides to leave the race, there's a little more pressure put on those who are still carrying their batons. It's a big responsibility, and our reading tells us this morning that it will take endurance.

This letter was written to a group of Christians who were facing hardship. Not just ordinary life-is-tough hardship, but persecution on account of their faith. So many of them were considering defecting from the faith and dropping the baton. The author here reminds them that when they first faced challenges, they faced them head on. He says, "you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution... [but] you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting." So he encourages these early Christians to keep up their confidence. He reminds them that they can do this. And he know it, because their ancestors maintained faith with endurance. Endurance is in their spiritual DNA.

Endurance is in our spiritual DNA. Who are our spiritual ancestors? Who are the people who handed the baton on to you? Parents, Sunday school teachers, youth counselors, friends, pastors, grandparents. And who handed the baton on to them? As we follow the trail back, we run into countless people who kept the faith with confidence and endurance, even though they are not remembered by name. But we also run into John Wesley and Martin Luther. We go back further, and we run into Paul and Silas, the disciples, Moses, Abraham... We carry their stories, their faith, their strength within us.

Today we are remembering and recognizing how others have been ancestors to us. But we are also thinking about how we will be ancestors to those who are not yet. Because we are ancestors too. Maybe not yet, but someday. Whether you have children or not, the Christians who come after us will look back to what we did. What we do now as a congregation is setting the stage for what someone else will receive in 25 or 50 years. What we do now is investing in the generations who will come after us. What we do now is investing in God's future. Will you run with confidence and endurance, so that you can pass on the faith you have received? Or will you shrink back and be lost as an ancestor?