

February 12, 2012

**The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Finally!

After all of these years preaching from this pulpit, the chance I've been waiting for:

I get to PREACH ABOUT RUNNING!

Many of you know that the running bug bit me a few years back. I am not fast, but I can go for a while and, most importantly, I really love it. I ran a half marathon a few years back, then a marathon on my sabbatical this summer and another half this fall.

There are so many reasons I run. #1 on the list is that running keeps the crazy from taking over. When I run, I work out my anger and my extra energy. Over those miles, I focus my head and think about what I've got coming up in the days, weeks and months ahead. I pound out the answers to daily irritations and celebrate minor victories.

I pray. And I pray and pray and pray. My best prayers are when I am running because they are raw and unedited. I don't have enough extra space in my running brain to be polite and gentle with God and so my running prayers are exactly what I need to say. When I am running, I remember to trust that God is big enough to handle what I need to unload. And so far, God has proven trustworthy on this point.

Some of you in this church right now are also on this running bandwagon and you are nodding your heads. Some of you are a little confused. Some of you think that running is for crazy people. You are right.

Take St. Paul for example. In his letter to the church at Corinth, he talks about running. And we all know that Paul, brilliant and holy though he may have been, was also a little odd.

Passion can do that to a person. Passion can make us each look a little bit, well, crazy to the rest of the world. Passion can make us reorder our worlds, to prioritize the thing which we find worth practicing, protecting, or proclaiming. I believe that running makes me a better person. Not just thinner or faster or holier-than-thou, but calmer, more patient, more present. Better. I am passionate about being better in those ways. I am passionate about running.

Running, for Paul, is—of course—a metaphor. In his hyperbolic, exaggerated way, Paul is talking about making ourselves better, making ourselves more worthy to bear the title of “Christian.”

In some ways, I don't think Paul makes this sound like much fun. Many folks think that “punishing and enslaving” is what I'm doing to my body when I run. I don't so much think so. Many folks also think that “acting like a Christian” involves hairshirts, overblown rules and a lot of earnestness. Those folks clearly don't go to All Saints'.

I think what Paul is trying to get at is the fact that we do need to comport ourselves with some decorum. In our media-driven world, someone is always looking for a way to portray people of faith as stuffy or hypocritical or backwards. There are eyes on us. Every one of us who chooses to wear the cross on our hearts and sleeves and foreheads is an ambassador for our faith. An ambassador and an evangelist.

It is up to us to show the world what real Christians act like. We love God in thought word and deed. We dedicate ourselves to learning our story. We treat ourselves and each other with respect. We control our tempers and when we don't, we admit our wrongs and ask forgiveness. This is not stuffy and it certainly isn't hypocritical, but it does take practice and control.

I know “practice and self-control” aren't exactly synonyms with “punishing and enslaving” but they both get to the core of what Paul is exhorting from us: you owe it to yourself, to your community and to God to show the world what being a Christian really means. And that takes some work.

But Paul isn't only talking about personal training.

Paul is also talking about passion. What makes your heart sing? Do you love to paint or sew, to beautify the world around you with art? Do you love to sing, either publically or in the shower? Do numbers unlock their mysteries in front of your eyes? Do you crave the next novel in your bedside stack? Are you raising your kids with joy and excitement?

I know that you have a passion. You may not have figured it out yet. You may have given it up to do something necessary or responsible. But we all have one.

Part of our job as Christians is to let our hearts sing out loud. Part of our job as Christians is to be fully the glorious created people we were created by God to be. We are to live our passions out loud, to run to win this race with every ounce of fervor and *joie de vivre* we can muster.

We are also called to take those passions into the world. Love to sing? Use your voice to worship God. Love to read? Teach a refugee child to do the same. Love to sew? Make a panel for the AIDS quilt.

There is a place for every one of the passions that uplifts God's kingdom. You must find that passion and show it to the world, help it to serve your community. Your light should not—now or ever—be under a bushel basket. Dust of that lampstand. The world needs more of you and what you love.

Clearly these two messages beg for balance. There is not one of us that can live with all eyes on us all the time. Nor should any of us abandon our earthly responsibilities for that which might bring us momentary happiness.

But Paul is calling us into that balance. He is calling us into something bigger and better than we are alone. He is calling us to serve the Body as witness, as voice, as champion. Like all of the Good News, this is not an easy call into service. But like all of the Good News, we are not called to run this race alone.