

“Marathon of Life” - Philippians 3:4b-14 - (Oct 4, 2020)

Have you ever heard Chicago Marathon? Surely, it was canceled this year because of Covid-19, but usually it has operated the second Sunday of October. The Chicago marathon is a major marathon held yearly in Chicago, IL. Alongside the Boston, New York, London, Berlin, and Tokyo marathons, it is one of six world marathon majors. The Chicago Marathon is the fourth largest race by number of finishers worldwide. When I came to America and I was living in downtown Chicago and Evanston, IL I was very amazed by there being so many runners. Morning, afternoon, evening, night, also spring, summer, fall, and even winter, there are so many people running in town. And when I first saw the Chicago marathon, I was totally surprised at the endless people who were running. Last year, there were more than 40,000 finishers of the Chicago marathon. Personally, I used to enjoy running, and I even had joined the marathon.

A marathon is often compared to life. When you first run, it is not fun at all and hard to find the meaning. Perhaps nothing remains but a totally exhausted body... However, in many ways, we already run a marathon because a marathon looks like our life. While you are running, you may go uphill and downhill and you may run ahead of someone or behind someone. And this is repeated countless times throughout the whole course of marathon – 26.2 miles. But the same situations are never repeated. And this is what our common life exactly looks like. As you live life, sometimes you may face unfamiliar situations, and you may face some easy or difficult situation. Sometimes you may meet competitors and you may meet supporters. But no matter what you go through, your goal is singular and clear – complete!! So you don't have to worry, feel anxious, or fearful about what will happen to you, because you have to pass it through anyway to complete your marathon of life. Even, for most people, the record has no meaning, because you will be fully satisfied with the sense of accomplishment as you see the people who are waiting for you and cheering.

In today's New Testament lesson, the apostle Paul describes himself as the runner of the marathon, who is making a constant effort and continues striving for the goal of life, which is reaching for the perfectness in Jesus Christ. Do you remember who the apostle Paul is? In verse 4-6, he said that he has enough reason to be confident himself: "I was circumcised on the eighth day. I am from the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew of the Hebrews. With respect to observing the Law, I'm a Pharisee. With respect to devotion to the faith, I harassed the church. With respect to righteousness under the Law, I'm blameless." Indeed, he was a man of unusual ability – one of the greats and the most religious. However, in today's scripture, he wrote that he regards all that he gains as rubbish in order to gain Jesus Christ and to be found in him.

To Paul, any advantages and achievements that he gained as a human, such as birth, religion, social status and reputation, are valueless. He realized that through the experience of conversion, which had happened while he was approaching Damascus when he was Saul, which means before his conversion, he persecuted the followers of Jesus, but after he met Jesus, he was converted and he changed his name to Paul. From this, he experienced the changes in valuation. He realized that all the things that he had valued were not good nor did they benefit him, but rather they were evil and wicked.

Because they only made him feel satisfied with his own righteousness and self-trust, so they finally led him to ruin and perish. If he gained all things but lost Christ, he gained for nothing. On the other hand, if he lost all the things that he had but gained Jesus Christ, he is like the richest among the rich. Therefore, Paul turned back and pursued the only one - Christ Jesus.

Nevertheless, he never thought that he has already obtained or had already reached the goal. He just kept running towards the goal, which is the prize that God calls him up and the prize that is contained in Jesus Christ, no matter what he had already attained. He just faithfully ran on

his marathon of faith, because he knew that Christian perfection is in effort, striving to reach the perfection in Christ Jesus. True perfection does not think that I am already perfect but thinks that I have a long way to go and many things to do for good.

Matthew 6:21 says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Paul believes that Jesus Christ is the only treasure that he wants to gain, so he spares nothing- effort, money, time, energy, talent, skill, and witness- for Jesus Christ. All of his heart, soul, thoughts, and every direction of his life is only directed to Christ Jesus, because he knew that if he loses his direction and considers other worldly things, he would not reach the goal – the perfection in Christ Jesus. Likewise, in the marathon, when you run losing direction and considering too many other things, you will never reach the finish line.

Today, I would like to invite you to stop for a moment to think about what you have been striving for in your marathon of life? In your life, what you are trying to do the best? What is your true treasure that you are hoping to gain? What do you value most in your life? As a pastor, I have the opportunity and privilege to be with people in their last days. Mostly, when I first meet them, they were busy being proud of and boasting of something that they have acquired in their life- careers, wealth, and honors. But, when they are very close to the last moment, no one talks about the things that they usually boast about. Rather they talk about their family, friends, moments with God, children they have taught, mission trips they have taken. They talk about vacations and laughter, and they share stories that are delightful and meaningful. I bet no one really wants to talk about their salaries or properties that they have owned, rather than the promises and love shared with God and with people.

As Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” For Marathoners, the finish line is the treasure, so they only pursue and run toward to the finish line. And for Christians, perfectness in Christ Jesus is the treasure, so we only pursue Jesus Christ and follow

his way. Sometimes as runners get exhausted and falls down, but they can keep running with the help of many supporters. Christians sometimes also get exhausted and fall down, but there is always someone in front of you who holds your hands to raise you up. That is Jesus Christ. For both Marathoners and Christians, as Paul said, press on toward the goal. Forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead and remember the prize! The prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus is waiting for you.

Last week, while I was working at my office, I got a phone call from a health coach of my health insurance company. She told me that if I follow what she recommends, I would get more benefits. Who would say no to this? Her first question for me was to ask what my health goal is. I said, “Maybe... be healthier?” But she told me that I have to set a more specific goal to reach, if not, I can’t make anything better. Right, whatever you do, you need a goal. And in most cases, your goal is related to what you value and treasure. What is your goal in your marathon of faith?

As Christians, our goal of life in faith should be Jesus Christ. His love enables you stay alive and keep going on, and he guides you live a true life. What do you want to gain at the finish line of your life? Let us press on toward Jesus Christ, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. Jesus Christ our Lord is running right next to you, behind of you, and in front of you, ready to give you the water of life that never makes you feel thirsty again. Let us run with Jesus Christ our Lord who is our one and only savior in our marathon of life.

Praise God. Amen.