

"FAITH FOR THE LONG TERM"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 8, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

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DEVELOPMENT

Something like that was beginning to happen among those who followed Jesus. As He began to fill in the details of the Kingdom life, fewer were willing to follow Him. One by one they drifted away.

It reminds me of the reaction of a late night television personality some time back when the great missionary Albert Schweitzer was receiving international attention. He told his television audience,

"I'd like to be an Albert Schweitzer, if I could commute...."

There were some who were following Jesus who discovered to their amazement that they could not commute! The number of followers was dwindling rather dramatically. Finally, one day Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked, "Do you also wish to go away?"

And who could have answered that question except Simon Peter? He asked,

"Lord...to whom shall we go? You have the words of Eternal Life...and we have believed, and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God."

Good old Simon Peter. Impetuous. Excitable. Sometimes speaking before his mind was fully in gear. But Simon Peter was in for the long term. His commitment was no momentary, fleeting experience good only when things were going his way.

Certainly, he got discouraged. After the crucifixion, he was ready to go back to his fishing nets. We can understand that. After all, he felt terribly let down. Still, his commitment to Christ never failed.

And as a pastor, I can appreciate that. I watch boys and girls go through our Sunday School and never become part of our youth program. I see them go through the Confirmation Class and many of them I never see again. I see people bring their children to Sunday School and Church, but then drift away as the children become grown. I have seen people who have spent ten or twenty years in the church, who have a disagreement with another member or a difference of opinion with the pastor, and are never seen again. What a treasure, what a blessing, what an encouragement are those of you who are in for the long haul, for the long term. You have a very special kind of faith - a faith that will be rewarded. Indeed, it is really the only kind of faith that counts.

Yes, blessed are those who are "in" for the long term!

LIFE IS A MARATHON

For you see, life is a marathon. Life is hard. The obstacles are many, and just because we are Christians does not mean that the way will be made smooth for us. We get cancer and have heart attacks and strokes and diabetes. We watch family members suffer. We lose our jobs. We grieve the loss of loved ones. At such times we need faith for the long term.

Toward the end of the First World War, a battalion - the 308th - was ordered to push an attack against the German Army. The troops were battle-weary, low on supplies and understrength from high casualties. As they advanced under orders, however, they hit an undefended hole and broke through the German lines. When the Germans closed the gap, the battalion found themselves surrounded inside German territory.

To make matters worse, they fell under what the military dubs, "friendly fire". The first two attacks by the Germans on the pinned-down American battalion failed. American support artillery, however, having been given the wrong grid coordinates, now threatened to finish the battalion. The only method of getting a message back to the artillery unit that they were shelling the wrong target was by carrier pigeon, and the pigeon handler lost one of his two birds. A desperate message was attached to the last bird, and the bird flew up into a tree and sat. Nothing seemed able to move the bird, so finally one soldier braved enemy fire to climb the tree and shoo her away.

As the bird took off, all the German riflemen fired at her. The pigeon lost a leg, lost an eye, and suffered a smashed breast, but delivered the message to stop the shelling.

The apparent hopelessness of that World War I battalion's position is not terribly different from the "impossible" circumstances that most of us encounter at one time or another. While our Father promises to care for us and not abandon us, He has never promised to remove us from trials. Indeed, God sometimes delivers us from a situation only when the circumstances of the situation seem to us to be beyond hope. We are down to one pigeon who won't fly... but, God knows and He never forgets us. Life is a marathon.

To know this is a great advantage in life. Take actor Paul Newman, for example. Most of us would consider Newman to be a gifted man. He has enjoyed a superb career as an actor, and when he took up auto racing as a hobby, he proved to be extremely capable at that. Some people are just born with a lot of ability. Right. Not according to Newman.

When he talks about his successes, he describes early failures and lots of hard work. He says of himself,

"I don't have a gift for anything. I've only had a gift of pursuit."

That is a gift I would recommend to us all: the gift of pursuit.

One of the worst things that can happen to many of us is to have too many successes in life. We think all of life will be that way. But it will not. Life is hard. It is a marathon. Yes, it's a journey - not a destination.

HOW WE FINISH

And the great secret in life is now how we begin, but how we finish.

In the 1990 Tour de Trump, an 11-day bike race, a little-known Soviet amateur held the lead for seven days. He took the lead on day three and did not relinquish it to any of the more experienced professional riders until the next-to-the-last day. At one point, he had a 12-minute advantage over the next closest rider.

However, this young rider found himself over half-an-hour behind by the end of the day on which he lost the lead. Likewise, he finished the race far down in the pack.

A few things in life are like a sprint, but most things are more like a marathon. The issue, then, is **not** how you start, but how you finish!

Many of us are good starters. We have talent. We have enthusiasm. We start off with a burst of well-doing. But sustaining that beginning - that is the problem. That's true in our commitment to Christ and to the Church, to our marriage partner, in our work and in a host of other endeavors. How are we at finishing?

Theatrical producer, Arthur Hopkins, used to receive dozens of manuscripts for plays. Before he would read any script, he always asked, "Now...how's your second act?" He realized that many new playwrights had a wonderful first act, but allowed the drama to fade and the plot to drift in the later parts of the play. There is always a second act, though, and it must be just as impressive as the first.

So, how's your second act? That is the test of any commitment in life. In other words, when the enthusiasm fades, when the passion cools, when the numbers drop off - can you maintain your intensity? That's the mark of a real champion. Just ask Jimmy Connors. Right?

Olympic champion, Jesse Owens, once put it like this:

"There is something that can happen to every athlete, every human being - it's the instinct to slack off, to give in to the pain, to give less than your best... the instinct to win through luck or your opponents not doing their best, instead of going to the limit and past your limit, where victory is always to be found. Defeating those negative instincts that are out to defeat us is the difference between winning and losing, and we face that battle every day of our lives."

Life is a marathon. And finishing is what it is all about.

FINISHING IS WHAT FAITH IS ALL ABOUT

And finally, finishing is what faith is all about. That is the critical thing to see. Faith becomes real when we are down to that one-eyed, one-legged pigeon. Let me use an analogy from the legal profession.

There were once 12 men sitting on a jury to try a case. Eleven of these men were active farmers. The twelfth was a retired farmer. The eleven working farmers were for a verdict of guilty. The retired farmer was for a verdict of not guilty. It was necessary that the verdict be unanimous.

The eleven jurors worked diligently trying to convince their retired colleague to switch to a guilty verdict. They were concerned about getting in their hay before a storm that had been forecast for later in the day. The retired juror, however, just sat looking out of the window at the dark rain clouds as they slowly approached. As precious time dragged on, the eleven active farmers showed increased signs of nervousness. Finally, at the first clap of thunder, they panicked and all changed their votes to not guilty.

Faith is hanging in there when the day looks dark and the options are limited, because you know that somehow the victory of God is coming. You may not experience it for yourself - at least not this side of the grave - but you know it is coming. Thus you place yourself in His hands and you say with Simon Peter,

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of Eternal Life...we have believed and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch woman who spent months in prison and in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp for hiding Jews during the Second World War, had that kind of faith. Those awful days in prison were a strain on her faith. Once she was in solitary confinement. She prayed,

"God, how much longer do I have to take this? If you're alive, if you really care...will you please show me a sign that You are alive and that You hear my prayers?"

That night Corrie laid down on her cot feeling totally abandoned and alone. She fell asleep crying and wondering why God wouldn't answer her prayers. She next morning when Corrie woke up a beam of light was shining down through a crack in the ceiling on a few blades of green grass. A miracle in the middle of that concrete cell! "The violets in the mountains have broken the rock".

(Tennessee Williams)

Corrie told us,

"I knew without any doubt that God was alive and that His light would shine again in my life in a beautiful and wonderful way, even though the possibility seemed impossible."

That morning Corrie's faith in God and her commitment to allow Him to control her life were renewed.

Friends, that is faith. Life is a marathon. It's not how you start, but where you finish. Faith has to do with both having a great race and an even greater finish. The writer of the Revelation put God's promise to us about finishing the race like this:

"Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown

of life."

Faith for the long term...that's the only kind of faith that really counts.

PRAYER

Wrestle with us, Lord, in the deep places of our lives.

As we begin to think about the weeks ahead...a new season here in this church, rekindle our faith and make it strong...and may it be a faith that sustains us for the long haul...for the long term. Only then will it truly make a difference in our lives and the life of our world. All this in the name and spirit of Christ. Amen.

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