

INI

1 Corinthians 9,24—27

Pre Lent 1 – Septuagesima — 24 January 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, which was read earlier:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. ²⁵ And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: It doesn’t matter what sport it is you watch, but the best players generally practice – and they practice a lot. Day in and day out, in season and out of season, they strive to keep in shape both physically as well as mentally.

In today’s text, Paul is speaking about life and he is drawing examples from the world of sports. It really does not matter in what sport, great players are the ones who practice, practice, practice.

I’ve used this example before. In 1997, one of the great hockey players of all time retired, Mario Lemieux, number 66 of the Pittsburgh Penguins. He was immediately elected to the Hockey Hall of Fame. In the year 2000, however, he came out of retirement to help the Penguins,

of which he was now an owner. Another hockey great, Wayne Gretzky, was asked if he would come out of retirement and play again. Gretzky laughed, and said no. Gretzky said that before he resumed playing again, Lemieux was getting up at 4 or 5 in the morning and going to the gym to workout for hours on end. Gretzky said that now that he was in retirement that life style of endless training and practice wasn't for him.

This brings us to the theme of today's sermon, "**Life Is A Race – Train Properly.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) The Race of Life;**
- 2) Training To Endure;** and,
- 3) Given An Imperishable Prize.**

1) The Race of Life. Whether we like sports a lot or a little, whether we watch every game on TV throughout the season or just tune in at the end for the playoffs, we have to accept the fact that many people do like sports, and identify with sports, and that is why Paul uses sports as a metaphor for life, in particular, the race of life.

In ancient Greece, a lot of people liked sports. This was the birth place of the Olympics Games, which were held every four years. Corinth was the place where every two years the Isthmus games were held, in between the Olympic cycle. In both games, cities competed against city. The athletes who won were heroes. In fact, cities supported their own athletes, so all they had to do was train. All they had to do was practice, practice, practice. As part of the Olympic oath in ancient Greece, the contestants swore that they had spent the previous ten months training for their event. More, practice, practice, practice.

Now in the games, the winners received a garland, a wreath as a prize, which they placed on their heads. But like any cut flower or sprig from a tree, the wreaths quickly faded. After all, once a flower or a twig

from a tree is cut, it is dead; it is only a matter of time before it fades. One should also mention that the cities also provided money prizes for their winners so that they could have a substantial reward besides the wreath that was atop their heads.

The contestants in the ancient games practiced for months on end just to be able to complete in an event that would last but a few minutes or a few rounds, whether it was a foot-race or a boxing match or a wrestling match. At the end of the contest, there would only be one winner who would receive the prize and the acclamation of the crowd. In the ancient world, there were no silver or bronze equivalents.

But in speaking of life as a race, Paul is saying that our race or bout is run or fought every day. And it is not so much a physical contest as it is a spiritual contest. And for Paul, the contest is open to all, both young and old, both the physically healthy and the physically infirm. And we are not racing against a host of others, but we are in a contest with ourselves. And we all are eligible for the prize, the crown of life, the imperishable crown that does not fade, but is reserved in the heavenly places for every winner. And so we are

2) Training To Endure. In ancient Greece, as today, athletes train so that they are fit enough to endure the contest and finish the race. The boxer trains so that he can endure the five or ten rounds that he is in the ring. The sprinter or longer distance runner trains so that he can last for the entire race, and for a marathon runner that is a time of several hours.

But for many sports, it is more than individual effort. At one Christian university, the coach told of his three rules for success: Hard work – Team effort – and, Clean Living.

For years, Christians have seen the value of sports not only for

building the body, but also for building character for a long time. For example, within the context of the YMCA, Christian men invented both basketball and volleyball, sports which emphasize hard work and team effort, and hopefully clean living (although we know from news reports that the clean living is not always practiced, people believe that hard work can be short circuited through so-called performance enhancing drugs, and the ego of some players make a mockery of team effort).

But the spiritual discipline that Paul calls for is not the solitary life shut away in a monastery or as a hermit on a pillar of salt. Rather the spiritual discipline that Paul calls for is to avail ourselves of the Means of Grace.

Faithfully and regularly read and respond to God's Word. That is why John wrote his gospel.

Faithfully and regularly participate in the Lord's Supper. A meal instituted by Jesus for His followers; not a solitary meal, but a meal in which he invites believers — you and I — to sup with Him and with each other.

Faithfully and regularly bringing our concerns to God on a daily basis. Seeking not only His forgiveness for the sake of Jesus, but also direction for our lives. This can be struggle as well. Struggles, as when Jesus struggled against the temptations of the devil. Struggles, as when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Struggles, as He picked up His Cross.

Calvin Miller writes:

Many Christians are only “Christaholics” and not disciples at all.

Disciples are Cross-bearers; they seek Christ.

Christaholics seek happiness.

Disciples dare to discipline themselves, and the demands they place on themselves leave them enjoying the happiness of their growth.

Christaholics are escapists looking for a shortcut to nirvana. Like drug addicts, they are trying to “bomb out” of their depressing world.

There is no automatic joy.

Christ is not a happiness capsule;

He is the Way to the Father

But the Way to the Father is not a carnival ride in which we sit and do nothing.

To discipline yourself is not always fun. We have to be prepared to always be in spiritual training. Here, we have to say that the Christian life is not always easy. It is not always fun to regularly go to church. But there is more. To be a follower of Jesus Christ can at times even be dangerous since both earthly and spiritual powers seek always to lure us into temptation.

Paul used the analogy of being a boxer who always has to be training. Life can be tough, but that is when the tough get going. But the aim of all that training, when we discipline our own bodies, is to be

3) Given An Imperishable Prize. Paul concludes with the thought that we do not run after a perishable prize like the athletes in the games — running after a wreath that is dead before it is even placed on the head of the winner, or basking in the money that comes from wealthy sponsors — rather, we are running with a view of the imperishable prize, the Crown of Life.

That word “crown” is also the word for “wreath,” but there is another “wreath” that we should be thinking about in the pre-Lenten season, and that is the crown or wreath that was originally worn by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. That crown is “the crown of thorns,” and it was not the crown given to winners but to losers, those going to the Cross to die.

The crown of thorns was an earthly crown. It symbolized defeat, it symbolized failure, and ultimately, it symbolized death. It was worn by Jesus as He died on that Cross. But neither defeat, failure, nor death, nor even the devil, had the last word. Because on the third day Jesus rose from the dead, and now He Himself is the Crown of Life, which replaced failure by success, replaced defeat with victory, and replaced death with life.

This Crown of Life is shared with us every day in the forgiveness that Jesus has won for us. It is shared with us because Jesus is the one who has called us into this race; He has called us through the washing and regeneration offered us in Holy Baptism. He has called us through His Word. In fact, not only has He called us, but as is recorded in John’s Gospel, He has prayed that as we are called, we would strengthen one another.

We take comfort from the fact that we are not in this race alone. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses,” not only those who have gone before us in the faith, enduring the trials and temptations of life, but those who are alive now, who pray for us and for whom we can pray as well.

But most of all, we are comforted by the fact that we are not alone because Jesus is at our side. The world, our flesh, and the devil will always be there to cause us to doubt, to stumble. Life is a struggle. But we know that we shall never be perfect in this life. We are in a constant

battle, a constant race. Indeed, when we struggle, this only shows that we have to rely more and more on forgiveness to pick us up and put us on our feet again. Struggle does not mean we have fallen, it is only when we have ceased to struggle that we fall. But struggle leads us to the realization that life is a race of daily repentance.

But it is in that daily repentance that we see what our Lord and Savior has won for us and wishes to share with us — the imperishable prize of the Crown of Life.

A final thought on this topic. Paul worried that as he preached to others he himself would not be found wanting. To Preach, to proclaim, to be a herald. In the games, the herald was the announcer. He just listed the events, told who was competing. he did not compete. In this sense Paul speaks as one who should both announce, proclaim what Christ has done, and do it as well. To compete, not just to speak. Not to talk the talk, but also to walk the walk. Walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

Conclusion: Was Paul an athlete? Physically it is difficult to tell. From the brief description in the scriptures it would appear not. In 2 Corinthians Paul quotes his opponents and speaks of himself:

His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account. (2 Corinthians 10,10)

Indeed, from an apocryphal book, the Acts of Paul, we read of Paul

At length they saw a man coming of lowly stature, bald on the head, bow-legged, with a crooked nose, but full of grace.

But Paul, full of grace, was strong in the spirit. In the spiritual race of life, he disciplined himself to endure. The hardships he endured, both physically and spiritual, indicated that while he may not have been an

Olympic contender, he was tough and contended where it counted most
— in the race of life.

Indeed, may we say of ourselves as Paul said of himself,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept
the faith.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our
hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

St. Stephen Lutheran Church of the East Bay & Central Valley
21290 Birch St.
Hayward, CA 94541-1538

SDG