



Free Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
in South Africa

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2017

Run the race!



St. John's Lutheran Parish
Shelly Beach

• **The Word of God for this Sermon is written in Phillipians 3,1-14: Let us hear it again in a slightly more direct translation (NAU):**

NAU ¹ Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things *again* is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you.

- ² Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;
- ³ for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,
- ⁴ although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:
- ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israë, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;
- ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.
- ⁷ But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.
- ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ,
- ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith,
- ¹⁰ that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;
- ¹¹ in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.
- ¹² Not that I have already obtained *it* or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus.
- ¹³ Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of *it* yet; but one thing *I do*: forgetting what *lies* behind and reaching forward to what *lies* ahead,
- ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

• **Let us pray:** *Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts with Your Word so that we will run the race on the path You set out before us and in the Way You inspire us! Amen.*

• **Dear Congregation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!**

- We like looking back, but looking backward is no way to run a race. When I was in

high school, I looked back over my shoulder for a pass playing touch football and crashed headlong into a concrete light pole. That backward glance earned me twenty stitches and four days in the hospital with a very big headache. When you run a race, you look forward. You press forward toward the mark, the prize, the finish line.

- I've noticed that a recurring phrase in middle age is "used to." All the things I used to do. I used to ski, I used to run, I used to play classical guitar, I "used to" a lot of things. I used to know a lot of chemistry and physics and mathematics. I still have the books from my science days packed in the garage somewhere. I don't want to get rid of them, even though I know I won't use them anymore. They're like trophies, reminders of things I used to know and was good at.

- We love our trophies, our ribbons, our merit badges – little symbols of our achievements and accomplishments. Long after we've ceased to compete, when the knees are achy and we're no longer in any semblance of shape, we can point to those trophies and medals and ribbons with pride of what we did once. They're little pieces of evidence that we left a mark, made a difference, achieved something, even if the present doesn't seem so noteworthy. That's why awards and plaques are so important to people. They're basically worthless pieces of cheap metal and plastic, but they represent our accomplishments and achievements and they tell the people who see them how important we are in our own little corner of the world.

- And there's nothing wrong with that, horizontally speaking. There's nothing wrong with a case full of trophies or a chest full of ribbons and medals or a wall full of diplomas and honoraria and pictures with former presidents. That's part of our history. It tells our story and rejoices in how God has gifted us in the various ways of our vocations.

- But the problem is that old Adam/Eve wants to use these things vertically, before God, as reasons why God should care for us, love us, accept us, and just be grateful that we are on the team. Merit was at the heart of the system that Luther grew up with and lived under. Your merits had to offset your demerits. Your good works had to balance out your sins on God's scales of justice. Yes, God would help with His grace, but you had your work cut out for you in this life, and if you failed, well then tens of thousands of years of purgatory awaited you to set the scales right.

- You see this most at the end of life, when people take stock in how they lived and what they've accomplished and are facing death. The common phrase is, "Well, I've lived a good life. I've been gracious to people, kind to animals, good to the environment, generous with the poor, patient, etc." Or you'll hear things like, "I've been a good Lutheran all my life. I went to church every Sunday (or at least every other Sunday), always gave to church and charities...." You know the litany. It's our trophies – the merit badges and medals of our good works. (Speaking of merit badges, I understand that the Boy Scouts actually have a merit badge in Religion, something that will give a theological Lutheran a migraine headache for a week.)

• In his letter to the Philippian congregation, the apostle Paul engages in a bit of religious boasting in order to make a point. “If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” Those are some serious credentials. An Israelite with the papers to prove it. A Pharisee whose zeal was to keep the Torah. A persecutor of the church who went from synagogue to synagogue to weed out those who confessed Jesus to be the Christ. Measured outwardly against the Law, blameless. And Paul’s not exaggerating here. He was a good Jew. The best of his class. He was up and coming, a riser in the ranks of the religious. He had the papers, the credentials, the degrees, the achievement awards, the reputation. He would have gone far, except for a fateful encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus that changed everything for Paul.

• Did he have any regrets? No. Did he look back and long for those heady rabbinical days of doing the Law? No. “ 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Loss. Nothing. Garbage. His whole past. Everything he had worked for and achieved Paul counts as rubbish, garbage, because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ. All those trophies, those merit badges, those medals and ribbons of his past? They’re worthless in comparison to knowing Christ and being found in Christ.

• In Christ is the key to understanding Paul. To be in Christ is to be a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. To be in Christ is to have a righteousness before God that is not your own. It’s not about your works under the law, your merits and achievements. Before men, yes, those are important. Men can’t see your faith; they can only see your works. But before God there is only one thing that holds, only one way that a sinner can stand before God justified, and that is through faith in Christ, to be found in Christ, to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

• This was the great insight, the breakthrough that drove the apostle Paul to preach the Gospel. And he suffered for it. His fellow Jews largely rejected him. The pagans wanted nothing to do with him. The non-Jews were suspicious of him. Who wouldn’t be? A persecutor of the church suddenly becomes the leading apostle to the Gentiles? Who wouldn’t be more than a bit suspicious of this “conversion?” This idea that the Torah was a Torah of faith, that what God saw was not merits and works but faith, trust in His promise, that what God accounted for righteousness before Him was not what we do but what God in Christ has done, this was the radical Gospel that Paul preached far and wide, wherever anyone would listen, because he was convinced that this message was the very power of God to salvation.

• Paul suffered for this. And yet he considered his own suffering a share in the suffering

of Christ. He considered it a privilege to suffer and to become like Jesus in His death so that He might be like Jesus in His resurrection. The goal for Paul, the finish line, the end of the race was nothing short of resurrection from the dead. It wasn't simply a good life, or a good death, but resurrection from the dead. That's the Christian hope. And that's what Paul pressed on to make His own. He was confident that Christ had made him His own. And now he presses on and strains forward, leaning like a runner straining for the finish line. "Forgetting what lies behind" – don't look back! You'll run into a pole! "And straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

• Your Baptism set you on the race of faith. You were put into Christ. Clothed with Christ. Born anew from above by water and Spirit. The goal of Baptism is your resurrection, for which you've received the Spirit as a down payment, pledge, and guarantee from God. No race is fun while you're running it. It can be painful, exhausting, demanding. The exhilaration comes at the finish line, where all the pain pays off, where suffering gives way to joy. Look at the faces of runners as they are running their race. This isn't comfortable. It's demanding and difficult. Don't expect the baptized life to be easy, a series of open doors and easy paved roads. It wasn't for Paul, it won't be for you.

• But the forgiveness that is yours in Christ allows you to run the race unencumbered by Sin. Christ bore your burden to death on His cross. Now you run. Don't try to carry around that 50 pound bag of guilt and shame. Christ bore that on the cross so you don't have to run with that resting on your shoulders. And never mind the past. Forget what lies behind and strain forward for what lies ahead – resurrection to eternal life.

• When the apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, he was in the midst of one of his many imprisonments. Listen to what he wrote Timothy the last time he was in prison knowing that he was not going to get out alive. This is what a runner of faith sounds like as he nears the finish line:

• 2Tim. 4:6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

• He's looking forward to the awards ceremony on the Last Day, at the resurrection, where the Victorious One will place on his head the crown of righteousness, not as a merit badge or trophy, but by grace through faith for the sake of Jesus' own death and resurrection. That crown awaits you too. Now run the race and don't look back.

• **In the Name of Jesus, Amen.**¹ *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen. (2 Cor 13, 14).*

¹ This Sermon was written by Rev. Cwirla from the LCMS.