

Epiphany 5 2/4/24
1 Corinthians 9:16-27 B

DO YOU NOT KNOW THAT IN A RACE ALL THE RUNNERS RUN, BUT ONLY ONE RECEIVES THE PRIZE? SO RUN THAT YOU MAY OBTAIN IT.

Back in my cross-country coaching days, the team would have t-shirt with their motto, their inspiration quote, for the year, printed on it. One year – it's still my all-time favorite, BTW -- it read, "Our sport in punishment in your sport." What is about running that we associate with "punishment"? Is it because we associate running with high school PE class, basic training? Even in the world of sports, running is often punishment for doing something wrong.

In our Epistle, Paul uses the imagery of a runner running a race to teach us about living the Christian life. And, Paul reminds us that the goal of that race is to win the prize: the crown of life that is "imperishable," that is, that lasts forever.

Paul is making the point of our lesson today is that it takes great, strenuous effort for an athletic to win, to be victorious in the race. That is not simply true of sports. For example, a musician who wants to improve on their instrument, or a quilter making a fine quilt for a special friend, must be dedicated. They must discipline themselves and put forth strenuous effort to the task before them so that they do not become distracted, but finish their work.

I. By way of comparison to the Christian life, we must remain faithful so that we gain the crown of life.

That is not easy. As the hymnwriter of old put it, we must walk by faith "through many dangers, toils, and snares" (*LSB* 744:3). The devil, the world, and our own flesh would lead us away from the race of faith, to be

engulfed and overcome in sin and the death that sin brings.

Sin leads us away from God. Sin promises us happiness. Sin promises us popularity. Sin promises meaning and purpose. Sin offers what is lacking in our lives. But, there is only one thing that sin truly gives - it weighs down with guilt and shame.

You will remember right after the Fall, after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, what did they do? They ran away. They were ashamed and so they hid from God. Sin does that to you, doesn't it? Sin makes us run away and hide from God. In our nature as fallen sinners, the guilt and shame of our sin cuts to the core of who we are and what we are. We try to put on a mask and pretend everything is OK. We can ignore it, make light of it, try to pretend it doesn't exist or even make fun of it, but the shame and guilt of our sinful nature humanity will not go away. No positive thinking, no modern medicine, nothing that you can think, do, or say will make you without sin.

Epiphany. God has appeared to us in Jesus of Nazareth. In our Gospel, Jesus healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law; He *healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; And He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.* In doing these miracles, Jesus shows us the heart of God. Jesus teaches us that it is God's will to deliver us poor sinners from the curse of sin and the devil.

II. And the Good News of the Gospel is that God did deliver us from sin and the devil in Jesus. That crown is ours because of the crown Jesus wore for us.

The very Son of God humbled Himself to be born of a Virgin. And as a man, even though He was a king, He did not wear a crown made with

gold and precious jewels. No, He was betrayed into the hands of sinful men, beaten, whipped, mocked, crowned with a crown of thorns, and crucified upon a cross. That is the wages of our sin. But, because Jesus did that, we are forgiven all our sins.

Jesus wore that crown of thorns and died, but was raised to life again the 3rd day. By His resurrection, He defeated death and grave, so He can promise us, *“Because I live, you also will live” (Jn 14:19)*. Jesus ascended into heaven and prepared a place in heaven for you, *“I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that also may be where I am” (Jn 14:2-3)*.

Like those who brought the sick or those oppressed by demons to Jesus, we come. We come in faith, for the healing of forgiveness that only He can give. With faith in His Word of promise, we rejoice with the words of Paul, *There is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the Righteous Judge, will award to me on that day (2 Tm 4:8)*.

III. *Run that you may obtain [the prize], Paul writes. ...We [run to get] an imperishable [prize].*

Do you remember your **confirmation vows?**

- ⇒ Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?
- ⇒ Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the divine Word, to be faithful in the use of God’s Word and Sacraments ... and in faith, word, and action remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?

Its easier said than done, isn’t it? By virtue of our baptism into Christ, we have new life in Him. We have died to sin. We have been freed from sin. We should no longer be slaves to sin. Yet, Dr. Luther reminds us

that, though we have been baptized, the old Adam -- the corrupt and evil nature that we inherit because of Adam's fall into sin -- swims so very well.

In our Christian faith and life, living on this side of heaven, we grow lazy, indifferent about God's will, we begin to see sin as no big deal, it is easy for us to live for the pleasures and treasures of this present age. Using the words and imagery of Paul in our Epistle, running is just too painful, so want to quite; give up.

This is why Paul reminds us, *So I do not run aimlessly...I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified (vv. 26-27).*

Paul is teaching us that the Christian life is the life of repentance. Daily, we return to the waters of our baptism in repentance to drown our sinful flesh with all of its unholy desires and arise to new life in Christ to believe the promises of God's Word and live a godly life according to that Word of God.

We poor sinners have no strength nor ability in our human frames to run the race of faith. This is why we pray: "O Lord, keep Your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope on Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power." God answers our prayer. He gives us grace, strength, and guidance.

Our worship in Church is God's service to us. He gives us faith in baptism, so that you may live a godly life. He forgives and breathes new life into you in the absolution, the forgiving of your sins. He restores and strengthens you with His holy supper. We need the forgiveness of sins which Christ's body and blood have won for us on the cross, for we all daily sin much. And, we need the strength, and the desire and the will, His body and blood give to us to live the new life we have in Christ.

Our faith trusts the words of Paul, *He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Ph 1:6)*. God has begun our race of faith in baptism. Christ empowers us to discipline our sinful flesh so that we do not lose the crown of life. Christ empowers us to run the race of faith so that we may obtain the crown that will last forever.

So, don't be afraid! God is greater than the problems and dilemmas you face. God is mightier than the stresses in your life. God will not allow the devil, the world, and your own flesh to cause you to give up in the race of faith. God will reward you with the crown of righteousness.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.