

Winning at the game of life: running the marathon

Message for Sunday, November 13, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Philippians 2:2-4

Children's Message: Mark 9:33-37, "Anyone who wants to be the first must take last place and be the servant of everyone else."

I think all of us have run in a race at school. The person who crosses the finish line first gets a ribbon. The rule in a race is: whoever comes in first is the winner.

But in God's "human race" it's *very* different. Jesus says the winner is the one who is humble, who is willing to serve, who lets others go first.

I gave each person a "winner" medal, to encourage them to follow Jesus' way.

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1) Winning is fun...

In this series of messages, I've been using the theme of winning at sports and games as a metaphor for life. There's no doubt about it: winning is fun. Actually, psychologists have done research on this, to find out why this is so. What they found out is that when you win at something, the body gets a shot of testosterone and dopamine. Dopamine is the brain's pleasure chemical. Dopamine is released when you eat chocolate, have sex, and have other pleasurable experiences. Winning just feels good.

Some people like that feeling so much, they get upset if anything get in their way. A doctor was giving one of her patients a physical exam. She noticed several dark, ugly bruises on his shins, so she asked, "Do you play hockey?" "No."

"Do you play soccer?" "No"

"Do you play any other physical sport?" "Not at all. I just play bridge with my wife."

Winning is fun; but there's something that's even better than winning. I'll come to that in a minute.

The sport we're looking at today is running the marathon, 42 kilometres. Running a marathon is different from many other sports. For most people, simply making it through to the end is the reward in itself. Sure, the elite runners can run the race in just over two hours, but the average time is more like four and a half hours. I used to do cross country running when I was in my twenties. I could keep up a fast pace for 30 minutes. I can't imagine keeping running at that rate for another four hours.

Although there is competition in marathon running, there's a much greater emphasis on encouraging one another to keep on going, not giving up. People will often run with a partner, just for that reason.

2) ... but finishing well is even better

So what's better than winning? Finishing well. Going the distance. Completing the job, or whatever mission you're working on. This is what was going through the apostle Paul's mind as he was nearing the end of his life.

2 Timothy 4:6-8, New Living Translation:

The time of my death is near. I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness that the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that great day of his return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to his glorious return.

Two things to note in that passage:

- "I finished the race": It's like Paul is saying, "God, I did the work you gave me to do, telling others about Jesus and starting churches. At times it was hard, *very* hard, but I kept going right up to the end." It is easy to begin something, but it's much harder to finish something. Paul finished well.
- "The prize is not just for me": in the Kingdom of God, we can all be winners. Whatever is your mission in life, do it to the very best you can, and do it for the glory of God.

3) Helping others to win is the greatest fun of all

It's easy to begin something, but it's much harder to finish something. That's especially true when it involves working with other people—which is how 95% of life operates. We depend on others, and they depend on us, for all of us to make it to the finish.

Philippians 2:2-4, New International Version:
Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” That doesn’t sound like “Winning is the only thing.”

I’ll give you a couple of sports examples of what that looks like.

On April 26, 2008, the Central Washington University women’s softball team were hosting the visiting Western Oregon team. During the game, Sara Tucholsky, one of the visiting players, who was in her last year of university, hit the first homerun of her college career. She dropped her bat and started running around the bases. In her excitement, she missed touching first base. Her coach called her back, and she quickly spun around. Right in front of the whole crowd, her right knee bent backwards and she fell to the ground in incredible agony. Crying in pain, she tried her best to crawl back to the base, but it was too much for her. The umpire warned her teammates that if they touched her, she would be called out. The umpire also noted that if her coach opted to call in a pinch runner, the homerun would only count as a single. But there was no other option.

That’s when Mallory Holtman, the home team’s first base player turned to the umpire and said, “Would it be okay if we carried her around the bases, and she touched each bag?” The umpire said that was fine. Mallory and her teammate Liz Wallace picked up Sara and carried her to second base. They gently lowered Sara so that her foot touched the bag. They did the same for third base and home plate. The crowd erupted into a standing ovation. The visiting team went on to win the game, eliminating the Washington team from the playoffs. When interviewed later, the losing players said they had no regrets about helping the other team make that run.

Let’s switch from baseball to basketball. Witts Springs, Arkansas, has a population of about 200.

The school has a total of 41 students. They don’t produce teams which are state champions, but they are great in another way.

In a basketball game with rival Leslie, Witts Springs trailed by over 30 points with just two minutes to go. The fans began to chant, “Put in Scotty.” “Scot-TEE! Scot-TEE! Scot-TEE!” Coach Nash obliged and inserted senior guard Scotty Harmon. Scotty has cerebral palsy.

Scotty received a pass, alone and unguarded on the three point line, and flung the ball toward the hoop. He missed. His teammates scrambled for the rebound and gave Scotty a second chance. He missed again, and they again raced for the ball.

“The kids know when Scotty’s in there, their game is over,” Coach Nash said. “They’re doing it for him now. The atmosphere changes. If they’re worn out, they’ll break their necks to get that rebound. Our kids will go above everybody to get the ball to Scotty.”

On his fourth try, Scotty sunk a three pointer. Fans on both sides of the gym cheered wildly.

In both that baseball game and the basketball game, can you imagine the thrill, the delight, the pure joy those players felt when they helped someone else be a winner? So the question is, how can you and I do that for someone this week? And the week after that?

Next Steps:

- First of all, know that God thinks you’re a winner:

Ephesians 1:4-5, New Living Translation:

Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.

So you don’t have to prove how good you are; you don’t have to earn God’s favour. God already loves you, just as you are.

- What do you want to accomplish in life? OK, that may be a bit big to chew on right now (but seriously, think about it!). What do you want to

accomplish this week? Do it to your utmost, and do it for God's glory.

- How can you help someone else be a winner?