

Text: I Corinthians 9:24-27

April 27, 2008

Theme: Many people get started in the Christian life, but the prize comes to those at the finish line.

Title: *Starters and Finishers*

You may have heard the true story of how Winston Churchill planned his own funeral, which included great hymns and eloquent liturgies from the Book of Common Prayer.

At his direction, as the funeral ended, a bugler, positioned high in the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, played "Taps," the universal signal that says the day is over.

But then came a dramatic turn: as Churchill had instructed, after "Taps" was finished, another bugler, placed on the opposite side of the great dome, began to blast "Reveille"—"It's time to get up. It's time to get up. It's time to get up in the morning."

Which is it? We just sang, "In our end is our beginning; in our death, a resurrection."

Which is it? We experience moments like this throughout life. The coming weeks are going to be full of celebrating the completion of years in school, the wrap-up of years of college, and at the end we will call it a commencement.

Every birth is the end of a long pregnancy, but really the beginning of a family relationship.

Every wedding is the culmination of courtship and engagement, but so much more the start of a shared life together.

Our church family is in one of these special times, climaxing a process that has close to a seven-year history of faithful study and prayer and conversation and dreaming, with some miracles along the way, now coming to time of affirming our decisions and purchasing a piece of land for ministry expansion.

It's been a good process, led totally by lay people with high integrity and loads of involvement from everyone, coming together in an act of commitment and generosity.

But is it all a climax or really more of a launch? The Land has come to represent more of a generational starting block than a finishing line, the opening up of vast possibilities for greater fulfillment of our mission as the Body of Christ.

And that's the kind of day that Confirmation is: a conclusion, no question. Confirmation has been longer and more in-depth this year than we've probably ever experienced at Centenary, which is as it should be to build our kids up strong in the Lord as they go out into this world their facing.

So it's got to feel like an "I made it" moment for our students, while we all know that this day is actually more of a send-off, an embarking, next step of a long obedience in the same direction.

That's what God looks for. That's what Paul was writing to the Corinthians about, the kind of extended follow-throughs that the Christian life is made of.

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run?" Paul asks these people who would have been familiar with what we call track and field. (I Corinthians 9:24) Corinth was the site of the Isthmian Games, second only in prominence to the Olympic

Games in ancient Greece.

I picture those aerial photographs of big-city marathons with thousands at the starting line when Paul writes that “in a race all the runners run.” Lots of people get started in the Christian life.

But the prize comes to those at the finish line. So “run in such a way as to get the prize,” Paul says: a timeless biblical principle for students on Confirmation Sunday and for our church acting boldly for the future and for all of us in life: God is looking for finishers. God’s looking for people who know that He has brought us this far in order to see how much more there is to look forward to.

I’ve heard it said that there is not a man or woman alive who could not retire with a comfortable fortune in their old age if they could sell their experience for what it cost them.

There is no place like the church in the way that we cheer each other on in this marathon from generation to generation, hoping our kids and grandkids will learn from our experience, both our strengths and our mistakes.

We want them to do better and be more than we have been as Christians. They need to be stronger. It’s not getting any easier to run this race out there.

So we put a baton in their hand on Confirmation Sunday with some advice from Paul.

First, do the things that nobody sees. “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training,” Paul writes (I Corinthians 9:25)—things nobody else sees.

His analogy operates on what all of us understand about sports, whether we play them or not: that what we observe when an athlete competes is only a small part of the story. We don’t see the diet and the mental discipline and the early morning workouts and the many hours in the gym: the strict training that no one else sees.

We grow into long-distance, follow-through Christians on the basis of what we do when no one else is looking—the way we pray; the way we give; how we let other people take credit when the idea was actually ours; the behind-the-scenes way we help others; the way we personally study the Bible; the forgiving we do, when the person we forgive doesn’t even know we were hurt; the faith we keep under fire.

We do this believing in Jesus’ promise from the Sermon on the Mount: “Then your father, who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:4)

So do the things nobody sees, and second, pay attention all the time: “do not run like a man running aimlessly.” (I Corinthians 9:26-27) Pay attention, all the time.

I read this week about a recent NCAA cross-country championship held in Riverside, California in which there were 128 competitors.

At one turn, 123 of the runners missed it, went the wrong direction.

One guy, Mike Delcavo, stayed on the right 10,000 meter course and waved for his fellow runners to follow him. But Mike was able to convince only four other runners to go with him the right way.

The whole bunch went the wrong direction and were disqualified.

Which is such a picture of life: how people can live it so aimlessly, just going along with the crowd, lulled into dropping our guard or losing our bearings.

To finish well, we have to pay attention all the time.

A follow-through life is the product of grit, of the courage to go the right way even if it looks crazy to the world. Life’s prize comes to the determined, to the tenacious,

the disciplined and committed.

We're talking about Christians who finish their lives still growing, still serving;
husbands and wives who stay faithful to each other "until death do us part";
young people who remain sexually pure until marriage, resisting the world's
deceptions and pressures;
ministry leaders who stay passionate about the Kingdom of God until their last
breath;
church members who weather the rough spots and remain faithful and loving and
joyful.

We're talking about congregations that finish what we've started as a fresh place to begin
with expanded horizons before us.

You're doing a great thing, Centenary, in completing this land purchase because it
models for our kids what commitment looks like to finish something, to complete
a long follow-through, but to do that with an even bigger future in view for them.

That will come down to a very personal time of prayer and decision-making, what
nobody else sees but you and God. It comes down to giving undivided attention
to God's Kingdom while the world values other things and races after them.

But how else can we say to our kids at this starting line, "Meet me at the finish line,
students," but "to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given
[us]," in Paul's words, "the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace." (Acts
20:24)

We hear the confession of these kids, we sacrifice to expand our ministry to complete that
task—which our students are going to portray now as we continue to worship God
with our tithes and registration.

Sources:

Thomas, David R., *The Best Is Yet to Be: Finishing Well* (June 28, 1998).