

Lately, in an effort to become healthier and to cheer myself up when I'm feeling down, I have gotten in the habit of taking my Boxer Tank for daily walks. Not only does it help us both get some badly needed exercise, but it also provides me with the opportunity to reflect on things happening in my life and it gives my mind the opportunity to wander a bit. For example, the other day as I was walking for whatever reason I began to think about my friends who enjoy running and I started to wonder about all the different marathons that take place every year here in the United States.

At one point during my walk, I actually pulled out my cell phone to look up the most grueling competitions and challenging races that people take part in. As I was scrolling through the results, I discovered something called the "Self-Transcendence 3100 Mile race, which is the longest certified footrace in the world. Held in Queens, New York, the event challenges athletes to run 3,100 miles in 52 days. The runners begin at 6 a.m. every day and run for extended periods, taking breaks when needed.

To meet the goal of 3,100 miles, each contestant must run an average of 59.6 miles per day. Apparently throughout the long and rigorous race, each runner tries to set records and gain spiritual insights. A documentary called *3,100: Run and Become* examines the philosophical side of long-distance running. One athlete in the movie says that running is "a prayer and a teacher and a celebration of life."

I would imagine the apostle Paul would certainly agree with that statement. After all, he asks the Corinthians, "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it." To his friend and colleague Timothy he says, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." And although Paul doesn't mention Adam, he most certainly could have. After all, Adam was the fastest runner of all time. He was first in the human race!

Tonight, we observe that running language is also found in a letter to the Hebrews as well. Chapter 12 begins with the words, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Since the earliest days of the church, Christian faith has been linked to running. “Run in such a way that you may win it.” Finish the race and keep the faith. “Run with perseverance the race that is set before you.”

You might even say that people these days still connect with that analogy of our spirituality. On his 40th birthday, a Presbyterian pastor named Henry Brinton was challenged by a Catholic priest to run the Marine Corps Marathon. The goal seemed crazy, since Brinton had no experience as a runner, and the prospect of running 26.2 miles was daunting. But Brinton needed a midlife challenge. His priest friend had run several marathons, so he gave him some tips and turned him loose.

The first time the pastor hit the road, he ran for three minutes and had to stop, gasping for breath. But after walking for seven minutes, he was able to run for another three, and then he walked another seven and ran three. Over several weeks, his running increased and his walking decreased until he could run for an hour. And then he ran two hours. “If you can run two hours, you can run four hours,” the priest said. “If you can run four hours, you can do a marathon.”

Apparently, the priest was right. Six months after beginning his training, Brinton finished the Marine Corps Marathon in a respectable four hours and 12 minutes. He felt as if he’d been through boot camp, but his wobbly elation at the finish line made the pain worthwhile. Afterwards Brinton declared, “Marathon training has become a meditation for me, an opportunity to think, dream, pray and solve problems. Besides enjoying the fabled endorphin rush, I’ve been amazed by

the clarity of mind I experience. I've come to appreciate how exercise cuts through the clutter of life and gives me the gift of simplicity for a few hours each week."

As it turns out, running really is a prayer and a teacher and a celebration of life. Run and become. Of course, one could argue that not all of us are runners. And those who do run might be more comfortable with a 100-yard dash than a 3,100-mile ultramarathon. But whether we run or walk, we can grow in faith by joining the race laid out for us in the letter to the Hebrews, and by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith."

When you think about it, our Christian life is a race — long and rigorous. An ultra-marathon that involves our soul and the very nature of our spirituality. Which may lead us to wonder, so, what is the challenge? Why is it so difficult? And how can we run better?

First, the challenge. "By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land," says the author of today's lesson, "but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace." In other words, in the face of each of these enormous challenges, the people of God had faith. They did not overcome obstacles with their intelligence or technology or physical strength, but with their faith. They trusted God to work for good in their lives, in every time and place and situation.

Faith is *trust*, pure and simple. It is a willingness to lean on God and believe that God will lead you through the difficulties of life so that you will be able to join the apostle Paul in saying, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." The primary challenge of the Christian life is, quite simply, faith.

But why is faith so difficult? According to Hebrews, faith is difficult because it does not immediately lead us into an easy or comfortable life. Over the years, people of faith have “suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented ... They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”

Some might argue that the Christian life would be much easier if our faith freed us from all pain and suffering. But unfortunately, it does not. “We all experience sadness,” said Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, “we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in our world will never end.” But sadness and suffering are never the end. Tutu had faith that suffering could be transformed, and he said that “God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now.”

Faith is difficult because it involves pain — even more suffering than the anguish of an ultramarathon. But God brings order out of disorder, in our personal lives and in our communal lives as well. God leads us toward the finish line which is “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

So how can we run better? The writer of Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” In other words, we can learn a lot from our role models and coaches in the great “cloud of witnesses,” men and women who have run the race of faith through enormous

challenges and difficulties. Along with the inspiration we glean from the Saints in our lives we also have are Lord Jesus who we are encouraged to imitate and follow.

It is important for us to keep in mind that we can go a lot farther when we “run with perseverance the race that is set before us,” not giving up when we feel pain or suffering or sadness. And we run the very best when we look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus endured the agony and the shame of the cross — the most grueling trial of pain — and he did it to bring us forgiveness of sin, as well as to help us “not grow weary or lose heart.”

Run and become. When we run the race of faith, we become the people that God wants us to be. Remember, God is always working for good in our lives, in every time and place and situation. God is an expert at dealing with chaos and brokenness. And Jesus is running ahead of us, showing us how to deal with pain and to help us cross the finish line into the city of the living God.

Yeah, you might say that the runners in our mist could probably share with us that running is a celebration of life, a prayer, and a teacher. But that run or that walk is not as good a teacher as all the Saints in our lives, those who are still with us, and those who have gone before us in the faith, who have demonstrated by their very existence in this world what it means to truly believe in Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Amen.