

“Running for the Finish Line”

I Kings 19:1-8; Galatians 2:15-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 21, 2016 – 14th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

In the award-winning movie *Chariots of Fire* the Scottish runner, Eric Liddell, asks the question, "From where do we get the strength to run to the finish?" Then he answers himself by saying, "We get it from within."

Liddell was a gold medal sprinter in the 1924 Olympics, who a year later, gave up his athletic career to become a missionary in China. Perhaps he is best remembered today for his decision to forego his strongest event because it would have required him to compete on a Sunday. Instead he ran the 400 meters, which even he knew wasn't his best.

As Liddell went to the starting blocks for the race, someone slipped him a piece of paper with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honour me I will honour." Liddell ran with that paper in his hand and not only won the race, but broke the existing world record with a time of 47.6 seconds.

Well, we have a couple of runners in our scriptures for this morning in Elijah and Paul. They would surely agree with Liddell's conclusion that the source of our strength is, indeed, found within.

Elijah ran in fear of Jezebel and the threat she made against him. He runs for a full day into the wilderness, away from people, until he drops exhausted against the trunk of a tree. Only after he has received heaven-sent food sufficient for the journey ahead is he able to successfully get to his destination. The trip would have been too great without maximizing his strength.

For Paul, the metaphor of running is a favorite with him. He uses it in a number of places to illustrate a point. In his first letter to the Corinthian Church he writes, "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. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we receive an imperishable one. So I do not run aimlessly "

In our passage for today Paul makes the point that a person's right relationship is not won by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul describes himself as a Jew by birth, but that doesn't make him superior to the Gentiles. For all persons are sinners, whether Jew or non-Jew. All stand in need of God's grace and forgiveness.

One doesn't earn his way into God's favor by keeping a static list of do's and don'ts, but through an active faith. "First believe," he indicates, "then live accordingly." By giving up the wrong way, Paul has found the right way. Through giving up what enslaves, he is now authentically free to live in the presence of God.

His old way of doing things is a thing of the past. It is as if the Paul he once was is now dead. The new Paul is one who is totally committed to Christ. Verse 20 says: "It is no longer I that live but it is Christ who lives in me." This is total change.

I have a good friend who is an alcoholic. That's a fact of his life though he hasn't touched a drop in over thirty years. I don't believe he ever will again and that is my frequent prayer for him. His way of handling problems is radically different from what it used to be in his addictive days. The old self and the new self look alike on the outside, but it's on the inside where everything is turned upside down. What a marvelous strong person has emerged from the weak and dependent one that had been there formerly. Still, he has to fight every day to stay on top.

When one begins to find their way spiritually in the world, it's always a struggle not to revert to prior ways. It seems as though when we begin to turn an important corner in life, there is always someone or something trying to pull us back. Maybe it's just the little voice in us that says, "You don't have to make all that effort in living. Let things slide a bit and you'll be just as happy."

Some of us here today may still be searching, trying to discover just what it is we believe. And that's fine. What better place to look than within a community of faith willing to share the truths and encouragement that they have found. Know you're welcome here. We want you to find your way. We'll help in any way we can.

For others of us we've been part of church life for more years than we can remember. Maybe we can't even recall a time when we didn't feel like we followed Jesus. Yet, within our faith, we'd have to admit that there have been times of greater strength and those when we've wavered. There are occasions when the fires of the Spirit have burned strongly within us and some where we have barely felt warmed. And that's a common experience.

Life is a long journey. It is interesting and exciting, but how successfully we live it has much do with the inner resources we bring to each day. Our lessons this morning remind us that what we need isn't something one we will find in the outside world. It isn't money or power or possessions. Instead, this strength is of the spirit and it's all within. And when our wherewithal lags, as from time to time it will, we have to renew it from its source. For this boost we don't go to the gym, but to meditation, scriptures, and prayer and a new openness to God's presence in our lives.

Paul experienced this very personally and brings his life transparently before us. He has been so changed by Jesus that he has become a follower from the inside out. He has incorporated Jesus' way within his own life and tries to see the world around him with the eyes of Christ. Every cell in his body is attuned to a higher way of living, a better way of being.

The old, misguided person of his past has made way for the new, energized man of today. He is clearly a stronger person and realizes the source of this power. He knows the Lord will never fail him, even in his most difficult days.

During the Korean War four soldiers found themselves suddenly in a combat zone. Their jeep stuck a landmine. Thankfully they weren't hurt though the vehicle was badly damaged. The transmission was broken by the impact and they could only travel forward in low gear.

Now the four realized that the road ahead was probably well mined and their only hope of survival was to go back to camp the way they had come. The problem was that there was no place wide enough on that stretch to make a U-turn and they had no reverse gear.

They sized up their situation quickly and came to only one conclusion: they would have to pick up the jeep and turn it around by hand. The artillery was getting closer and closer, and that made the time now or never.

The sergeant looked at the others and said, "Let's do it." But just as they positioned themselves at the four corners, doubt began to set in. One soldier said they couldn't possibly lift it but, as the bullets flew around them, the other three convinced him that they could in no uncertain terms. Somehow they managed to get the jeep off the ground and pointed in the opposite direction.

Just after they roared out a shell dropped exactly where they had been only seconds before. Once back in camp they began to tell their buddies about their extraordinary feat of strength. The others scoffed and laid down bets that the four couldn't replicate their claim. The four soldiers took that bet, but no matter how hard they tried they couldn't get the jeep off the ground.

You see, in their immediate danger they had an inner strength, a kind of emotional adrenalin. In camp they tried to do the same thing with just physical strength, and it proved to be lacking.

There's a parable of sorts in that story. Within us is great spiritual strength that lies latent and waiting its release. God has placed it there for our use and benefit, but we must learn how to tap into it. When we are faced with challenging moments, it is this inner energy that will prove to see us through. It will be sufficient for our need.

Over these years I have known many of you I have seen this made real over and over again. Some of you have had incredibly difficult times to get through, but you have found the strength you have needed. I don't believe this has been by chance, but because you came more in touch with what had been provided all along. You let God carry you when your own ability proved insufficient. When you needed help the most, you had it.

It's a long way from our first day on earth to our last. It takes a lot of energy to live and live successfully. Those who do it best are those who know what faith reveals and the world wants to deny: it's all from within. When you let Christ into your living, then what he had to rely on is yours as well. Inner strength is an endless pool, but whether you draw from it or not is up to you to decide.

Well, for me I realize where my strength lies, and I can tell the difference when I go it alone or when I access what I'm given. Paul encourages us to make our faith an everyday reality and to use freely what is provided. Those who discover this same source of spiritual energy he had | find just what they need whenever it's required the most. It's a life changer and as Olympian Eric Liddell reminded himself and us, "We get it from within."