

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
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God Speed

The other day, I read a story on giving up things for Lent. It was about this woman, Nora. As Nora walks into the sanctuary for the Ash Wednesday service, she overhears a parishioner tell her friend, “Well, Anne is giving up drinking, Terri is giving up chocolate, and me—I guess I’m just giving up!”ⁱ How many of you have felt like that at least one time this Lenten season? You may think that a self-defeating attitude like that is not the way to go, and I agree, it is not. But, theologically speaking, it is most appropriate. You see, Lent is about giving up—surrendering your old self to God so that we can embrace the new life God offers us. We become like new creations but not before we die to our old self, as Jesus dies on the cross. It is in this context of “giving up” that we read Paul’s letter to the community at Philippi.

There’s a song in the Broadway musical, Annie Get Your Gun called, “Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better.” Maybe some of you are familiar. The song depicts two people—a man and a woman—trying to outdo each other in complex things such as singing, knitting sweaters, talking fast, and opening a safe without getting caught. The famous line goes, “Anything you can do I can do better; I can do anything better than you.” The song is now being used in a current Gap add to sell the “Boyfriend Trouser”, which is made for girls but so relaxed and comfortable they feel like they are fresh from your boyfriend’s closet. (Don’t ask me. I don’t make these things up.). Well, my first experience with this song was a bad one. My great-grandmother taught me how to play gin rummy when I was only about 7 or 8 and I swear she did this just to beat me. I was barely in elementary school and she was a certified card shark, who played every day at the high-rise where she lived with other card sharks. Every time I got excited and put down a set of three, she would sing that God forsaken song and put down a run. It never failed. I grew to hate the song because I always equated it with somebody beating me in a game or competition....and loving every minute of it.

When we first read Paul's words in the scripture for today, it almost feels like he's ready to break into "Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better."ⁱⁱ He highlights every credential he has—circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church, blameless. It is a pretty striking résumé according to the law, but according to Paul, the law does not matter anymore. Jesus is what matters. So, at first glance this looks like a résumé, or a bragging session, but in reality, it is a kind of confession. Paul is proclaiming that these things that once defined him and meant so much to him, he now considers "loss." Paul has surrendered these earthly credentials. He has, in fact, died to his old life and is moving on by taking a different path—the path that led him to his encounter with the risen Christ, which changed his life forever. His goal is no longer a perfect résumé, filled with achievements and accomplishments, but something much more—something not of this earth.

I presume many of us have goals. If I asked you to list your goals, you probably could do so with ease. Earthly goals, in of themselves, are not insignificant nor are they un-Christian. In fact, goals of compassion, humility, patience, and understanding build up the body of Christ. So, I don't think that Paul is saying we should abandon our earthly goals in their entirety. But, I do think Paul is saying that perhaps there are goals that are more important—like spiritual goals. What if I asked you: what is your ultimate spiritual goal? In other words, most of us recognize that we are on a journey of faith, but what is the end point? What are we working toward? This question may give you pause, but I suspect some of you would say that your goal is Christian perfection, or full maturity in Christ, or getting to heaven, or being reunited with your loved ones—eternal life with Christ. Have any of you heard the old adage, "It's about the journey, not about the destination"? I think, according to this scripture, Paul would say that the destination is just as important as the journey. It's the destination that makes the whole journey worthwhile. It's ultimately the destination that motivates us to press forward. So, if the destination is that important, shouldn't we be asking: If we're running the race of faith, what's waiting for us at the finish line?

Most of us are familiar with running races. You probably ran races as a kid. Maybe you still run road races as an adult. When you run a race, especially as a kid, you run to win. I ran races as a kid—track races, cross-country races, "Who's Better? Boy or

Girl” races. I don’t think I ever won a race in my life, but I imagined, as every kid does, stepping across that finish line first. It went a little like this. I would imagine running in the throngs of cheers and excitement, hearing the voices of my friends and family urging me to run faster—faster, noticing the adrenaline building and building in my gut, feeling my legs burning with each stride, finally experiencing the victory of breaking the tape across my chest, collapsing in exhaustion and triumph at the end of the race, and then feeling the medal of honor placed around my neck or clutching the trophy—the prize. That’s glory. Sadly, by the time I finished the race, and I know some of you can relate to this, there were no more cheers—the excitement was over—the race was already won. I heard one or two voices saying, “Go Allison. Bring it home.” They were usually my parents.

Paul borrows a lot of his Greek words, especially in this passage, from the athletic arena. Unfortunately, we miss some of this rich imagery because of the translation and the differences in our cultural context. But, it’s obvious by his word choice, Paul likens his journey of faith to running a race, except Paul is running a different kind of race. This race is already won. It has been won by Christ—through his death and resurrection. In baptism, we proclaim the race won—that we are washed clean with God’s grace and claimed as God’s own. Today, we proclaim that Savannah’s race is won by the God that loved her from the very beginning. Because of the work of Christ, she can seek because she have been found, she can know because she has been known, she can apprehend because she has been apprehended; she can finish because the race has been finished for her.ⁱⁱⁱ

The other thing about Paul’s race that is not like any earthly race is that the prize is none other than knowing Christ completely. We will know fully because we have been fully known. It’s important that we realize we do not obtain the prize by our own merit. God accepts us not because of our own righteousness or works or faith, but by the faith and obedience of Christ—this in itself sets us free to run without counting our steps, or maintaining the perfect speed, or competing with other servants of Christ who are running their own race.^{iv}

As you can see, the race Paul describes, is a different kind of race with a different kind of prize. There’s an old Nike add with a great motto. It says this, “The race is not

always to the swift, but to those who keep running.” You see, it’s not about winning, it is about finishing and keeping your eyes firmly fixed on Christ Jesus. Paul cautions us not to look back on the old self we left behind or to be tempted by earthly prizes that are meaningless and insignificant. Fix your gaze on the one that offers new life. Let’s make sure we don’t live our faith journeys floundering for meaning, but let’s live them with purpose, and hope, and the assurance of things to come. Let us keep a clear vision of the goal of faith.

On this fifth Sunday in Lent, I urge you to declare your spiritual goal and press on, my friends. Do not give up. Run the course that God has put you on, enjoy the journey, and do not ever overlook the destination. In our childlike imaginations, let’s keep the image of the race alive—the one where we all finish and hear the cries of angels calling our name and feel the tape of victory break across our chest, and we shall collapse in exhaustion, and maybe a bit of agony, and relief, and we shall finally clutch our heavenly prize. *That* is glory. Amen.

ⁱ Kimberly Bracken Long, “Forty Days in the Womb: Worshiping in Lent” in Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 9.

ⁱⁱ Steven Molin, “A Braggart’s Prayer” in Lectionary Homiletics, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, source unknown.

^{iv} Fred Craddock, source unknown.