

Persevere in Christ's Passion

In Christ:

I was never a track athlete – I grew up in the Borg, Connors, McEnroe era and hit a lot of tennis. Truthfully, I just wasn't fast enough for track, but I can very much appreciate what track athletes do.

To run 800-meter run at full speed seems must tax a runner physically to the point of complete exhaustion. Then add two more laps. Can you imagine running a sub-four-minute mile? Or a marathon averaging under 5-minute miles?

The point is this: races tax endurance and stamina. They require focused energy and commitment. The Greek word for "race" has "agony" at its root.

Brothers and sisters, we're in a spiritually taxing race. It's a race for our very lives. Consider the image used by the writer to the Hebrews.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Here we have the coaching points for our race. We are pointed to the highlight reel – the "great cloud of witnesses" who have run the race of faith before us. We are also given the ultimate focus – to remember the one who ran a perfect race. When Jesus said, "It is finished," he was marking the point of salvation's successful completion. He ran for us – his victory is our victory.

This section applies to all of us individually, and, by extension, to all of us as a team – as a congregation or district or church body. This **call to perseverance and endurance** is timely and fitting. My dear brothers and sisters, I think that we are headed for some very difficult times ahead as members of Christ's church. It will become increasingly difficult to stand up for the truth as our culture and society becomes increasingly paganized. There is no flat track for

our race any more. Satan and this world put hurdles and obstacles in our way. So the Christian race is very challenging. Furthermore, we ourselves are in less-than-perfect shape. Our sinful natures work against us – they resist training. Our own sin hinders us significantly as we plod forward.

This text picks up nicely on your convention theme: **Christ's Love, Our Passion.** It tells us to keep our eyes "fixed on Jesus," the pioneer and perfecter of faith (or author and perfecter) – the beginning and end, or be all and end all of what it means to be a believer in the only true God.

Brothers and sisters, Persevere in Christ's Passion – there you have purpose and power for life and the mission of the church.

Hebrews 11 – the great "Heroes of Faith" chapter – supplies us with examples of others who have run the race of faith and faced great challenges (hurdles and obstacles). The repeating litany is "by faith . . . by faith . . . by faith." By faith Abraham By faith Isaac By faith Jacob By faith Moses

[Read selections from the chapter.]

We must learn from this section of the Scripture that it does not intend chiefly to praise the personal accomplishments of people who lived incredible lives. This chapter is about God's promises of life and salvation – and the gift of faith to trust that promise.

I don't want to overstate my case – it is true that the writer of this letter wanted to set out Abraham, for instance, as an example. But he is not an example of self-reliance. Abraham is an example of how God's promises can give the sinner, who is frustrated by evil desires and temptations, a new perspective on life. And an energy to do what God desires. To take eyes off of the world and its attractions and to realize that we are "aliens and strangers on earth."

Ah, yes, faith can do incredible things – precisely because the promises of the gospel are true! Great man, this Abraham! Yes, because God made him so. And Abraham's God of the ages past, is our hope for years to come.

All of these Chapter 11 "witnesses" lived before the time of Jesus. All of them believed (trusted) in the promises of that which was to come. **"Sure of what they hoped for and certain of what they did not see."** But we have the words of the prophets made more certain. We know that account of fulfillment. So we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and what he did.

This is still a “life-by-faith”—because we’ve never seen Jesus. We know this only because the Spirit has worked faith in our hearts to absolutely and most assuredly believe what is truly unbelievable. That Jesus of Nazareth was truly God among us—this is unbelievable. He looked like any other ordinary human being. That the Jesus was crucified as a criminal—what looked like defeat, was indeed a victory. Unbelievable.

The Romans felt a certain sense of vindication in the prolonged torture of the cross. They wanted the accusation and conviction of criminal activity to “out there for all the world to see”—a human billboard. The victim was supposed to feel the weight of guilt and how much pain it had caused. To think about what he had done. This was not a quick end; this was a prolonged execution. In this case it has the opposite effect – it provides a sense of pause for all of us to reflect on why this happened. We are the ones who deserve to have the world know just what we’ve done. To be exposed as criminal.

But Jesus **“for the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”** The whole time Jesus was on the cross, he was thinking of us. He wasn’t focused on his crimes—he deserved none of the torture.

St. Paul explained that the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. He also said: **“We preach Christ crucified.”** And, **“God forbid that I should glory—boast—except in the cross of Jesus Christ.”** How can that be? What does he mean?

Recall what Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”**

Yes, Jesus “scorned the shame” of being treated like a common criminal. But this had to be. He had to die unjustly – he had never done anything to deserve death. In other words, Jesus’ life had to be taken in an unnatural and unjust way. Christ became for us what we were not, to do for us what we could not, and to die for us that we might not. He who had no sin became in the Father’s eyes the greatest and most cursed sinner in our stead—making our guilt his guilt, our sin his sin, our punishment his punishment.

I would submit that the cross is the only place where we can really understand God. The “beams” of God’s righteous holiness and merciful love intersect on

the cross. This is the place where we can understand how God is both just (exacting the penalty for sin) and the justifier (paying the penalty in our place) at the same time.

John writes: Jesus said, **“Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”** Like the bronze snake, Jesus wants to draw our attention to what happened on the cross. This was judgment on sin. This was also the acceptance of a perfect sacrifice—a complete life lived in sinlessness.

Life is never easy when sin and personal unworthiness haunts us. Who are we to be so blessed to have been given faith to trust in forgiveness and eternal life?! The Hebrews 11 “heroes” would have said exactly the same thing.

Life is not easy when we encounter hurdles that seem to be getting higher and higher. I fear that our natural reaction to the challenges of this world may be to “cry foul” – to demand that the race be “run according to the rules.” Fellow racers, the hurdles (e.g. “gay marriage”) will not be removed from the track. But we run with the energy and focus and power that Christ supplies. The hurdles seem insurmountable? But we do not run with our own strength. The church (this district, this gathering) is not our human creation. God has given us life and structure and purpose and strength. We run, truly, with supernatural power. Our mission is a supernatural mission.

Brothers and sisters, in the struggle that is the church **“do not grow weary or lose heart”**—even if you feel like walking off the track and away from the race. Be renewed by the Word and Sacrament—Christ’s promises to be with you always. Be renewed by the fellowship of faith that we all share together. We bear each other’s burdens. Encourage each other. Pray for each other. Come to Christ often for guidance and strength and you will be renewed and refreshed—you have God’s promise on it. The call of faith is a call to live in Christian discipline and focus—fix your eyes on your forgiveness and follow Christ.

Brothers and sisters, Persevere in Christ’s Passion—there you have purpose and power for life and the mission of the church. Amen.