

“Dumping the Trash” Philippians 3: 4-14 Rev. Janet Chapman 4/7/20

So my daughter Mikayla is training to run in a marathon – she will be the first person in our immediate family to ever do so. That may seem odd to you but this is just not the body of a runner. I enjoy walking, bicycling, and swimming, but I am not a runner and neither is anyone else in my family. Mikayla admits she doesn’t like the actual running part either, but she enjoys how it makes her feel afterwards. In preparation 2 weekends ago, she went to cheer on a friend in a 26-mile marathon in LA with 20,000 runners. Andrew came in among the first 1000 which gave him a top rating. Andrew is coaching Mikayla, giving her important keys on pacing herself and practicing her rhythm. She has gotten to about 5 miles and is working her way towards her first marathon. That is a sentence I never in a million years imagined saying about one of my own but I am proud of her perseverance.

A little background study shows that the word “marathon” comes from around 490 B.C. when a gigantic Persian army landed on the flatlands of Marathon, menacing the city of Athens, just 25 miles away. The Athenians prepared for a climatic battle that would determine the fate of their civilization. Against all odds, the vastly outnumbered Athenian army defeated the Persians in battle. It was an unimaginable victory, the kind of news that sent people running with joy. So after the battle, in a story more likely fable than fact, a runner named Pheidippides was dispatched to carry the good news of the victory to the terrified residents of Athens. He ran the entire 25 miles across the plain of Marathon to the city, not once stopping for a Gatorade. When he arrived, exhausted, dehydrated, saturated in sweat, he burst into the city assembly and with his last breath shouted, “Rejoice! We won!” And then he collapsed and died. The poet Robert Browning, writing much later, imagined that this runner died with a smile on

his face, that his heart gave out not so much from exhaustion as from sheer bliss, pure euphoria at the victory, from overwhelming peace and happiness at sharing such good news with the people he loved.

In Philippians, Paul imagines his whole life as a kind of long and arduous marathon. However, in this race, he is like that runner who is carrying too much baggage, excess weight from his past, that even caused him to miss some of the turns in the path that kept him in the race. During that time in his past, he had been running toward a different prize. As Jeremy Troxler notes, Paul wanted to be a religious success and by all intensive purposes, he was. His spiritual resume goes on for pages and then Jesus hunts Paul down on the road to Damascus and with that encounter, Paul realizes he has been running for the wrong prize, literally running in the wrong direction. You middle aged football fans will remember that major gaffe from 1964 when Vikings defensive lineman Jim Marshall scooped up a fumble by the 49ers and seeing daylight ahead of him, not a 49er in sight, he headed for the goal line, some 60 yards away. He took off running, as fast as a big defensive lineman could go, dreams of a touchdown dancing in his head. He heard the crowd roaring but wasn't listening to what they were shouting, all he heard was the cheering in his head. As he crossed the end zone, one of the 49ers walked up and gave him a hug, and his ears suddenly became in tune to the announcer saying, "I've never seen anything like it – he ran the wrong way! Marshall ran the wrong way." The only person in the stadium who didn't realize the truth was poor Jim Marshall. It was sort of like that man who was driving down the freeway, whose wife called him on his cell to tell him the news stations were reporting about a crazy driver going the wrong way down the same

highway he was on. The man replied, “You’re not kidding, honey – there’s not just one crazy person going the wrong way, I can see hundreds of them!”

Paul realizes he has been running the wrong way. He had reached the end zone; he had been successful, but that success came with a lot of relative garbage in comparison to what was offered if he had been listening to the announcer, the Spirit of Jesus in the first place. Paul always thought that Jesus had been an enemy of the law, now he was hearing and understanding that Christ was the fulfillment of the law, the reason behind it. The law had been a wonderful map to follow but God had done something even better, had brought the law to life by sending a faithful guide in Jesus, who embodied what the law was all about, and who made it available to all people, not just the marathon runners like Paul. Paul writes that even the things he has lost by following Jesus pale in comparison to what he has gained. All his pedigree, his fine upbringing, his standing in the community – he dismisses all these things, good as they might be, as trash, as garbage in comparison. The actual word he uses is “rubbish,” but unless your British, it doesn’t quite have the same effect. It is like those things we accumulate without much apparent purpose. We store them up in our garage for a rainy day, which in Redding these days is every day, and then they do nothing to transform and make our lives better, they only become clutter tripping us up and dragging us down. Paul got lost in his pedigree so “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,” he says, “I press on toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Troxler notes another important point of this text. Paul doesn’t just run in a different direction now but he runs in a different manner as well. It is not about where he is headed but how he is running. We talk about it saying what is important is the journey more than the

destination. Paul has been running in the wrong way, believing that righteousness and goodness were something that could be achieved through hard work and dedication, through his own efforts and gifts. The race of life was this grueling, guilt-wracked grind, a kind of never-ending death march where you have to justify your existence and self-esteem every day. But he was running in the wrong way. Christopher McDougall argues that most of us have been running in the wrong way, literally. We view running as merely a means to an end, like getting in shape or living longer, and when we run, we try to protect ourselves from injury with high-tech running shoes, at least Nike hopes we do. But McDougall looks to the Tarahumara Indian tribe of Mexico to show us a different way. They have honed the ability to run hundreds of miles at a clip without rest or injury. Part of this is because when they run, they wear only simple sandals, and so from a young age, they learn to run upright, on the front pads of their feet, instead of on the arches or heels, the way our shoes encourage us to run. But beyond this, the Tarahumara run the way they do not as a chore, but as a gift, as a worthy end in itself. They run believing that is what they were born to do. McDougall tells of a track coach who is studying two guys from the tribe to understand what makes them tick, why they are such good runners and what he can take back to his team. What strikes the coach is not so much their technique as it is the joy with which they run. These runners race up one of the course's most heartbreaking hills and they are still laughing, churning up the slope like kids playing in a leaf pile. What makes them such great runners is that they haven't forgotten what it means to love the act of running itself.

In the book of Philippians, Paul's letter sounds out joy, even while he is in prison. Paul is running the race, dumping the trash of the past, pressing on, straining forward for what lies

ahead...and he is doing it laughing. He hits the hill with a smile, believing this following in the ways of Jesus is what he was born to do. However hard it might be, it is not a grind of guilt but a race of grace. Paul loves the act because there is nothing better than that freeing love of Christ flowing through you to others. He sees the prize before him in that Christ-like connection with God. It is not a grim test of willpower or personal worth, but it is a joyous jaunt across the flatlands of Marathon, with good news filling up your soul. "Rejoice," Paul says "Again I will say Rejoice!" Love has won! So run – for ***your life***. Run this race because you were born to run this race. Find some running partners. Forget what lies behind. Strain forward to what lies ahead and keep your eyes on the prize. The Divine Announcer is cheering us on. "Speak, O God, for your servants are listening."