

**MEDITATIONS FROM  
ORIOLE – YORK MILLS  
UNITED CHURCH**



**Oriole-York Mills United Church, Front View**

**“Life is a Long Distance Run:  
Parts 1 to 3**

**by Reverend Chris T. Miller**

This is one in a series of selected sermons and resources from Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from the insights they provide.

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***Life Is a Long-Distance Run: Go for the Goal!***

***1: "Remember the Witnesses"***

Hebrews 11 (selected verses) - 12:1 (*New Living Translation*)

This summer, the 29th Olympiad of the modern era is being held in Beijing, China. These games are always a great display of pageantry and athletic accomplishment for thousands of athletes from all over the world. The Olympic ideal was actually born in ancient Greece where, from around 776 BC until AD 393, the games were held every four years to honour the pagan god Zeus. The modern games were begun in 1896, also in Athens, but without all the religious baggage of the original games. People are fascinated, aren't they, by the achievements and the stories of the athletes who compete in the Olympics!

While I have not been one to do much competitive racing since high school, I have friends who have participated in various competitions and races throughout their lives. There was Bernie -- a camp counsellor, teacher and joy-filled singer who loved to run and ran in various competitions well into his 70s. There is Joe -- a minister who loves to participate in triathlon competitions in which you run, bicycle and swim (not all at the same time). And there is John, Rev. John Smith -- a friend and one of the clergy at Leaside United Church not far from here. This past June, with hundreds of other bikers, John rode his bicycle 200 kilometres from Toronto to Niagara Falls to raise money for cancer research at Princess Margaret Hospital. (Both John and his wife, Joan, have recently lost parents to cancer.)

I looked up John's webpage on the Internet and was intrigued by the kind of training John was expected to undertake if he wanted to finish the 200 km successfully.

Here is what all the riders were told:

"Most likely you're not used to riding over 100 km one day, then waking up the next morning and doing it again. So we'll help you get ready to do just that! We'll organize Training Rides in different areas and terrains that vary in difficulty from beginner to experienced Rider. We'll also have Orientation sessions where you'll learn more about bike basics in case you've never changed a bike tire or you want to know the difference between a road, recumbent, hybrid and mountain bike. Another important aspect of training for The Ride is learning how to properly fuel your body through proper nutrition and hydration. So once you sign up for The Ride, you'll receive a Ride Manual with information on eating and drinking right, tracking your training progress and stretching to keep your body limber. And last but not least, you can always call your coaches when you have questions about how to physically prepare for The Ride. They'll be able to provide you with one-on-one advice and guidance to ensure achievement of your goals."

([www.conquercancer.ca/site/TR/Events/Toronto2008](http://www.conquercancer.ca/site/TR/Events/Toronto2008))

John started his training the middle of March. So his physical, mental and psychological training was spread out over 12 weeks. I received a picture from John with a handwritten note saying "I made it all the way!" I knew then that all of his physical, emotional and mental training, and

the discipline that went along with it, was worth the joy he experienced crossing the finish line. John called it “Amazing! What a rush!” And he raised well over \$11,000 for cancer research from family and friends. He went for the goal and crossed the finish line successfully.

For the month of August, I want to talk about going for the goal – g-o-a-l – so we, too, will cross the finish line with success and joy. But it’s not about a two-day bicycle ride or a 100-yard dash or a 200-metre butterfly swim. It’s about going for the goal in a different kind of race -- the race (or journey) of life. And this race is clearly long distance for most of us. It is more like a 26-mile marathon than a sprint.

Along the way, I hope each of us will discover some of the deeper meanings of going for the goal. But let me warn you, going for the goal of life will not be a simple walk in the park. You probably know that anyhow. Like training for the Olympics or a 200-kilometre bike competition, life that finishes well will also require plenty of discipline. So in this series of messages, I hope to challenge you (and myself as well) to begin -- or to resume if that’s the case -- a training course. It will not make you an *instant* spiritual champion in five easy weeks but it will set in motion the kind of disciplines that will be necessary for you to finish well and finish strong and finish your spiritual journey with joy. In order to do that, we will learn to:

- Remember the Witnesses, today’s focus
- Remove Any Hindrances (Week 2)
- Run With Perseverance (Week 3)
- Reach for the Goal (Week 4)
- Finishing Well (Week 5).

The writer of the book of Hebrews pictured himself in a race. As he began writing our text for today, he imagined himself in a great arena with people all around him watching and cheering. Have you ever imagined yourself competing in front of an arena full of people? I have! I have wondered what it would feel like to catch a touchdown in the Grey Cup, to hit a home run in the World Series or to be among the leaders in golf at the Canadian Open! When you are on the world stage, everyone is watching you and, probably, at least half of them are cheering for you to win.

The stage the Scripture pictures is much greater than any of those minor venues. It is actually the stage of Heaven, the Kingdom of God where God reigns. And the people who are in the stands are those who have already run the race of life themselves -- and won. All of them are now watching us, cheering for us to overcome all the hurdles and obstacles in front of us in our quest to reach the goal and become, like them, spiritual champions.

What is the significance of these heavenly witnesses? For one thing, since they've already run the race, their examples should serve as an inspiration to us who are still in the race. We certainly understand this in the world of sports. Basketball players want to "be like Mike or Chris Bosch." Soccer players want to "bend it like Beckham." Baseball players want to be able to "hit like Vernon Wells or pitch like Roy Halladay." Go to any major sporting event and look at the number of uniforms worn by fans bearing names such as Woods, Clemens or Sundin. Whatever sport you follow, you could immediately tell me the name of a player whom you enjoy watching. Most of us have sports heroes. They "set the bar" for excellence in their fields. And

their lofty accomplishments serve as a constant inspiration to both children and weekend sports enthusiasts alike.

So what is it about the lives of these heavenly witnesses that should set the bar for us in our spiritual lives? Hebrews 11 says it was their *faith*. And the author of Hebrews defines faith this way: “Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.” The heavenly witnesses listed in Chapter 11 were mostly ordinary men and women who ended up doing extraordinary things as a result of their faith -- *in God*. They were people like Noah. Remember, God told him about the impending judgment coming upon the world by a flood. So God gave Noah the plans to build an ark to rescue him, his family and anyone who would listen to Noah, along with two of every animal on the Earth. That took great trust for Noah – great faith to build a huge boat in the middle of the desert over a period of many years!

Then there was Abraham, a man God picked out of nowhere, who followed God off his known map when God told him to take his family and move to an unknown land that God would eventually show him. The grandstands of Heaven/God’s Kingdom also include Moses who, somewhat reluctantly at first, led an entire nation out of slavery in Egypt and into their own Promised Land. There was Gideon, who had a bit of an inferiority complex, who defeated an army of 30,000 warriors with a small band of 300! And David, of course, the youngest in his family – an unlikely shepherd, poet and musician -- who conquered a Philistine giant with only a slingshot. The Bible says these heroes, by their faith, “conquered kingdoms, administered justice ... shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword” because they

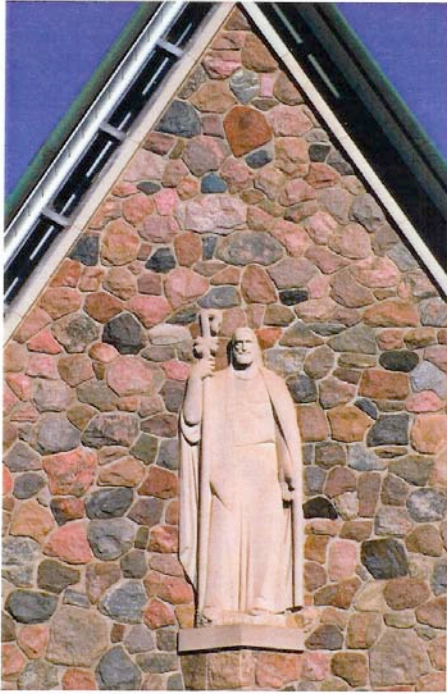
trusted God who told them "I will be with you." They had faith in the living God who encouraged them, empowered them and enabled them to overcome the obstacles they faced in life. These heroes are a great testimony to that fact.

Some of the witnesses in God's grandstands, however, never ended up recording any great accomplishments on the pages of history. These are the nameless heroes -- at least in terms of the world -- but certainly not in the records of Heaven. The latter part of Hebrews 11 says that, as a result of their faith, "some were tortured ... jeered at, flogged, chained, put in prison, stoned, put to death by sword, even sawed in two." The Scripture says some people of faith "went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, mistreated, persecuted and often wandering around in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground." Often faith is not what rescues people from calamity but what enables them to stand strong in the face of trouble or disaster.

In early July, Canadian Christian missionaries John and Eloise Bergen were both savagely beaten with machetes. He was left to die by their attackers; she was raped by three of them. I recall meeting Eloise many years ago. She is the daughter of one of my seminary professors. John and Eloise were living in rural Kenya where they grew food to feed the local orphaned children. You may have seen some of the reports and dramatic pictures of their return to Canada and the physical results of the blows to their bodies. However, what amazed people was the response of their spirits toward those who attacked them. "We hold nothing against our assassins," said 70-year-old John, his left arm heavily bandaged and stitches marking his right

arm. “If I am able, I would tell them that Jesus loves them. And I forgive them, and God wants to forgive them, if they’d receive it.” Even newscasters commented on how remarkable this was.

What difference does the faith of each of these heroes, whether past or present, make on our lives today? For one thing, the writer of Hebrews says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (11:6). No one can have a right relationship with God apart from faith – no matter how small. What sets each one of these men and women apart from everyone else is their unwavering trust in God – that God is there and cares enough to respond to their seeking. In fact, that’s how a relationship with God is born -- when we put our faith in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, who offered his life for our sins. Trusting a God who gave himself that way for us can give us a life of hope and peace and love. And we demonstrate that faith when we acknowledge our need of God and invite the living God to be at the centre of our lives and give us new hearts. This kind of saving faith puts us in a right relationship with God.



But spiritual champions then and now also discovered that faith is needed every day. In fact, the stuff that life throws at us is a constant exercise in learning to trust God. Tony Snow, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, battled cancer off and on since early 2005. On July 12, 2008, Tony died. But when he was asked in January what spiritual lessons he learned from his battle, he replied: "We want lives of simple, predictable ease -- smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see -- but God likes to go off-road." (Tony Snow, "The Up Side," *Guideposts*, January 2008.) I am glad God likes to go "off-road" because that's

where we often find ourselves – and God can and will find us there. It's in the "off-road" places where life throws all kinds of "stuff" at us – whether physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually or in our relationships with family and friends and enemies. You can add your own *stuff*, because it may be different than what I have mentioned. And like the spiritual champions who are already in the heavenly grandstands, we too need to learn the lessons of faith and trust and apply them to every area of our lives.

Here's a suggestion to consider. Let's make this month of August – the time of the 2008 Summer Olympics – a time to go intentionally for the goal in our own long-distance run in life. Maybe it will also be a time to rededicate ourselves to go for the gold and become a spiritual champion. Together we'll establish a spiritual exercise and training routine that will, hopefully, help us make significant strides in our quest. So let's look at the next five weeks as an opportunity to be "in training." I'll be your coach – but I'll be participating and learning with you.

So here's our assignment for this week: Pick a spiritual hero and learn about him or her and from the person's experience.



**Mother Teresa**

There are many from whom to choose: maybe one of the biblical characters noted in Hebrews 11 (I'll help you do a biblical study, if you wish), or one of the great voices of spiritual reformation throughout history, or one of the impressive voices closer to our time such as Eric Liddell, Elizabeth Fry, Harriet Tubman, William Wilberforce, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa – all ordinary people with special callings. (I have books to lend if you want to borrow one.) The people we look up to and allow to be our mentors can challenge us and contribute to determining the person we will ultimately become. Who do you want in the grandstand cheering for you?



**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

One of my favourite movies is *Chariots of Fire*, the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell was a devout Christian and one of the finest runners in the world. Eric's sister, Jennie, wanted him to leave competitive running to join the family on the mission field in China. Jennie thought Eric was putting running ahead of serving God and questioned his commitment.

In one scene, Eric attempts to help his sister see his point of view. He announces with a smile: "I've decided I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted -- "

Jennie interrupts him. "Oh, Eric, I'm so pleased," she says.

Eric continues: "But I've got a lot of running to do first. Jennie. You've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose -- for China. He also made me fast and, when I run, I feel His pleasure. To give it up would be to hold Him in contempt. You were right; it's not just fun. To win is to honour [God]."

Life is a long-distance run, not a brief sprint. Let's look to the witnesses who have gone before us and who are our examples of faith and trust in the living God. In crossing the line well, we too will honour our God.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller,  
August 3, 2008

A Reading from Hebrews 11 and 12, *New Living Translation*:

Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see. Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation.

It was by faith that Abel brought a more acceptable offering to God than Cain did.

It was by faith that Enoch was taken up to heaven without dying—"he disappeared, because God took him."

It was by faith that Noah built a large boat to save his family from the flood. He obeyed God, who warned him about things that had never happened before.

It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going.

It was by faith that Moses' parents hid him for three months when he was born. They saw that God had given them an unusual child, and they were not afraid to disobey the king's command.

It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God's people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin.

It was by faith that the people of Israel went right through the Red Sea as though they were on dry ground. But when the Egyptians tried to follow, they were all drowned.

It was by faith that the people of Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and the walls came crashing down.

How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets.

All these people earned a good reputation because of their faith, yet none of them received all that God had promised. For God had something better in mind for us, so that they would not reach perfection without us.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight

that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.

This is good news from the Living God.  
**Thanks be to God.**

***Life is a Long-Distance Run: Go for the Goal!***

**2. “Remove the Hindrances”**

Hebrews 11 and 12:1-3

*Enter with backpack and hands full of stuff (computer, baseball bat, golf club, newspaper, Bible, car keys and palm pilot in backpack). Walking slowly with great difficulty.*

I apologize for starting late. I had every intention of beginning right after the solo, but something slowed me down. Something also made me tired -- not only this morning but also all week. I prayed about it. I said *[beginning to lift hands]* “O Lord . . .” Oh, that hurts! Anyway, I said, “O Lord . . .” *[raise arms]* Ow! What is that pain in my neck? Oh, I didn’t realize I still had this backpack with me. I guess that would slow me down a bit, wouldn’t it? I’ll set it down. But I need some help to get it off. . . That feels better. Thanks. What’s in here anyway? *[Pull out bat, golf club, car keys, palm pilot, newspaper, two or three books and computer.]* I guess this could be a big chunk of the reason I have been feeling tired and going at a slower pace recently. Maybe they weigh more than I thought.

Hebrews 12:1, the last verse in our Scripture reading this morning, says: “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.”

Last Sunday we began a five-part series “Life is a Long-Distance Run: Go for the Goal.” “Remember the Witnesses” was Part 1. Today we are going to look at the second step on our journey: “throwing off everything that hinders” – whatever weighs us down -- and “the sin that so easily entangles” – the sin that is so

close to us it trips us up. We need to throw off these weights and sins so we may keep running our race of life well and finish well, so we may follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ -- so we may become spiritual champions.

Well, the 2008 Olympics have begun. Did you see the opening ceremonies from the Birds Nest Stadium in Beijing? Spectacular! Are you aware the Olympic Games began about 2,800 years ago in Athens as a religious festival to honour the pagan god Zeus? And the best way to honour Zeus was to win the contest. Athletes competed in a stadium with about 40,000 spectators. The facility was also filled with statues and records of victors and heroes from past games – a lot like the picture of the heroes of the Bible in Hebrews 11. So Chapter 12, verse 1 says: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses . . . ”*

Before the ancient Olympic Games began, athletes had to swear an oath that they had trained honestly for 10 months before the Games. They also had to promise they would not cheat during the competition. As the years passed, athletes began competing in the nude. According to legend, a runner in 720 BC lost his shorts while sprinting but still won the race. That sparked the idea of getting rid of all the excess clothing that slowed the runners down. Stories of a different event say another runner tripped over his shorts and lost. This gave runners the idea of running without any clothes at all so that *nothing*, absolutely nothing would cause them to stumble. Again this feels a lot like the picture in our Scripture passage: *“. . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”*

Followers of Jesus believe that human beings are created in the image of God for a relationship with him. We exist to glorify God and enjoy God forever. That’s why we believe our mission here at Oriole York Mills Church is “to glorify God, grow in

Christian faith and follow in Jesus' footsteps." (Look at the top of page 2 of the bulletin.) When we do this, we receive the strength, courage, resources and vision to love and serve others also made in the image of God in both our local and the global communities. This is one of the ways that the *living* God wants us to show our love for him. This how we can honour the *living* God on our long-distance journey in life and become, like the people the book of Hebrews celebrates, spiritual champions.

The Scripture gives us some training steps that will help us compete and cross the finish line of life well. In Hebrews Chapter 11, we see many examples to follow. They are mostly ordinary men and women who are remembered for doing extraordinary things as a result of their faith and trust in God. Spend some time reading and pondering Chapter 11 and Chapter 12. You will find yourself challenged -- and encouraged and inspired.

On our long-distance run through life, those who are spiritual champions *remember the witnesses of faith*. You might like to pick up a printed copy of the first message in the series to help you with that. This week we will learn that those who are spiritual champions *remove any hindrances*. Hindrances that, for instance, weigh us down, distract us, lead us in the wrong direction – away from God instead of toward Him.



## **Olympic Marathon Race in Beijing, August 2008**

Photo: Getty Images

I mentioned earlier that the original Olympic athletes -- runners especially -- would often compete without clothes. The long flowing robes that were the normal attire of the day would certainly have impeded the runners' progress. If they were to be champions, they needed to throw off those things that hindered them from running as fast as possible. In the current Beijing Olympics, athletes are still looking for something to give them an edge to go faster and not stumble. In the swimming competition, for instance, there is a controversy about the kind of swimsuits to wear. Speedo has apparently produced such a slick suit that swimmers wearing it can move through the water with very little drag on their bodies. But not every swimmer has access to these speedy swimsuits, hence the controversy. Runners do something like this as well, wearing only lightweight bare essentials.

So Hebrews has this intriguing description of life with God and with Jesus Christ: those who are spiritual champions remove

anything that hinders them. They strip down to the bare essentials in their run to the finish line.

For us to remove the hindrances we must first **recognize** the things that hinder us. The *King James Version* of the Bible uses the word “weight” instead of “hindrance.” The *New American Standard Bible* calls it an “encumbrance.” Weights are not necessarily evil in themselves but they may impede our progress. They slow us down or distract our focus from the goal or finish line in our spiritual run to become champions. It’s like carrying a full backpack when you are trying to run. You may be able to do it when you are running a 100-metre dash, but you probably won’t win. And if you are running a marathon, you may not even finish. Following Jesus, as we have said, is like a marathon. So we must rid ourselves of unnecessary weights that slow us down if we wish to finish -- and finish well.

Now a weight for one person may not be the same for another. Think about the Old Testament witnesses Moses and Joseph mentioned in Hebrews. God did not use Moses in his royal position in Egypt to serve God’s people. Moses had to spend 40 years away from Egypt, working as a shepherd and learning some valuable lessons about faith and trust in God before God could use him the way God planned. However, God used Joseph in political leadership in ways he didn’t with Moses. To Moses, political leadership was a hindering weight while, for Joseph, being a government leader was a significant part of God’s direction in his long-distance run.

Hindrances for some of us may be obsessions or distractions that take so much of our time we have no time left for God: such as leisure, sports and entertainment, or workaholism, or material possessions, or technological toys. None of these are bad in themselves. That’s why each of us must honestly judge what

hinders our faith in God for ourselves and resolutely lay it aside, even though others seem to be unhindered by the same thing. We can't run well with a full backpack!

A hindrance is anything that pulls us away from God, causing us to stumble or fall. It could also be something intangible such as pride, anxiety, laziness, constant doubt. Any of these will certainly hinder our performance in a spiritual run. We need to recognize these hindrances before we can remove them. And when we are honest, most of us can readily identify at least some of the weights that are slowing down our Christian growth. But when we need help, here is a process to consider:

**First, we can sincerely inquire and honestly identify what hinders us.** We can engage in self-reflection. We can ask others. Certainly we can ask God. And as we ask in prayer and read the Bible, we will recognize what weighs us down.

**Second, we need to remove it.** Whatever it is, we need to grab it by the throat, throw it aside and find our true focus again. Especially if we want to run this long-distance life well.

But how do we need to get rid of it? I have been around long enough to know that although this process *could* be quick – like selling it or giving it away -- depending on the weight, it may also take time. And we may need counsel from people spiritually more discerning than ourselves, who love us and may see what we don't see or do not want to see. But we could always start by asking God how to remove it.

I have talked about getting rid of hindering weights but not yet about what the author of Hebrews calls “the sin that so easily entangles.” Here is the image underlying this sin: whatever it is, this sin is pictured as standing all around us. It is as if you and I

are in the middle of a ring of wild, snarling animals, each ready to pounce on us. Not a pleasant scene. The writer of Hebrews does not tell his readers here what this kind of sin is. But when we read the entire letter of Hebrews, we soon discover that the sin the author clearly and continually warned about is *an unbelief that can result in our drifting away from faith*. Chapter 2 of Hebrews in *The Message Bible* begins this way:

It's crucial that we keep a firm grip on what we've heard so that we don't drift off. If the old message delivered by the angels was valid and nobody got away with anything, do you think we can risk neglecting this latest message, *this magnificent salvation*? First of all, it was delivered in person by [Jesus], then accurately passed on to us by those who heard it from him.

Salvation is important throughout Scripture but, in Hebrews, it is especially central. Salvation marks what God has done in Jesus Christ whereby God accepts just the way we are. Through God's action in Jesus, we are in the process of being made whole, being healed of the damage sin causes and restored to the wonder of God's original good intentions for us and for the world. In Hebrews the author is aware his audience knows what the gospel is but they are easily distracted and deceived by "strange teachings" so they no longer trust the gospel.

I often wonder if "the sin that so easily entangles" us today, the sin standing all around us in this 21st century, especially in the Canadian church, comes close to the same sin in Hebrews. It seems everywhere we turn, whatever we read -- whether from authors outside the church or some scholars supposedly inside the faith -- we are being persistently called to disbelief in such a manner that we are paralyzed, disabled from sharing anything about our faith in Jesus. Jesus is no longer central to us as he once was and is meant to be. How can we go on believing what is

preached when everything around us seems to deny it? And too many simply drift away from Jesus Christ and hardly notice the growing distance.



**Jesus Preaching On The Mount, Gustave Doré**

If you have been a movie-goer, you are probably familiar with the Rocky films with Sylvester Stallone. The first movie was made in 1976 and the sixth and final one in 2006. The year 2006 held some surprises from Sylvester Stallone. First, he surprised the entertainment world by resurrecting his iconic movie hero, Rocky Balboa, for one last film. Then, while promoting the film, Stallone shocked Christian and non-Christian fans alike with the revelation that his faith in Jesus Christ had not only impacted the writing of the first Rocky film but also that his decision to create

the final movie was inspired by his renewed faith in following Jesus.

Stallone discussed both surprises in an interview. He said: "I was raised in a Catholic home, a Christian home. And I went to Catholic schools and I was taught the faith and went as far as I could with it. Until one day, I got out into the so-called real world, and I was presented with temptation. I kinda, like, lost my way and made a lot of bad choices."

But, Stallone added, those choices ultimately left him unsatisfied, especially his decision to place fame and career ahead of his family. As a result, he refocused on his Christian heritage. "The more I go to church," he says now, "and the more I turn myself over to the process of believing in Jesus and listening to his word and having him guide my hand, I feel as though the pressure is off me now."

As part of this transformation, Stallone realized another poor choice that had guided his previous life: self-reliance. He said: "You need to have the expertise and the guidance of someone else. You cannot train yourself. I feel the same way about Christianity and about what the church is: the church is the gym of the soul."

I like Stallone's description but I would express it a little differently. The church is God's people helping each other lift off and throw off the hindrances slowing us down in our faith and the sin that causes us to drift away from our relationship with Jesus.

Sometimes we need to intentionally refocus our lives. Sometimes we need to change some things in our lives to focus more on God. And sometimes we need a nudge in our commitments or recommitments to God. In the Old Testament, there were

occasions when the people made a pile of stones in a certain place to remind them of what God had done for them or to remember commitments they had made to God. We did something like this the first Sunday in January this year. There are some smooth stones on the stand here at the front. If you so wish, you are welcome to take a stone and place it in the baptismal font as a sign and reminder of the commitment or recommitment you are making to God. You are also welcome to take a stone home with you to help you think about the weight or sin you need to get rid of. And the good news is Jesus promises that, when we reach out in faith, God will be with us through the Holy Spirit to help us.

**Life is a Long-Distance Run: Go for the Goal!**

**3. “Run With Endurance”**

Hebrews 11:1-2, 39-40; 12:1-4

What does it mean to endure, to persevere, to run with determination – as the various translations put Hebrews 12, verse 1? There are different ways to look at what this means.

Two frogs fell into a can of cream, Or so I’ve heard it told.  
The sides of the can were shiny and steep,  
The cream was deep and cold.  
“Oh, what’s the use?” croaked number one.  
“Tis fate, no help’s around.  
Goodbye, my friend! Good-bye, sad world!”  
And weeping still, he drowned.  
But number two, of sterner stuff, Dog-paddled in surprise.  
The while he wiped his creamy face,  
And dried his creamy eyes.  
“I’ll swim awhile at least,” he said, Or so I’ve heard he said;  
“It really wouldn’t help the world, If one more frog were dead.”  
An hour or two he kicked and swam,  
Not once he stopped to mutter,  
But kicked and kicked and swam and kicked,  
Then --- hopped out ----- via butter!

And you know, it was only by perseverance that the snail reached the ark!

Babe Ruth was called the *Sultan of Swat*. He knew about perseverance playing baseball. To achieve his 714 home runs, he also struck out 1,330 times. But he just kept on swinging!

A teenager decided to quit high school, saying he was fed up with it all. His father tried to convince him to stay at school. “Son,” he said, “you can’t quit. All the people who are remembered in history didn’t quit. Abe Lincoln, he didn’t quit. Thomas Edison, he didn’t quit. Frederick Banting, he didn’t quit. Elmo McCringle...”

“Who?” the son burst in. “Who’s Elmo McCringle?”

“See,” the father replied, “you don’t remember him. He quit!”

Thomas Edison gave us some wise thoughts regarding failure and perseverance. It is said that the famous inventor made thousands of trials before he got his celebrated electric light to operate. One day, a workman to whom he had given a task said, “Mr. Edison, it cannot be done.” To which Edison responded, “How often have you tried?” The man replied, “About two thousand times.” Edison said, “Go back and try two thousand times more; you have only found that there are two thousand ways in which it cannot be done.”

Let’s hear again the Scripture from Hebrews Chapter 12 verses one to three.

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses round us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination [with perseverance] the race that lies before us. <sup>2</sup>Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right-hand side of God’s throne. <sup>3</sup>Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from

sinner! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up.

Two weeks ago we talked about remembering the witnesses – those individuals in the Scripture in Hebrews Chapter 11. These were mostly ordinary women and men who did extraordinary things as a result of their faith in God. Others, because of their faith in God, were persecuted even to death. Yet Scripture says, “What a record all of these have won by their faith!” Then last week we looked at removing anything that hinders our following God -- hindrances that weigh us down, distract us and lead us in the wrong direction – away from God instead of toward Him. Both messages are available on the table in the lounge for your further meditation. Remembering the witnesses and removing any hindrances are two ways that empower us to run this race of life with endurance – with perseverance, with determination..

But there is more to consider as we run this long-distance race of life. I hope you caught this sentence in Chapter 12: “let us run with determination – perseverance -- the race that lies before us.” This morning we’re going to ponder these two elements: 1. The race that lies before us and 2. Running the race with perseverance.

**The race that lies before us.** We each have a course stretched out ahead of us in life. And the course for each of us is unique. For some life is relatively straight, for others life is all turns, for still others life seems all uphill. Do any find life to be easy -- a flat hiking path? Most are long, but some are longer. But the glory is, each of us (no exceptions!) can finish the race “that lies before us.” And we all can choose to finish well.

Now I cannot run your course nor you mine. But I can finish my race and you can finish yours. Both of us can finish well if we

choose -- and if we rely on Jesus Christ who both began and finished the race like the one we are in. He is our strength, our guide and our companion!

In our lives, we can experience a similar satisfaction to the Apostle Paul's as he neared the finish line of his race:

I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. And now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the [honest] Judge, will give me on that Day—and not only to me, but to all those who wait with love for him to appear. (2 Timothy 4:7, 8)

In 1940, Clarence Jordan founded *Koinonia Farm* in Americus, Georgia, as a haven for racial unity and cooperation. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home.

In the midst of the raid, Jordan recognized the voice of a local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter showed up for a story about the arson while the rubble was still smoldering. He found Jordan in a field, planting seeds. He said to Jordan, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued prodding him with questions but with no response from Jordan. Finally, the reporter said, "You've got two PhD's, you've put 14 years into this farm and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

With that statement, Jordan stopped hoeing. He said to the reporter: "You just don't get it, do you? You don't understand us Christians. What we are about is not success, but faithfulness."

To be faithful to God in our lives means running with perseverance -- with endurance. To be faithful means enduring the worst life throws at us. To persevere includes staying the course and starting all over again as Clarence Jordan did -- if that is what it takes.

**Running with perseverance.** Let me tell you the story of Bill Broadhurst. In 1981 Bill entered the Pepsi Challenge 10,000-metre race in Omaha, Nebraska. In 1971 he had had surgery for an aneurysm in the brain that left him paralyzed on his left side. But, 10 years later, Bill stood with 1,200 agile men and women waiting for the race to begin.

The starting gun sounded! The runners surged forward. Bill threw his stiff left leg forward, pivoting on it as his foot hit the ground. His slow plop—plop—plop rhythm seemed to mock him as the rest of the runners raced ahead into the distance. Sweat rolled down his face, pain pierced his ankle, but he kept going. Some of the runners completed the race in about 30 minutes. But it took Bill almost three hours before he reached the finish line. From the small group of remaining bystanders, a man stepped out and approached the exhausted runner. Bill recognized the man as marathon record holder Bill Rodgers, who had won medals in both the Boston and New York City marathons. Bill Rodgers then did something remarkable. He took his newly won medal and draped it around Bill Broadhurst's neck. Why did he do that? Because Broadhurst finished the race, and his finish, though he finished last, was as glorious as that of the world's greatest. Why? Because he ran with perseverance. His determination was deliberate and steady and he refused to be distracted from his intended goal. No obstacle could deter this determination nor could any discouragement take his hope away and nothing was going to make him quit.

It is quite within the reach of every one of us to live with positive, preserving patience –even if it feels as if we are struggling to put one heavy foot in front of the other until we reach the finish line. The race in life is not for sprinters who flame out after 100 metres or 200 or 400 meters. It is for faithful plodders like you and me. Fast or slow, strong or weak -- all of us can persevere and finish well.

**Only one focus can make consistent endurance possible.** You won't be surprised when I tell you the focus is Jesus -- our Good Shepherd. The *Message Bible* puts the first few verses of Hebrews Chapter 12 this way:

Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed -- that exhilarating finish in and with God -- he could put up with anything along the way: [the] Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honour, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility [Jesus] plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

If we want to expand upon what our congregation's mission statement really means when we say we exist to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we certainly must take seriously this Scripture in Hebrews. "Keep your eyes on Jesus," we are told. In fact, this is the central theme of Hebrews. Throughout Hebrews, we hear the theme stated in various ways: "But we see Jesus ..." (Chapter 2 verse 9); "fix your thoughts on Jesus..." (Chapter 3 verse 1); "since we have a great high priest [Jesus]... let us then approach [God's] throne of grace with confidence" (Chapter 4 verses 14 and 16). Remember, the author of Hebrews says, Remember the

witness of those who have gone ahead of us for they can inspire us, encourage us and bring us hope by their example. But, above them all and above all else, we are being challenged to fix our attention on Jesus, for he can do what no one else can.

He can inspire faith in us and he can bring our faith to a successful finish and bring us into God's presence now and at the end of our lives. In fact, that was Jesus' greatest joy! To be with his Father! And to make it possible for us to be there too! That's why he could endure the Cross and its shame – whatever it took to finish well and be with God again. And since his resurrection from the dead, Jesus is now waiting for us when we reach the goal. And through the Holy Spirit he is also with us daily – every hour, every minute, every second as we open ourselves to him -- to strengthen our faith in the midst of life – “to shoot adrenaline into our souls” as *The Message Bible* put it. So when we find ourselves flagging in our faith, we must go over Jesus' story again and again – line by line, event by event – even the long hard times of hostility he plowed through. Yes, we do look at other men and women of faith for inspiration and encouragement, but then or perhaps even first we look higher -- to Jesus.

That's why we take the Scripture seriously here. That's why we encourage each other to read the Bible. It is through placing ourselves in God's presence as we read and listen to the Scripture that we can experience the love of God, the grace of Jesus and the companionship of the Holy Spirit. And we can also experience God's gracious love by coming together -- worshipping God and sharing our lives together, praying for and caring for one another. This fall we are making plans for us to learn more, to respond more to Jesus the Good Shepherd and to continue to open ourselves to serve our local and global communities. Watch for these opportunities.

The 2008 Olympics are going strong in Beijing. Each athlete has trained hard and long and with passionate determination to achieve his and her hopes and dreams. If they were not passionate, they would have great difficulty persevering as they do. Did you see the women finishing the marathon yesterday at the Olympics? You could see the determination, the perseverance and the endurance etched on their faces as they crossed the finish line. There is a lesson here for going for the goal in our long-distance run in life. Mark Boswell, a Canadian 2008 Olympic high jumper expresses his passion and perseverance this way:

“Be serious.”

“Be focused.”

“Go hard.”

Remember the Marathon of Hope Terry Fox ran in 1980? His goal was to run a marathon – 26 miles – every day across Canada. He certainly was serious, focused on his goal to raise money for cancer research and he ran hard every day. He certainly showed determination, perseverance and endurance as he ran across the country.



### **Terry Fox Marathon of Hope Memorial, Thunder Bay**

And although he wasn't the fastest or the smoothest runner, and although he didn't make it to the west coast, who would not say that Terry finished his race well and reached his goal, accomplishing even more than he had planned or every knew in the end.

Leslie Scrivener, a journalist with the *Toronto Star*, covered the Terry Fox Marathon of Hope. She wrote at the time of his death:

Terry was uncommonly blessed with hope. He refused to be humbled by the disease burgeoning inside him. Even if cancer did claim him, Terry believed he was still a winner. There was no other way he could look at his life. In 22 years, he had contributed more – materially and spiritually – than many who live to a gentle old age. Terry

wouldn't want us to weep for him; he'd want us to hear his message and be uplifted.

Then she quotes Terry Fox:

“I don't care what percentages the doctor tells me I have. If God is true I know I've got 100 per cent, if that's what He has in His plans for me. And if I really believe and if God is really there, then I'm not going to lose even if I die, because it's supposed to be the Pearly Gates I'm going through, and if heaven is there, I can't lose out!”

So let us too

“be serious” about our relationship with God

“be focused” on Jesus and

“go hard” no matter the hardships we face in this life  
for we know that, with God, we cannot lose out in the end!

God wants us to finish this race of life and finish it well. So let us run with perseverance the race that is stretching out before us however long and successful or arduous it may be. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. When we do, that will shoot adrenaline into your souls and mine! Amen.



**Oriole-York Mills United Church, Rear View**