

Wednesday Online Message – The Finish Line
Acts 17:22-31
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
May 20, 2020 (Online Only)

On Sunday our first reading was from Acts chapter 17:22-31, where the apostle Paul is preaching to a crowd of people in the great Greek city of Athens. If you weren't able to read it, please take some time to let it sink in. It's one of my favorite passages from Acts, but I didn't get to preach on it, so now I'd like to get into it a little bit. As an introduction, I want to share with you about one of my old friends who has always excelled in everything she's done. In high school she won awards for piano and vocals. She was the most valuable player on the girls' basketball team, she played the lead role in school plays and musicals, she was popular and attractive. Straight As. Everyone admired her, but they admired her from kind of far off. Few of us really knew her well. She was always friendly and nice. But you always got the impression when you talked to her that she was on her way to some better location. You looked at her and what you saw was a great future, but in the here and now, she had a way of keeping people at arm's length.

A few years back, I caught up with her at a funeral. We were standing in a long line together, and we ended up having a surprisingly candid conversation. She told me about how she had gone on to college, had kept up her straight "A's." But she said once she graduated, it was like the bottom fell out of her life. She went through a major crisis: suddenly it was like she didn't know who she was. She described how her whole life had become like a race, and she couldn't see the finish line anymore. You go through one competition, you win or you lose, and then you start another. You try to be the best you can be, you take what you've got and improve upon it, and then you move on to another project. What's the goal? She woke up one morning and found herself totally alone. She was always trying to "make the grade" with herself and the people around her. Her life had become a race with the world. And she wondered, who am I trying to beat? She realized she was running alone.

I've known a lot of people like her...I've been there myself. You feel like you're running and running, but you've lost your way home. Now, in Acts chapter 17, Paul is talking to this crowd in Athens; and I think they are a perfect picture of where a lot of people in our country are today. These are gentile people who have never heard of Jesus. They have no real substantive knowledge of Judaism or Christianity at all. They might have heard of them, but it's all more academic to them. But here's the thing: are these horrible people? Are they barbaric pagans steeped in ignorance and living destructive lifestyles? No. If anything, these are overachievers. Athens was a center of culture, religion, art, and philosophy in the Roman Empire. The people listening to Paul are educated, good, upstanding, righteous citizens.

And Paul tells them right out, "I see how very religious you are in every way." He sees a bunch of people who are reaching beyond themselves all the time. He sees these people who are trying to better themselves, trying to find the truth, trying to find the secret, the code, the formula which will lead to fulfillment, truth and life. And Paul sees the hidden hand of God working in these people's lives. Whenever you see someone like my friend from school, winning piano contests and getting straight "A's" and trying to be the best she can be...you know God's hidden power is at work there. As Paul says in the passage, God calls us to reach beyond ourselves, to improve ourselves, and he calls us to moral responsibility. There is no one in the world who does not feel that pressure from God, who created them.

But what if you feel that pressure, and you don't know where it's coming from, or where it's leading you? Paul basically tells the Athenians, all your struggling and striving, all your attempts to better yourselves, all the good grades and wisdom, are signs that you sense God's call in your life, to be more than what you are. You're racing and racing, but you feel you can't get to the finish line. You know God's pressure on you, but you don't know God.

You and I know how the work routine, the school routine--even the family routine--can become a burden. You and I know how life sometimes is a very grueling race. People will tell us to stop and smell the flowers, but the fact is, sometimes it's all brambles and thorns. Sometimes it seems that our efforts are getting us nowhere, that no matter how hard we work, our lives are draining away. And without God, our reaction is either to work harder and grasp for even more control of our lives, or...we give up. My friend, for example, was trying so hard, running so fast...but when she realized the finish line was nowhere in sight, she dropped out of the race. As she expressed it, God had forced her out of the race. She had to start thinking about the "WHY" behind her efforts. Her extreme talent, her wisdom and her intelligence weren't getting her there. So she was forced to grasp hold of something else. She told me God had forced her to grasp hold of what her parents and Sunday School teachers had given her. She grasped hold of Jesus Christ. The way, the truth, and the life.

She experienced the truth of what Paul was telling the people of Athens: The same God who calls us to the race has now in Jesus Christ given us the finish line and the total victory. When you're in the race, trying your hardest, reading all the instructions and the self-help books, it's good to know what lies at the finish line. As far as this broken world goes, without Christ, the finish line is a cross. If you're running on your own, this is where all your wisdom and intelligence and talent, and all the advice from the books, gets you...to a cross. This is where all the Athenians' religiosity will get them, too...to a cross. And this is where a lot of people turn around. They would rather grasp hold of an idol that gives false promises than face the humiliation, the failure, the truth, of the cross.

But you and I see something very different in the cross. A God who loves us. The cross is where God reveals himself once and for all. And instead of seeing our failure, our dashed hopes, our loneliness in that cross, we witness something beautiful. We see God turning our cross of death and failure into the tree of life and hope. You and I don't just see a finish line in that cross. We find a new starting point that we can live out of every day. For us, everything starts with God's abundant grace.

My friend is now running the race as well as ever. She still has to tell herself to slow down at times. And she does. She knows now that she's not running alone. She knows a Lord who gives her beautiful gifts along the way...who gives her a meaningful job and a family and friends and people all around her to love freely and completely. Who gives her his meal, who feeds her from the tree of life. I really don't think she'll ever slow down. But she is running free, because she knows where life begins, and she knows the One in whom it all ends.

What a difference for us, knowing how our race is going to end. Knowing who runs with us from starting gate all the way to the finish line! A Lord who will pour his own life into us, whether we excel or whether we fall down. What freedom that should give us, to run the race, to love our neighbors as well and as generously as we can, and to never give up on the race. What a difference it makes, knowing that as you run and run for God, God has not held back. If you have Christ, you already have the final prize.