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The Race
Hebrews 11:29-12:3

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners,^[c] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

**I just got back from a great conference in Dallas, last night.
*Ever feel a little harried? Too busy?***

Dumb question, right?

Seems like ***all of us*** are too busy—with just about everything, right?

Work, school, in the community, and especially, at home.

And our kids are just as busy as adults, right?

We are busy people.

And we are ***competitive!***

Seems that's part of modern life too,

We're supposed to Run, run, run, and be MORE busy than all the other people running around like chickens with their heads cut off!

So when we hear about ***RUNNING*** a race of faith—

well, it kind of makes me want a ***nap***, how about you?

So what is Hebrews 12 really saying to us?

And what on earth does it have to do with John 15?

Is this about running and doing, staying busy with our faith?

Are we supposed to ***add 'do more for God'*** to our already long list of jobs?

What kind of 'race' of faith is this?

Well, as we read this, we picture a ***marathon***, not a sprint.

And we see that it requires some important things—

like ***patience, perseverance, and preparation.***

It also says we have to ***let go of anything*** that hinders our faith, any weight or sin that is holding us back.

Hmm....

This 'race' is Sounding ***more and more like the John 15 passage***.
He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit.Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Truth is, Hebrews 12 is really about an ***odd race***.

Because what is ***NOT mentioned?***

Something we would assume?

There is ***NO mention of competition!***

With anyone!

Think about that for a minute.

This is a NOT a competition!!!

There's not a first, second, or even a 'last' place.

This weekend I was at a ***missions conference*** in Dallas sponsored by our *Synod of the Sun, and NEXT church*, and the title was ***'Cultivated Ministry'***.

Which doesn't sound anything like a race.

And it's not, exactly.

But it is a way of ***doing, and evaluating mission and ministry—***
 in our ***lives, and in our churches***.

It's ***NOT about competition***.

Competition among Christians and churches is really common,
 believe it or not!

We love to compare, and label one another.

And what do we use to compare ourselves?

Usually we use the ***3 Bs*** ---

Buildings, Bucks, and Butts (in the pews)!

We compare our ***buildings, our money, and our # of people***, right?

We judge our 'success' on those things!

Which, when you think about it, Is pretty crazy.

Cultivated ministry is about looking at mission and ministry

The same way we look at ***fruit on a vine***.

Which is why I asked Melissa to read John 15!

Jesus said...I am the vine, you are the branches.

*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing*

Cultivated Ministry—***says we are here to grow fruit,
good fruit, fruit that will last,***

Which IS ***NOT the same thing*** as the 3 Bs!

Which is not to say that facilities,
and money, and # of people don't matter,
It's just that those are ***not the metrics***
to measure the success of faith and ministry!

There is such a thing ***as spiritual success,***

Even when the bank account is small,

And the building is tiny,

And the volunteers are few!

It's called BEARING FRUIT---GOOD FRUIT!

What if, instead of calling something successful—we called it fruitful?

This life of faith,

A ***ministry that is cultivated like Jesus wants for us,***

Is about asking ***whether what we have is growing, like fruit on a vine.***

It's about asking what we might need to ***prune,***

Or what branches need to be ***thrown away,***

so that new, good fruit can grow.

Do you see the difference?

We usually focus on the ***numbers.***

We usually frame everything with ***winners and losers,***

But if we look at ministry and mission ***the way Jesus did—***

Talking about seeds in the ground and branches on a vine,

we have to use some ***different ways of doing, and evaluating ministry.***

So at this great conference,
we talked about how to evaluate good fruit,
 And how to *prune,*
 And how to *let go of some branches.*
Instead of just focusing on the 3 Bs, or looking solely at numbers!

It's a *totally different way of doing and evaluating ministry!*
 And it's *very close to the heart of Jesus.*
 It's what Jesus is talking about in *John 15.*
 But it's also about *running the race of faith, with our eyes on Jesus!*

This is not to say that there are no metrics to measure ministry,
 Or measure the life of faith.
 Anything that is truly important can be measured!

We do look at 3 things:
 Our *Input*—resources of people, money, time, etc.
 Our *output*—what we want to end up with
 And our *Impact*---why this matters,
 what a difference this makes in our community!

And when we serve, we ideally *think about the end before begin.*

For instance---*if we want to give youth a safe place and good relationships,*
 We use that goal to help us figure out
how and where and when we do ministry for youth!

We have to look at things like what *resources* we have,
 And what we want to do as an '*output*' of *ministry* for them,
 In order to achieve that *impact of creating a safe space and good relationships.*

Right now, we are in the process of *re-envisioning the Youth Café,*
 It will not open the same.
 We feel God wants us to transform it into something *new and different,*
Pruning the old format,
 because we want something that *bears even more fruit!*
 Which is not just about any numbers.

It's about ***faithfulness*** to our mission of loving God and neighbor.
Especially the youth of our community!

In order to do that,
We are going to use the ***resources*** we do have,
To set up shop on the church lawn once a week for several weeks,
In order to ***hear the stories*** of young people,
And ***what they desire for that safe, welcoming space.***

Our hope is that God will lead us to use the
Resources we have,
To ***create something new*** in the place of the old Youth Café,
In order to serve the Youth of this community!

It's exciting, and scary, right?

It's easier to just close the old mission,
and say—well, that didn't work the way we wanted.

But ***is that running*** the race of faith with our eyes on Jesus?
Is that abiding in Jesus, so that we grow fruit, good fruit?

At this Missions conference,
We also talked about the importance of
theology---the God reasons---behind our service.
The faith that undergirds it.

We talked about the importance of ***mutual accountability***—
how we will hold ourselves accountable to each other
and our community.

We talked about the importance of ***learning*** as we go.
Which means things like: ***failure isn't really failure,***
it's just a new ***opportunity*** to learn and grow!

So, when we evaluate ministry,
When we ask ourselves---was this successful?
We don't just count the ***number of people*** who came,
the ***amount of money*** we used or raised,
or the ***size of the ministry!***

***Instead we ask important questions like,
Why*** are we doing this?
How does this ***matter?***
And what ***Impact*** are we making?

Instead of just looking at ***statistics,***
we make a point to hear people's STORIES.
Which is different, and more challenging,
But also so much more rewarding!

We learned that
theology, accountability, learning, and storytelling
are ways of cultivating ministry,
And ***bearing fruit is a great image for ministry and mission---***
Running the race with eyes on Jesus is too!

All of that is ***different than competing*** for ***bucks, butts, and buildings!***
It's different than ***comparing*** ourselves to every other church!
Its different than ***complaining*** about what we don't have!

Because that is so often our ***default,*** isn't it?
Usually we ***compare ourselves to other people.***
Oh, she is a much stronger Christian than I am.
God must listen to his prayers more than mine.
I could never serve the way she does.
I don't have that kind of time, or energy, or money...
the list goes on, right?

And we do the same thing in ***our churches,*** don't we?
We ***compare ourselves to the bigger churches,***
and think we are inferior, or less than.
How many times have any of us said—
We don't have enough ***people,***
We don't have enough ***money,***
We don't have enough ***kids and youth.***
We don't have a ***big facility.***

But Jesus tells us that ***he is the vine, and we ARE the branches***,
 He doesn't say if you have enough
 butts, bucks and buildings—you are the branches!!!

No, he says YOU ARE the branches, I am the vine.
Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.

I think this is exactly what ***Hebrews is talking about*** when it says
let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,
looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith!

Just like we are ***supposed to be branches bearing fruit***,
 We are also supposed to be ***people running a race with our***
eyes on Jesus!

Growing Fruit.

Running with our eyes on Jesus.

This is different than a competition to see who is better,
 Or who is the best, whatever that means!

And there's something amazing in the race of faith!

Not only are we not to compete, or compare,
 Or Complain about what we don't have,
 Or what we cannot do,

But instead----we keep on going because,
 We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.
 Which means we have ***a whole bunch of people, a cloud of witnesses,***
cheering us on, and encouraging us all along the way!

These are the people ***who have been running the race of faith*** before us,
 just like we read about in Hebrews 11—
 also known as the 'Hall of Faith",
 These are our Biblical ancestors,
 But it also includes all our loved ones who have gone before us—
 The witnesses are all of the saints!

What if we lived like people who believed this?

What if we lived like people who ***knew that they are being cheered*** and encouraged in each step of faith?

What if we lived like people who are not in a competition of winners and losers,
If we were ***NOT churches in competition*** with one another?

What if we ***really believed***, deep down inside our hearts,
That we are called to bear fruit?
Good fruit? Fruit that lasts?

If we lived this way,
***We wouldn't ever have to worry about what our neighbor is doing---
only what WE are doing.***

So, ideally ***we are people who are abiding in Jesus.***
Or as Hebrews says, we are people
with our eyes on Jesus!

It's all too easy to measure success the way the world does.
Super Christians, and the rest of us.
Winners and Losers.
Big churches and Small ones.

But in this race it's ***not about some of us 'winning' and others 'losing'.***
Our ***goal*** is to make it to the end,
not beat someone else!
That's important to think about, in our current ***culture.***

I was reading in the *Christian Century* July 3, 2019,
about '***zero sum game theory***', and ***zero-sum logic.***
There's a lot of it in our world today.

It goes like this:
One party's gain, requires the other party's loss.
Every time there is a winner, and there is a loser.
If I have something, you don't get any.

In our culture right now, is this idea that
somebody must win and somebody must lose,
 in EVERY economic, legislative, and political decision.

Peter Marty, "Zero Sum Living", The Christian Century July 3, 2019,

It's Zero-sum logic.

And to be blunt, it's ridiculous.

It's not a great idea, or theory.

And definitely not of Jesus.

Although ***some Christians do espouse*** this thinking,

That my joyous salvation means others don't get saved, etc...

Zero-sum logic is about ***scarcity***, there's only so much to go around...

That's not God, my friends.

Our God is a God of ***abundance***.

Our Savior causes us to bear fruit!

There is NOT only so much love to go around!

To give, is to receive.

To shower others with blessing, is to be blessed.

We don't have to have 'winners' and 'losers' in this race of faith,

We don't have to compete as fruit on the vine!

God's race of faith is not about 'winning' and others 'losing'.

It's about ***finishing***.

It's about ***keeping our eyes*** on Jesus.

Remember when ***Jesus called Peter to walk to him out on the water?***

And Peter stepped out of the boat,

and he actually walked on water out to Jesus,

but the minute he took his eyes off of Jesus,

the minute he paid more attention to the wind and waves than his Savior,
 what happened?

He started to sink, and Jesus came to the rescue.

This race of faith ***works when we keep our eyes on Jesus---***

Our leader, our Savior, our reason for running the race at all.

And this race of faith is about one thing:

JOY.

Listen again to Hebrews:

looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of ^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

³ *Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, ^[c] so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

The journey of faith,
This life on the vine,
Has a purpose----

And that purpose is to bring us joy!

That's what the ***cheering section is all about too!***
It's all about finding joy!

When I compare that to the rat race of the world,
I want this race of faith.
I want to live in the vine, close to Jesus, abiding in Him.

I want to be ***a branch that bears fruit***,
And a ***runner that keeps her eyes on the prize***,
The person who makes all this possible!

I'm sure not saying this is easy—

if you read any of the stories of the Biblical ancestors mentioned in Hebrews 11, you will learn that this race is challenging, some days it will make you cry, or even want to give up.

That's why we ***have to keep our eyes on Jesus***.

Because Jesus faced temptation, ridicule, discouragement and betrayal, torture and crucifixion,
He cried.

But he didn't give up.
He ran the race---why?

For the joy!

I'm not a runner, so I don't really know what runners go through,
 but I have heard of a runner's 'high'—
 that place where the adrenaline is pumping,
 and the joy of running overcomes the pain.

What if we could have that JOY?

Jesus' joy came from knowing His Father's love.
It didn't come from a stable home,
 or steady income, a respectable job, a nice house or even a family.
 It didn't come from a giant synagogue and lots of disciples!
 His joy came from abiding, in His Father's love.

So what do you say?
Are you ready to run THIS race of faith?
Are you ready to bear FRUIT on the vine?

There's ***no competition, no comparisons***
 There's just ***each one of us, and Jesus.***
 And a ***whole crowd of witnesses, cheering us on!***

I don't know about you, but I think that sounds wonderful!
 And that is our ***Good News of the Gospel today!***

Let us ***run the race*** set before us---with our eyes on Jesus.
 Let us stay so close to Jesus, that ***our lives bear fruit,***
 And let us have ***hope,*** that no matter what happens,
We will find the JOY!

And to that, all God's people said, Amen.

