

***Sermon***

***Pentecost 10 Year C August 18, 2019***

***Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Charleston, SC***

***The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder***

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Often, when I leave the office at the church, I wind up sitting in bumper to bumper traffic on the Ravenel Bridge. Traffic patterns in Charleston are very difficult to predict, which makes it almost impossible to know the best time of day to try and leave the city. And of course, often we do not have the luxury of a choice. Sitting on that bridge in the late afternoon or early evening, one gets to watch the vast number of people walking, jogging, running, bicycling, and pushing strollers from one side of the Cooper River to the other. But what I have mostly noticed are all those people running at a good pace, something that I was once as well capable of in my younger years. Now, bad knees and a hurting hip probably from all that running I did, keep me from even

pretending to be that young again. Perhaps, this sounds familiar to you?

Within the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the book of Hebrews we read: “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” Hebrews was a letter written sometime between 60 and 70 CE, with only speculation as to who was its author. Some believe it was Paul, but other scholars suggest Luke, Barnabas, or Apollo. Throughout, it is a letter of encouragement and inspiration written to the early Jewish believers in Jesus who were now suffering from persecution and hardships for their Christian faith. Certainly, many were considering returning to their original faith, and some in fact did.

The image that became clear to me as I pondered this passage anew is that no matter our age, physical condition, or ability, all of us until our last breath are “running” this race on the Christian spiritual journey. Whether with our legs, or with a walker, or with a wheelchair, or in our easy chairs, the race to which God calls us is a lifelong one. And, this presents a real challenge and an

opportunity for us as individuals and the corporate community of faith.

Within his book, The Future of Faith, Harvey Cox, Professor of Divinity at Harvard, writes, “Despite the imaginary pasts they sometimes contrive, all these denominations agree on one thing. What Christianity should be doing today, and tomorrow must continue what Jesus and those who immediately followed were doing; otherwise it has become something different.” (p.56) So, what is it that we should be doing as individuals and as a community of faith?

As an Episcopal priest who has served six parishes over these 34-years of ordination, this continues to be a front and center challenge to my call and ministry. And, I believe that each of you visits and revisits this very question over and over again; “what should I be doing within and for my Christian faith?” Certainly, both American and world culture have changed dramatically during this period. Less people now identify with either a denomination or a particular community of faith. Gone are the days when one could open the doors of the church and fill the pews on a Sunday, because attendance was an expected norm of

you as a Christian; on Sundays, you went to church. Yet, despite this new challenge to both the Christian faith and the Church, I have found it to be an exciting time to be rethinking both the nature, meaning, and practice of our faith. It is if you will, a time in which we are rediscovering the roots and purpose of the Church that was founded and ordained by God in Christ Jesus. This is a time that we must now run the particular race that is set before us, and I sense that those that are now within our churches get this truth.

Today, the Church must be about reclaiming the call of Jesus to both form and strengthen communities of faith around his teachings, truth, and love. In 2019, both the country and the world hunger for such teachings, such truth, and just such a love. So, no matter your physical ability and stage in life, what God is asking of you, what God is asking of us is to “run the race” that both claims and enacts the teachings and love of Christ Jesus. This was indeed the overriding message of the early Church that caused the Christian faith to spread and take hold of the world. Can we live up to this challenge?

I have shared with you before, that I have had both the privilege and what has seemed to be an unusual number of times even for a priest, the experience of being with beloved parishioners and family members such as my mother and father, at the time of their death. And what I have witnessed with each of these souls and in each of these times, is the reality that they were still running the race of faith right up until their time of passing into eternal life. What I have imagined is that this passing, their death, happens at the moment that they cross the finish line. Of course, all of these experiences have been with people who were believers and followers of Jesus seeking to live the life of his call. And, perhaps above all else that is what God is asking of us; to actively live the words we read in the book of Hebrews until our very last breath to: “run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” I ask of you, will you run this race with me? And remember, that God loves you as one of his beloved on every step of this race...