

Hebrews 11: 29 – 12:2
 10th Sunday after Pentecost
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Mt. Hope LC – El Paso Texas
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*May your written word be our guide,
 Your Holy Spirit, Our teacher
 And Your glory our supreme concern.*

You wouldn't know it today....but a number of years ago....
 I was a triathalon guy.

I did three of them in Ohio.....
 If I could fit into my triathalon tee- shirts.....I would do it... But luck for you....I
 don't! Sadly, I've lost my Olympian physique.....and I don't know where it's
 gone.

The Triathalons were in Crestline Ohio.....

- They weren't Iron Man triathalons..... which consist of a 2.4 mile swim, a
 112 mile bike ride, and a 26.3 mile run.
- Mine was a little less.
- I described it as a triathalon for wimps!

There was a 1 mile swim, a 25 mile bike ride, and a 7 mile run.

- And it was no piece of cake.

Swimming was the easiest for me.....I would practice at the Shelby Y throughout
 the winter....swimming a couple of miles....in my speedo....which my wife thought
 I looked pretty good in....I'm happy to report.

Then came bicycling.....when it came spring.....I would ride by old, very heavy
 Schwinn bike to the Shelby Y.....put in my swimming... and then ride 10 miles
 back. I always took pretty much a leisurely approach to bicycling.....I enjoy
 looking at the Ohio farm fields....smelling the countryside....feeling the breeze
 against my face.

And then came the running.....and you know.....that was always a little
 problem.....because after swimming and biking.....I was a pretty tired guy....

- And I always said to myself.....Oh you can practice running the next time.
- And I rationalized it this way: "Wayne, you do a pretty good job running
 5 miles on the days when you aren't swimming or biking.....
- So....Wayne....it shouldn't be a big problem.

Well, the big triathalon came.....and the swimming part was a breeze for me....I
 was among the first five out of this large lake.

- I blew kisses to my wife and our two year old first born son....and they
 shouted "Hurrah!"

Then came the biking!

- My strategy for biking on my old Schwinn.....was to take it easy!
- Enjoy yourself Wayne! Appreciate the beautiful Ohio (hilly) countryside!, Revel in nature!
- Well.....it was at this point that a lot of people began to pass me in their shiny, sleek, \$3,000 racing bikes.....
- It looked like they were pedaling effortlessly as they passed me!
- And I noticed that the biking course was a lot more hilly than the one that I had practiced on.....which was pretty flat.....really flat.

I eventually made it back to the depot.....where I would leave my old Schwinn behind and begin running.....

- And there was my lovely wife waiting for me.....with Soren our 1 year old son in her arms.....
- And they were yelling: "Hurrah for Wayne!"
- "Hurrah for Papa! Keep it up! Keep it going!"
- I told Christa that I thought I heard her say to our one year old son: "I wonder what took Papa so long!" (which was not helpful!)

And then I got off my bike.....and I felt as if my feet were in concrete blocks! It was difficult even just walking.....

- I said to Christa: "Something has happened to my legs.... They are not moving....."
- And I wanted to quit....
- But I knew I couldn't stop there....with Christa and my 1 year old son looking at me....I wouldn't want to disappoint my family....
- And then there was the crowd.....all around! Yelling....you can do it! You trained for this! (I told them...that they were mistaken and I definitely had not!)
- But they kept on encouraging me.....

And I took off! Limping.....but settled into a very slow and awkward trot.....

- And off I went.....7 long.....15 minute miles.....and oh did my legs hurt....and this course was a little bit more hilly than the biking course....."Undulating" is the word that comes to mind

And I made it to the stadium.....and I was going to walk in...not run....

But there was a guy with a video camera..... filming me....yelling:

- "You can do it! Go for it!"

And I did not want to be seen.....or my children to see me....walking to the finish line.....or national news!

- So I kept running!well..... somewhat running.

And up in front of me where the men and women and boys and girls who had finished hours before me.....and there they were..... cheering me on!

- You can finish! You have the strength to do! Run hard!

And there were the spectators now....on the side of the track yelling and clapping their hands..... and there at last was the **finishing line!**

- Go for it!
- You're looking good! (I rolled my eyes to that one)...
- GREAT JOB!

WOW! And I did it.....and my legs nearly collapsed....but they didn't.

- And there was my wife and 1 year old son....
- Clapping there hands.....yelling "Go Papa! Hurrah!"
- And I finished! And I finished strong! (Well relatively strong!)
- And I said....I'm never going to do this again!
- But I did.....in fact another couple more times....

I think I was able to finish because of all those people (my wife and son, and the spectators) and those who finished before and came back to cheer me on!

After that experience.....I think I had a new understanding of the Second lesson we read today.....especially Hebrews 12:1

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, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

I love the part of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses...& fixing our eyes on Jesus.....

The old 4th century church father Gregory of Nyssa. He painted a beautiful picture of a way of living. He wrote:

- *"At horse races, the spectators, intent on victory, shout to their favorites in the contest. From the balcony, they incite the rider to keener effort, urging the horses on while leaning forward and flailing the air with their outstretched hand instead of a whip."*

Gregory of Nyssa seems to have spent a surprising amount of time at the track for an early church father. He takes this picture and says,

- *"I seem to be doing the same thing myself, most valued friend and brother. While you are competing admirably in the divine race, straining constantly for the prize of the heavenly calling, I exhort, urge and encourage you vigorously."*

There is a phrase that has been around for a long time and is used to describe this sort of thing. It talks about someone being a "balcony person." Gregory says,

- *"I'm up in the stands. I'm watching my friend run the race, and I'm cheering him on. This is your life. This is your race. You've only got this one race, and*

God is with you so don't stop. You keep running the race."

Some people do that for you. They are your "balcony people." When you're with them, they fill your tank. Then you have some other people in your life. When you're not looking, they stick a hose in your tank, take a deep breath and start siphoning the fuel out. They drain you of life. They are "basement people," because they bring you down.

We are to encourage one another to.....Keep your eyes on Jesus and the finishing line.

Be a balcony person.....not a basement person. Here's a final story....

A man has a barber, and he tells him about his life, his family, everything. The barber's one of these guys who is never impressed, never excited about anything. The day comes when the man is getting ready to go to Italy, where he's going to have an audience with the Pope.

His barber is Catholic, so he's sure that the barber will be excited about this. He tells him, but the barber says,

- *"Big deal. You won't be able to see him. He'll be way far away. The guy goes to Italy, and he comes back and goes to get his haircut."*

He says to the barber: "You'll never believe this, but I got to meet the Pope.

The barber says: "You did not."

"Yes, I did. I was in a receiving line and got to come right past his chair. I got to shake his hand. I knelt down in front of him. I took his hand. I kissed his ring. I bowed my head before him. And the Pope spoke to me."

The barber is impressed in spite of himself. He asks, "What did the Pope say?"

He said, "Where did you get that lousy haircut?"

What are we going to be in our lives? Balcony persons or basement person. I end with The Message paraphrase of Hebrews 12:2:

12¹⁻³ Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. 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: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls.” Amen