

SERMON FOR MARCH 8, 2020

RED LETTER CHALLENGE: BEING

In the name of Jesus:

One of the most elite sports in the world is rowing. You see a lot of the Ivy League schools have really strong rowing teams. The aim of the sport is very simple. The first group of rowers that cross the finish line win. It's just like any other race: the strongest and the quickest will always win. However, there is one key difference in rowing to any other race. In most other sports the key to winning is keeping your eyes firmly fixed on the finish line. Rowing is different. None of the rowers are actually looking at the finish line. As a matter of fact, their backs are actually facing the finish line. The rowers are not focused on the finish line rather they are focused on a man sitting on the edge of the rowing boat called the cox. The Cox is literally like the conductor of the rowing boat. He alone has his eyes fixed on the finish line and on the other competitors. The key to winning the race in rowing comes down to the relationship between the rowers and the Cox. Typically, when rowing teams win a race it is the Cox that people will celebrate because he led his team to the finish line. Our walk with God is very much like being in

a rowing boat. As we look to Christ and trust in Him He will lead us and guide us and equip us!

Hebrews 12:1:2 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, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith...”** We are called to run our race and we will finish our race when we keep our eyes on the Author and the finisher of our faith!

God has called us to participate, to run the race of following Jesus. He wants us not only to start the race, but to finish the race. According to Jon Acuff's book called "Finish", 92% of people don't finish the goals or resolutions they set out for themselves. 92%. That's depressing. God wants us to start the race and finish the race. To do so we can't rely on our own strength, we need to rely on Jesus. Looking at Jesus is the most productive thing we can do. As we look to Him, He will lead and guide our steps.

In Jesus' life and ministry, His disciples wanted to be with Jesus. They worshipped together, read the Scriptures together, they prayed

earnestly together. For a disciple of Jesus, it was all about spending time with Jesus. That is what being a disciple is first and foremost all about, spending time being with Jesus. Psalm 46 says: “Be still and know that I am God.”

The problem for us is that we don't know the meaning of being still. We are so busy, on the move so much, that we don't take time to be still and know that God is who He says He is. We can find time to do all sorts of things that we want to do, but to spend time with God, alone with Him in His Word, in prayer and meditation, well, that's tough sledding for many.

So we can take a page from others who have put into practice spiritual discipline. Those who follow Jesus have practiced spiritual discipline for centuries. Martin Luther had a discipline of being in Word and prayer to be with Jesus daily. Just look at your Small Catechism, there is the Daily Prayer section Luther gives a template of how it can be done, being with Jesus and spending time with Him. In his own life, Luther would take the Scriptures or prayer book, go to a room by himself in the quiet of the room, to be with the Lord to meditate and pray. That is how it is done. You make it a priority, that which is of

primary and foremost importance, to spend time with Jesus in His Word then praying to Him what you have heard Him say to you in His Word.

You have heard the expression that you are what you eat, or that you are the person with the company you keep. Well, in the same way, when we daily spend time with Jesus in His Word, Jesus literally changes us. That is how His Word works, His Word does what it says, it never returns to Him empty but it is always working to accomplish what He desires. If we love Jesus we will want to be with and be like Him, doing what He wants us to do, not to get on His good side, we already receive God's goodness because of Jesus' death and resurrection. We want to be like Jesus and follow Him more closely because we love Jesus. And that's really what this whole challenge is about. Spend time, be with Jesus, and then you'll do like Jesus.

So you carve out time to be with Jesus, you make that a priority. You can find the time if you really want to. On average, people are watching more than 4 hours of television a day and spend about 2 hours with their cell phone devices a day. People can still manage to keep their dozen social media accounts active. It's not a time issue. It's a priority issue. But people feel tired, they feel exhausted, because they

are not getting true rest. What goes in will come out. You are filling your life with things and people that ultimately cannot give you rest. But Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The more you are with Christ, the more you understand what He's done for you and the more you can't help but want to do things for Him.

So the bottom line is this: prioritize Jesus. Find ways to be near Him and learn from Him. Do the things that will get you close to Him. Don't miss worship. For any reason. Receive the Lord's Supper. Get involved in Bible study at church. Have a daily time of meeting Jesus in His Word. Pray without ceasing. When you do these things, and there's other ways you can spend time with Jesus as well, you will have prioritized him in your schedule and then you will find rest, just like He said. You'll be able to not just start, but finish. Isaiah 40:30-31 says:

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;³¹ but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

When we spend the time to be with Jesus, then you will find the energy, the stamina, and the strength to not just start the race but finish the race that is before you.

John Stephen Akhwari was a marathon runner who ran a marathon in Mexico City. He cramped up due to the high altitude of the city. He had not trained at such an altitude back in his country. At the 19 kilometer point during the 42 km race, there was jockeying for position between some runners and he was hit. He fell badly wounding his knee and dislocated that joint plus his shoulder hit hard against the pavement. He however continued running, finishing last among the 57 competitors who completed the race (75 had started). The winner of the marathon finished in 2:20:26. Akhwari finished over an hour later, and only a few thousand people were left in the stadium. The sun had set. A television crew was sent out from the medal ceremony when word was received that there was one more runner about to finish.

As he finally crossed the finish line a cheer came from the small crowd. When interviewed later and asked why he continued running, he said, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race.

God has called you to be His child in Holy Baptism and has called you to run the race of life following Jesus. The Apostle Paul writes:

being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

He will finish the work He has started. When Satan tempts you to give up or give in, Christ is there to give you strength through His Word and Sacrament. He went all the way to the cross, not holding onto anything except the hope and joy set before Him, he gave everything until he uttered the words, Tetelestai. It is finished. Our God is a finisher! He finished by giving it everything that He had. He gave it all so that we can give it all. So, is there any worthier cause than following after Jesus and being with Him?

Amen