

**"Disregarding the Shame"**  
**Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year C**  
**August 15, 2010**  
**Text: Hebrews 12:1-2**  
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We talked about the nature and character of faith last week, and I want to continue that focus this week as well. The writer of Hebrews, in the passage from the lectionary for today, describes faith in terms of a race, a track and field event all of us are familiar with. This race that is our faith is to be run with perseverance, that is, it is to be run all the way to the finish line. As participants in this contest, we are not to quit prematurely. We are to complete the event, no matter how long it takes.

Browning Ware, known to his friends as "B. Ware," was a legend among Southern Baptist ministers in Texas. He pastored the First Baptist Church in Austin for a long time before he retired and my college friend Roger Paynter became his successor. Browning, like a lot of us, came to maturity rather late, as many wonderful stories from his younger days testify. This story in particular is one of my favorites and is relevant to what we are talking about this morning.

Once when he was in high school, Browning was enlisted by the track coach to fill in for an injured member of the team, the miler.

Ware always was rather naturally athletic. In his later years he looked so much like the daredevil Evel Knieivel that people would stop him and ask him for his autograph. So the track coach probably felt that at least Browning could make a showing in the mile run. Despite the fact that some of the best milers in the state were entered in this event, Browning shocked everyone, his own teammates and coach especially, by hitting the tape first. Almost miraculously, he came out of the pack on the last lap and beat everybody.

But his glorious triumph was short lived. You see, the track where the meet was being held was the old Ownby Stadium at SMU. As many of us recall, it was very small, with a portion of the track running under the bleachers on one side of the field, so that the competitors were out of sight for a few seconds during the race.

After the mile had been run, someone who had been sitting on those bleachers came and reported that he had seen Ware at the end of two laps falling far behind the other milers. The witness saw Browning step out of the race and spend the third lap resting while hiding underneath the bleachers. Then when the other runners came back around and passed his hiding place, the rejuvenated Ware stepped back onto the track, into the race, and outran all of them on the last lap. And, said Ware for years afterward, if they hadn't been so picky

about that third lap, he would have set a new Texas schoolboy record for the mile run.

Faith, like a race, is to be run all the way, not just part of the way, to the finish line, with all of the laps being taken. Because our faith is indeed like a race, the writer of Hebrews contends that there are those things which motivate us to run all the way to the finish line without a break. There is the crowd that cheers us on, what is described as the "great cloud of witnesses" surrounding us and encouraging us. As it turns out, we don't run the race alone. We have cheerleaders, the saints in heaven who have completed their own marathons and who know what it is like to persevere to the end.

There is the prize for running the race, whether we finish first or not: the perfection of our faith. Only through the endurance required to complete the race is our faith made perfect. Perfected faith, what Wesley called Christian perfection, does not come without a great deal of effort on our part, as well as a great deal of grace on God's part.

And then there is the example of Christ to motivate us. He is the pioneer of our faith, meaning that he has run this race himself and already stands at the finish line to encourage us. He is our trailblazer, our model, our guide, our hero in that sense. We strive to run our race

of faith just as he did his. And we, too, long to end our race close to where he ended his, before the very throne of God.

But like a race, there are those things which tend to burden us, slow us down, make it difficult for us to finish. Some of that weight the world puts on us. The world is not exactly a friendly place when it comes to the authentic, genuine gospel of Jesus Christ. The world says to us, "Conform to the likeness of what we consider to be a productive and successful and popular individual. Pay no attention to what Christ is calling you to: a life of sacrificial love and the giving of yourself completely to those whom the world has deemed as unworthy." The world would have us devote ourselves to many other things besides discipleship, things which actually represent a hindrance to our desire to follow Jesus.

Some of the weight we need to unburden ourselves with actually comes from ourselves. *We* put it there. We are insecure, which means we carry around with us the tremendous burden of wanting to please others—our family members, our friends, our colleagues. We desperately want to be accepted and affirmed by those around us. We want to be liked and loved. That great need distracts and even encumbers us to the extent that we have difficulty finishing the race that is our faith in Christ. All this is to say that much of our sin we actually *can* lay aside, because we can choose not to allow it to cling to

us so closely. We can choose not to let the world and ourselves burden us to the point that we no longer can run the race of faith as we should.

So we are to look to Jesus. We are to run as he has run. He finished the race of faith by enduring the cross. How? The author of Hebrews gives us the answer. *He did it by disregarding its shame.* The cross represented a shameful death to be sure, the most humiliating death possible at that time. Only the worst of the worst criminals were sentenced to die in such a manner. That is why when Jesus died on the cross, all heads looked the other way. Even though he was completely innocent, he was abandoned by all who had followed him. He was even forsaken by his own heavenly Father. Such was the shame of the cross. Shame is the very essence of the cross, and Jesus' death was completely and absolutely and totally shameful.

But as the writer of Hebrews suggests, Jesus disregarded the shame of the cross, endured the suffering he felt there, and kept his eye on the prize so to speak: the joy set before him of everlasting communion with God, the same joy set before each of us to receive once we have completed the race that is our faith.

*Perhaps being willing to disregard the shame is the key to running the race of faith.* There definitely is some shame that needs to be disregarded. Some shame is worth disregarding because only in

disregarding it can we serve God as Christ did by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The cross was the shame Jesus needed to disregard. We may need to disregard the shame of other things, things such as failure. We live in a culture that worships success. We are people who love winners. Winning is everything, and when it comes to success, the end almost always justifies the means in our world. And so in a culture like ours, where success is everything, failure is the supreme embarrassment and cause for shame. But when we look to Christ as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we realize that *failure is no cause for shame*. The Savior of the world died a shameful death and was considered by most to be a complete failure as a Messiah.

We also may need to disregard the shame of not being wealthy. Material gain is given supreme value in our culture as well. The one with the most toys wins, right? The best are nearly always seen in our society as the ones who have the most. When we don't have nearly that much, when we are closer to being "have nots" than "haves," we can fall into the trap of feeling like second class citizens and thus being ashamed of ourselves. Yet Jesus died with nothing, absolute nothing, not a material possession to his name. If we look to him as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, *we will not be ashamed if we have little as compared to others who seem to have so much more*.

If we are going to run the race of faith as Christ did, we may need to disregard the shame of a lack of popularity. If we are not considered particularly notable, if no paparazzi are following us around desperately seeking to take a picture, we don't need to feel any shame. We may not always live up to the expectations of others. We may not always do what the crowd expects of us. That's okay. Jesus didn't either, and they killed him for it. *We are called to be Christlike, not necessarily popular.*

And we may need to disregard the shame of relative powerlessness. So what if we are not shakers and movers in our community? So what if we don't possess a great deal of power and prestige? So what if we have relatively little control over our lives? So what if there is never a building named for us at our college alma mater? Is that anything to be ashamed of? Not if the pioneer and perfecter of our faith is Jesus Christ, who, as Paul states in Philippians chapter two, emptied himself of all the power and prestige and control he might have had as the Son of God while he ministered here on earth. *He chose to be one of us, the less powerful, in order to overcome the power of sin and death for us.*

We are to run with perseverance the race of faith that is set before us. We can, and we should, if we indeed will look to Christ. May we run as he did, exactly as he did, in complete submission and devotion

to the will of *God*. If we do, we will have abundant joy in our lives, despite how difficult our circumstances may be at times. And we will find ourselves in the afterlife, sitting before the throne of *God*, with *Jesus*, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, seated at *God's* right hand as a result of finishing the race he showed us how to run.