

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, September 16, 2007  
Rev. John Tapscott

“THE KEYS TO PERSEVERANCE”

Hebrews 12:1,2

This is the season for running events, events in support of good causes. Most of you don't know that I'm a runner. Of course, I don't run five kilometres any more. Not that I ever ran five kilometres at any one time. Actually, five kilometres is probably the total I've run in my lifetime. I read about a man who ran in the New York Marathon. He said about the experience, “It was enjoyable, except for the running.” I can relate to that. I admire people who train and discipline their bodies for running in a marathon or a some competition. A good walk twice a week is about my limit.

The writer to the Hebrews pictures the Christian life as running in a race or a marathon, perhaps. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and the sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1,2)

Note these words, “Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” I am convinced that the quality of perseverance is crucial for life in general, and especially the Christian life. Now most people start off well in the Christian faith, eager for growth and service and involvement in the church. Yet our spiritual enemy is constantly seeking to discourage and distract us as we run the race of faith. And somewhere along the way many Christ followers find their initial enthusiasm waning. Their progress stalls and they may drop out of the race altogether. The enemy counts that as a great victory. And sadly, it happens often, diminishing not only those who do it, but also the church and the Kingdom of God.. The story of Demas, who began as Paul's trusted associate, but wound up, as Paul says, forsaking him for love of this present world, is told again and again. So I admire those who keep running the race with perseverance, year after year, with loyalty to Christ and faithfulness to their vows. I'm looking at many of you right now.

Now the Greek word for perseverance means “steadfast endurance”, pressing on in spite of obstacles, disappointments and discouragements. And the older I get the more I long for this quality, for myself and for everyone of us. I find it true not only for my Christian life, but as a Christian leader. Sometimes I wonder, “How can I persevere over the long haul?”

How can I keep obeying God's call and serving God's people faithfully to the end?"

Now in our hearts we all want to persevere in the Christian life but we also know how easy it would be to slip off the track and fall out of the race. So where this quality of perseverance come from? How do we get it? How can we persevere in the race?

In order to discover the keys to perseverance I reflected on the lives of persevering Christians I know and looked into my own heart. I also reflected on Scripture. And I found three keys to perseverance. Perhaps that's not a surprise, but I was surprised to discover that all three keys begin with the letter "g." So let me share these keys with you, for they are essential "if we are going to run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

*First, perseverance comes from a sense of gratitude.*

Thirty-three years ago I began university. I was enthusiastic and certainly wanted to do well, but several things conspired together to make my first year less successful and less happy than I'd hoped. Several times I felt like quitting and going home. But what stopped me from doing so was the thought of my father who was paying the freight. I knew how hard he worked to make it possible, and how proud he was of me going to university, since he'd never had the opportunity himself. I knew how much he had invested in me and I was grateful for that. I couldn't bear the thought of disappointing him. I still remember a long letter of encouragement he sent me that first year. And so I persevered. In the second year I adjusted my courses and went down a slightly different road than I had originally envisioned, and I was much happier and more successful. Yet it was out of gratitude for my father's provision that I persevered through the difficulties in that first year.

I believe that perseverance in the Christian race is rooted in gratitude for God's goodness, God's gifts, and for all God has done and is doing for us. One of the goals of worship is to remind us of God's goodness and mercy towards us, undeserved and unearned.

Of course, life is not always as we want it. Things don't always turn out as we expect or hope. But in sunshine and rain, God proves to be a surprisingly faithful provider and helper. In fact, when we think of our foolishness and sin, both personally and collectively, we see that God treats us far more kindly than we have a right to expect.

Let's remember that for our sake, Jesus ran with perseverance the hardest race of all and finished the course. He suffered and died on that old rugged Cross, despising its shame so that we may always have light and hope, that we may be the children of God through faith, forgiven and free, heirs of immortality, saved from the great abyss and eternal separation. When we catch but a glimpse of what God the Father and Christ the Son went through for

our sake, gratitude floods our hearts. And out of that gratitude flows the quality of perseverance. When I remember that Christ willingly got up on a Cross for me, how can I not lift up my heart to him weekly, daily, for a lifetime, and more? How could I drop out of the race and turn away from such love, a love that its' gave all for me and for you, too? When I think how much God has invested in me, and how much he gave to save me, I feel compelled to persevere in the race. Surely the proper response to Jesus' perseverance on our behalf is to run with perseverance ourselves. Our perseverance is rooted in our gratitude for God's goodness and mercy.

*Perseverance is also rooted in God's grace.*

Now this word grace has many shades of meaning. But one that grace means is that when God calls us to do something, God first provides all we need to accomplish it. Our Christian life becomes much more joyful when we realize that all we are called to do is made possible by God's gifts to us and God's work in us.

Take this issue of perseverance. "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..." Running, except for those in shape, is very hard. But God doesn't expect us to run the race of faith on our own. God provides us with all we need to run the race and to keep going to the end. We only have to take advantage of it.

For one thing God gives other people to help us as we run. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in heaven. They're not only waiting for us to join them; they're also praying for us and cheering us on. It's like home field advantage for a sports team. And we run the race with others here on earth. God gives us one another for mutual strengthening and inspiration and accountability. That's why small groups are so important to the Christian life.

Now sadly some Christians are observing the race from the sidelines. They've already half dropped out of the race. They provide little encouragement *for* others and draw little *from* others. But we are not meant to be on the sidelines. And if that's where you are you can be sure that Jesus' hand is reaching out to you, inviting and welcoming you back into the race. For you were put in the race once by God's grace, and you can get in again by his grace.

God's greatest gift for running with perseverance is the presence of the living Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ runs the race with us, refreshing us and renewing us along the way. We keep our eyes fixed on Him and draw on his strength through our personal faith connection with him. Christ enables us to set aside every weight and discouragement for He takes upon himself all the burdens we hand him. He is the great forgiver who sets us free from the sin which clings so closely. By God's grace we can turn from the past and embrace the future God has opened for us.

A great Biblical promise reads, “They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Waiting on Christ through Scripture, worship, prayer and sacrament - this is key to persevering in the race. The presence of Christ means the race is not a marathon, but a daily walk with the living Lord. We don’t run the race alone, nor do we persevere on our own. God gives us abundant resources enabling us to run and to keep going. Perseverance is rooted in God’s grace.

*Finally, perseverance comes from having a goal.*

How easy it is to drop out of a race or any human endeavour where there is no clear goal or destination. Having a goal is a great motivator. College and university students who get near the end of their course and envision the degree behind their names are motivated to keep going and to do their best. It was true for me, and perhaps for some of you too, that my grades took a marked turn upwards as I got nearer to graduation.

The goal of the Christian life is the Kingdom of God. It’s mostly ahead of us, of course. The promise of the Christian faith is that beyond death we shall see Christ in glory. Because Christ lives, we shall live also. We shall take our place among that great cloud of witnesses which includes many loved ones who have already finished the race. “Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.” How sad it would be to drop out of the race now and miss all that God has prepared for those who persevere to the end.

But God’s Kingdom is not just in the future. Even as we move toward the goal, the goal comes to meet us. In our relationship with Christ, in fellowship with other Christians, in the high moments of worship, in the service we undertake for God’s Kingdom, in the times of joy we share together, we already “taste the...powers of the age to come.”

Studies of successful athletes show that before they head for the track or the field, they try to envision themselves performing at their best. In their minds they experience the thrill of winning long before it happens. In our relationship with Christ we can experience a small foretaste of what God has prepared for us in the age to come.

Perseverance comes from having a goal, and our goal is the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom has already come to meet us and meets us now in Jesus. So with gratitude in our hearts, by God’s grace, and with the sure goal of God’s Kingdom before us, “let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

