

Manchester United Methodist Church
February 12, 2006 - Dr. Carl L. Schenck
"I Can Feel His Pleasure"
1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Sometimes the timing just works and this is one of those times. Friday night, of course, the Winter Olympic games opened in Italy. This morning the Epistle lesson, which Fran read for us earlier, has Paul using the image of a runner in a race to talk about the Christian life. It couldn't be better timing. Paul, in this lesson that we have today, talks about the passion and the commitment, and the discipline of a runner. He says that we who follow Christ are called upon to have the same kind of passion, and commitment, and discipline, as someone who runs for a prize as perishable as a laurel wreath, which was the equivalent of an Olympic medal in those days. For those who follow Christ though, we run to achieve the prize of God's love in Jesus Christ, and the experiencing of that love in this life, and in the life to come.

Paul's image about the Christian faith as a race certainly was one that was fitting for his own life. My, what a life this man had. Think about it. Remind yourself from your days in Sunday school or Disciple Bible Study. This man was born probably five years, maybe ten years after Jesus was born. During the years just after the resurrection, he was a zealous and devoted defender of his faith. He initially believed that those who followed Jesus as the Christ were denying the true faith of Judaism. Young Saul, who was named after the first king of Israel, persecuted the early church and indeed, was even deputized by the religious leaders to go from Jerusalem to Damascus to arrest Christ's followers there.

You know the story. You know how he was approaching Damascus and had a vision of the risen Christ. This man who had previously believed that Christ divided Jews became a person who believed that in Christ all of humanity was united. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek," he was to say. This person who believed, early in his life, that Christ divided the Jewish nation now believed that Christ united all of humanity. He became no longer Saul, the persecutor of the church, but the great apostle Paul. He was to travel all over the eastern Mediterranean in what we typically call his three missionary journeys. In the first one, he traveled through what is modern day Turkey. When we read these stories in the book of Acts, it's easy to take them somewhat for granted. But just imagine what travel was like in that time. Imagine what it required of a person to go the length and breadth of what is modern Turkey, probably on foot. Staying who knows where, there weren't any Motel 6's with the light on for him.

Two or three times in his lifetime Paul made this traverse of Turkey. At the end of the second of those journeys he felt compelled to get on a boat and go to what is now northern Greece, Macedonia. It was there that he began to proclaim the gospel on European soil. Walking again, he traveled all the way down the peninsula of Greece. When you listen to the names of the places he went, it's a recitation of the books of the New Testament – Philippi, Thessalonika, Athens, Corinth, and then across the Aegean, and back to Ephesus. What a life!

Three times during all this period he made the journey to Jerusalem to compare notes, if you will, with the mother church in Jerusalem. It was a life of discipline and passion and commitment, like an athlete's life. It was a race that he had run and so, when Saint Paul could use this image of the runner who, with discipline and passion and commitment seeks the prize, he was speaking of his own Christian life, whether he intended to or not. He was speaking of the way in which those who follow Christ run life's race with a special and peculiar commitment and passion.

Paul's story is one story of a runner. I have another story of a runner to share with you. One that will be familiar to most of you. This story took place in the early 1920's in England. There was a group of young men in that time who were preparing for the 1924 Olympic games that were to be held in Paris. Among these young men was a young Scotsman named Erik Liddell. He was a young man who was preparing to be an athlete in the Olympic games, but he was also simultaneously preparing to be a Christian missionary, he hoped, to China. He was engaged, and his fiancé was quite enamored with the notion of a missionary's life, and not at all impressed with Liddell's commitment to running. The Olympic games didn't hold any charm for her, and it was the source of considerable friction and conflict in their relationship. She thought he was wasting his time running and preparing for the games while simultaneously seeking to be prepared to be a missionary.

Of course, as you know, Erik Liddell's story was told, a little over twenty years ago now, in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. There is a scene in that movie where Erik and his fiancé Jenny are walking in the moors outside the university community, and they've been discussing this tension that they had between them, about the call to China and the call to run, and that's where we'll pick up the story:

(Movie clip showing)

Erik: I've decided. I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted me.

Jenny: Oh! Oh! I am so pleased!!

Erik: But I've got a lot of running to do first. Jenny. Jenny, you've got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose. . . for China. But He also made me fast and when I run I feel His pleasure.

"God made me for a purpose . . . for China. But he also made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure." Christian life is a race to be run.

Erik did run in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Later he was to serve honorably as a missionary in China and eventually lost his life there. I am sure he did much good in China. I have no doubt God called him to that ministry. But it is interesting to note that because of the movie *Chariots of Fire*, more people know of his faith than all the people he ministered to in China. My the mystery of God's ways, it was his running that gave him his greatest witness.

My question for all of you today is: What is there about your life that is so central to who you are like running was for Erik Liddell? What is there in your life that is so much who you are that when you give yourself to that identity, that cause, that purpose, when you give yourself to it fully in the service of Christ, that when you do this thing, you can feel the pleasure of God? "When I run I feel God's pleasure."

There is, in each of us, some great talent, or passion, or hope, or dream that is planted there by God, and in giving ourselves to that fully, we can embrace and experience the prize that Saint Paul talked about. The great prize of feeling, somewhere in the very core of our being, the pleasure of God.

What is that thing for you? It could be anything. It could be leading Scouts. It could be serving the homeless at Centenary. It could be teaching a class. I don't know what your particular race is, but I know that for all of us, God has a race for us to run, and when we run that race with everything that we have in us, we can have those glorious moments when we can experience the very pleasure of God. "God made me for China but he also made me fast and when I run I can feel His pleasure." Run friends -- run your particular race. Run for the prize -- feel God's pleasure. Amen