



The Secret of Joy:
“PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL”

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Scripture: Philippians 3:12-21

The Bayshore Marathon in Traverse City. It was the first marathon I ever ran. Memorial Day weekend, 1984. Thirty years ago. Gary was the one who actually started me running. We were married in 1978 and began running together for exercise. I'd played field hockey, basketball, volleyball, and softball in high school, but there was no soccer, golf, swimming, track, or cross country team for girls. When you get to be an adult, there's little opportunity to continue playing team sports, so I picked running.

I'll never forget my very first road race on the first Sunday of May in 1980. It was a ten kilometer race just for women on a Sunday afternoon at 1:00 p.m. It's a strange time for a race, but, remember, this was thirty years ago before road races became so popular. And nothing happened on Sunday morning but church, unlike today. The challenge was the fact that I was the Director of Music in a large United Methodist church in Stratford, Connecticut. I was playing for an 11:00 a.m. service and directing the choir, and it was communion Sunday.

When the senior pastor didn't start his sermon until 11:45 a.m., I knew I was in trouble. For a variety of reasons, the order of worship was packed with all kinds of stuff. When it got to 12:15 p.m. and we hadn't started communion yet, I realized that I had to act boldly in order to get out of my robe, change my clothes, drive twenty minutes to the start of the race, and be ready to go at 1:00 p.m.

So I whispered to one of the choir members who was also a pianist, "Linda, can you do me a favor? I gotta go. Can you play the last hymn on the piano and lead the choral benediction? I'll make sure you get an extra star in your crown when you get to heaven." And off I went. Hey, I was young, and I was not going to miss my very first race because the service was going to set a new congregational record for length. I made it on time, barely. I found out later that the service didn't end until 12:45 p.m. So if our service ever goes long and you have a race to run, just leave. Go for it! You have our blessing.

Yesterday Gary and I were back in Traverse City so that I could run the Bayshore Marathon thirty years later. I loved it because the race was on the Old Mission Peninsula, where Gary and I lived for four years, where our first two children were born, and where my first church was, Old Mission Peninsula United Methodist Church. I had a great experience, but I'm a bit sore today. Let me just add that when you get to be my age, you're not setting personal records anymore.

In the third chapter of his letter to the Christians in Philippi, the apostle Paul likens the call to the Christian life to a race. “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” For Paul, faith involves running, wrestling and striving, all the while knowing that he does not have a righteousness of his own. Paul portrays himself as a runner. He’s pressing, stretching, pushing. Lungs explode, legs burn, muscles ache, perspiration rolls, the heart pumps frantically. Even though you and I are saved by God’s grace alone and not by anything we do, the life of faith is not an easy road to run.

This race of the Christian life is just like the Bayshore Marathon. Now most people think that the first male and female finishers were the only winners in the Bayshore Marathon, but I am convinced that anyone who can run, walk, shuffle, or crawl 26.2 miles, 6.2 miles, or just one mile, no matter how fast or slow, is a winner.

In the same way, the life of faith is not a race in which only one person succeeds and only one individual wears the victor’s crown. The goal for each one of us, young or old, male or female, is to discover God’s purpose for our lives and make it our own. The challenge is to become all that God created us to be. It’s never too late. And so we press on. **What is the goal of your life?**

Paul goes on to say in verse 13, “Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” Paul is trying to help the Philippians break with their Jewish past, for some people said that no one could become a perfect Christian unless they obeyed the entire Jewish law and became circumcised.

No, Paul says, we press on because we are undergirded by God’s grace. Reaching the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus is not something we can ever earn or deserve. The end of the race is the full realization of God’s call in this life as well as the divine summons to heaven in our death. The end is assured not because of us but because of God’s grace alone.

What’s at stake here? At stake is the call of God in Jesus Christ. It’s not a different call for those who are ordained and those who are not. And it’s not a different call for men, women, children, youth or adults. Each one of us is called to ministry and service through our baptism.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Methodism spread like wildfire throughout the United States, as male Methodist circuit riders preached Christ and moved west with the settlers. Eventually, women felt called to preach as well. Unofficially, some women held licenses to preach, but they were not allowed to be ordained or have full clergy rights.

The ambiguous status of women continued until 1920, when General Conference, our denominational legislative body, voted to license women to preach. Four years later General Conference allowed women to be ordained as local preachers but not as ministers in full standing. That meant that “women could only serve those churches left open after every male clergy had received his appointment.”¹

Julie Work is an active member of our congregation. Did you know that Julie's grandmother, Retha Sadler, was one of those early Methodist local preachers in Kansas? Retha was born in 1906 to Methodist parents and said that she received her first call to preach when she was a little girl. In a 1938 interview Retha said, "My folks used to take me to various church meetings in my home town, Mahaska. At the meetings I was called on to recite quite frequently. I loved to speak pieces. The larger the crowd, the more frightened I became, but the larger the crowd, the more thrilled I was.

"I recall that I used to practice my pieces alone in the barn. I was sixteen years old when I preached my first sermon in my home town. The regular minister was called away to a conference, and his daughter and I took over the service. My first sermon was on 'The Great Orchestra of Life.' It was a comparison of life to an orchestra in that persons should do things in harmony with those around them, just as members of an orchestra must work together."ⁱⁱ

Retha went through the required course of study and received her license to preach in 1929, at the age of twenty-three. Her first appointment was in a small Kansas town, where both church and town had been split over the activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Later, she was ordained, completed her seminary degree, and served local churches for twenty-nine years. Retha Sadler was a pastor who could make congregations grow. She was a church builder.

Retha used to say that when she went to a new church (and that was every one to three years), everyone would come out the first Sunday because they were curious to experience a woman preacher. All Retha had to do was keep them there – and she did! She never felt discriminated against as a woman and was convinced that competence was what really counted. Rev. Sadler knew that her call could only be fulfilled through the professional ministry. Each one of us, including you, you, and you, is called to ministry and service through our baptism as we press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. **What does God's call in your life look like? You do have a call, you know.**

Finally, Paul says, "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind... Join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us." Then, "Therefore my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved." (verses 15, 17, 4:1) Because not all are of the same mind, Paul urges the Philippians to imitate him by standing firm against enemies of the cross and those who would undermine their life of faith. When Paul refers to the Philippians as "my joy and crown," he's talking about the end of the race, a scene of celebration and victory, where the crown is literally the victor's prize. If the Philippians have a mature faith by being of the same mind, following their call, and standing firm in the Lord, then he and they will not have run the race in vain.

You and I wake up every morning knowing that Christ Jesus has made us his own. Every day you and I are challenged to let go of the past and press on toward the goal of transforming the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of God. It doesn't matter who we are, where we've been, or what we do. God calls each one of us to see our world and each person through the eyes of the love of Jesus and invite them onto relationship with Christ. Why? Because each person in this world is God's joy and God's crown.

It was all about the beds. Well, maybe it wasn't about beds, after all. Jeanne and Mike Fritz moved to a new home and had four twin beds that they wanted to give to a family that who needed them. They discovered, however, that mattresses cannot be donated to the Salvation Army, Goodwill, or even to our Rummage Sale because of the possibility of bedbugs. No one would take these beds, which were in excellent condition. The trash man said he would take them, but who wants good beds to go to the landfill when so many people in this world don't have a place to lay their head?

Susan Rieth was helping the Fritz's pack, so she called Ann Tenniswood the Younger about the bed dilemma. Ann volunteers at the Free Store at Brightmoor, so she mentioned the beds to Jan Oliver, who is the director of the Free Store. Jan said bring them on in. Jan is a foster and adoptive parent who has had teenage boys before but is now seeking to expand her ministry by starting a group home for children ages zero through twelve.

I heard this story from Ann Tenniswood at the Rummage Sale. She said that her husband Jeff put the beds in a work van and drove them down to Brightmoor. She also said that Jan Oliver was coming to First Church the next day to volunteer at the Rummage Sale. So I found Jan and asked her about the beds. She said, "I can't imagine anyone who wouldn't want these beautiful beds."

Jan gave one bed to a woman with an autistic son who was sleeping on the floor because he had no place to lay his head. He was ecstatic to have his own bed. She gave two other beds to her daughter, whose children were also sleeping on the floor. The fourth one is going to be used in her foster home. Jan said, "These beds are a phenomenal blessing" and called Ann "an awesome angel of the Lord."

It takes a whole village to give a child a place to sleep, doesn't it? It would have been easy to just put the beds in the trash because no organization would take them, but that's not who we are. How many determined disciples of Jesus Christ did it take to make sure that those four twin beds got to the right children? You see, when Christ lives in you and me, we keep pressing on toward the goal of the bringing in God's kingdom on this earth. We stand firm in the Lord and are persistent in making real God's love. We do not give up, for God has given us everything that we have in order to pass it on to others. **How will you stand firm in the Lord?**

Ann, Jan Oliver and I chatted several more minutes about the Brightmoor fire a few months ago and how Jan immediately opened the Free Store to the victims of the nearby fire. Many of them, including children, were wearing only pajamas with no shoes, socks, clothes, or coat. They literally lost everything. And there was the church through Jan Oliver, with grace, comfort and compassion, saying, "Take whatever you need or want," and pressing on toward the goal of modeling the unconditional love of Jesus.

What is the secret of joy? Describing that morning, Jan said, "How great is the God we serve. It's beyond words. You don't have to say a thing. You just have to let your light shine." What is the secret of joy?

Press on toward the goal of bringing in God's kingdom on this earth.
Don't be afraid.

Just be you.

Live the life to which you have been called by letting your light shine.

i. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Women and Religion in America*, Volume 3, San Francisco, Harper and Row, 1986, p. 341.

ii. Interview with Retha Sadler, *Kansas City Times*, March 24, 1938.