

It is An Amazing Race!
Hebrews 12:1-3
February 27, 2011
Northbrook United Methodist Church
Pastor Melissa Earley

If there is one reality show I would be on it is The Amazing Race. I love it! Corey and I are hooked. When we watch this show we chose favorite among the 12 teams that race around the world. We strategize about how we would deal with the different challenges, which of us would be better at which obstacles and even speculate about what we would fight about.

If the writer of Hebrews were writing today, and in a light-hearted mood, I wonder if he would use the image of the Amazing Race. Though the Amazing Race is no Olympic Marathon, it also takes endurance and perseverance. Teams have to find obscure landmarks in foreign places. Try their hands at traditional practices like dancing and cooking. They have to eat indigenous food and try local customs.

If it takes endurance to be on the Amazing Race or run an Olympic marathon, how much more endurance does it take to run the race of faith? There has never been a time when it was easy. Though we live with the myth that our parents or grandparent's generation had it easier – that's not true. It just gives us a convenient excuse. It's never been easy to love one's enemies. It's never been easy to live generously. It's never been easy to put God first and self second. It's never been easy to trust God in all things. It takes endurance. We are always at risk of throwing in the towel, and so were the people to whom the letter to the Hebrews was addressed. We don't know the price they were being asked to pay, just that there was a price. We don't know the currency, just that the price was high. And so this letter was written, in part, to encourage them to keep the faith.

The Amazing Race is hard. When teams get over their whining about how hard it is, they race better. The more energy they spend complaining about a challenge, griping at their taxi driver, complaining about the country they are in, the worse they do and the more distracted they become. The sooner teams accept that the race is hard, the better off they are.

Sometimes the world's reality is that life should be easy. There's something wrong when it's hard. Something has to be fixed. The reality of God is that life is hard, and a life of faith is harder. I like it that the writer of Hebrews say, "run with perseverance the race that is set before you." We don't get to run someone else's race. Just our own. Both individually and corporately. As a congregation we are not running the race set before the folks who started this church or the people of Village Presbyterian or the folks at First UMC Chicago Temple. As individuals we are not running the race set before our parents or our neighbors or even our children. Our races overlap and connect to be sure but they are not the same.

As we run this race, the writer tells us two important things to help us in our perseverance. One is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. Jesus is the example of faith. He shows what love looks like in his relationships with others and his love for us. He shows us what love can do – even bringing life where there was death.

During the last summer Olympics, I got caught up in the women's marathon. It was surprisingly dramatic. As a non-runner, I wasn't expecting that. Towards the end of the race, Romania's Constantina Tomescu was in the lead, but wearing out. Her face was haggard, she looked tired, drained, finished. And then she saw the stadium. And she perked up. Her step got stronger, her face relaxed. And when she entered the stadium, and the cheering crowd was on their feet to cheer her on, no matter their country, she ran like it was the beginning of the race.

She didn't just finish the race, she ran around that stadium multiple times carrying her nation's flag.

The other way we stay in the race is to feel the presence of the great cloud of witnesses who surround us. The lead-in to this passage is a recital of the people of faith. By faith Abraham went to unknown land. By faith Moses led the people through the Red Sea. The writers lists Gideon, Barak, Samson, David and Samuel. The list goes on and on. We would add Martin Luther King, Jr., Sojourner Truth, Henri Nouwen, and others. They are our cloud of witnesses. They are in the stadium, urging us on, imploring us to move forward, urging us to not throw in the towel, to not quit the race. They are there as are all who have faithfully gone before us. According to the writer of Hebrews, they are not victorious until we finish the race. They need us to continue the chain of faithful followers of Jesus.

On the Amazing Race, what becomes abundantly clear is that the relationship between the two teammates is primary. We first started watching the Amazing Race a few years ago when there was a young couple on it and they fought!!! It was horrible, but it's what made us watch. He would say things like, "the other women can do it." And she would scream obscenities at him. Another team was a father and daughter. At first he was domineering and belittling of her. But slowly he learned to encourage her, praise her and help her. They were in the final three. I've only watched a few seasons of the Amazing Race, but I have yet to see a season when a team who bickers and fights all the time, or where the people on the team don't encourage each other, forgive each other, and or help each other, actually wins. Those who together enjoy the race. They soak up the local culture. They enjoy meeting people along the way. They deepen their relationships with each other. Those who fight might as well be in a Kmart parking lot for all they get out of it.

Let's not be naïve – the race of faith is hard. The journey of faith is long. And it is worth it. But you only know that if you take the first step. May we run this race with courage and endurance.