

Sermon Series: Faith in Action
Part II: No More Tangles
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Some of us may remember the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City. In the stadium, it was beginning to darken as the marathon finished. The last of the Olympic marathon runners were being assisted away to first-aid stations. Over an hour earlier, the winner had charged across the finish line, winning the 26-mile, 385-yard race looking as strong and as vigorous as when he'd started. As the last few thousand spectators began preparing to leave, they heard police sirens and whistles coming through the gate and entering the stadium. Their attention turned to that gate. A sole figure appeared limping into the stadium. He was the last man to finish the marathon in 1968. His leg was bandaged and bloody. He had taken a bad fall early in the race. Now, it was all he could do to limp his way around the track. The crowd stood and applauded as he completed that last lap. When he finally crossed the finish line, one man dared ask the question all were wondering. "You are badly injured. Why didn't you quit? Why didn't you give up?" With a quiet dignity he said, "My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start this race. My country sent me to *finish*." (As told by Craig Brian Larson, "Strong to the Finish," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 155.)

Today as we continue talking about *faith in action*, we will read a passage in which the writer of the book of Hebrews seems to be talking about a race in which the runners are surrounded by a great crowd, or "a great cloud of witnesses", as he puts it. This great cloud of witnesses are those who surround us as we run our race of faith. They're like the persons we talked about last week from our Old Testament who live their lives "by faith" -- putting their *faith in action*. As we said last week, they were not perfect individuals, and yet they trusted in God, took one step of faith after another, and finished their race of faith:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
- Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV

So, what does it take for us to finish the race of faith marked out for each one of us? And what does that have to do with our giving generously of our time, talents, and treasure, as one way to put our faith in action? In reading these words from the book of Hebrews I was once again reminded of something we've talked about -- how *context* affects the way we perceive something. For example, reading this passage from the book of Hebrews, it helps to know that when it begins with the word "therefore" it is pointing us back to the previous chapter and all of those who have lived "by faith" -- whom the writer of Hebrews calls "a great cloud of witnesses."

But other times it is *our* context that changes, and we may come back to something we've seen before, yet we see it in a different way. Living through This pandemic has changed the way all of us “see” life. Like viewing the world through a new set of glasses, the lenses of this pandemic have changed the way we see things.

For me, this has been especially true with the hymns we sing in worship. The words to our hymns, which have stood the test of time, have spoken to me on a deeper level during this pandemic and the storms in life we are facing now. When I sing these hymns and pay attention to the words, I have a strong sense that many of these hymn writers have been through their own storms in life, and it makes me more interested to hear what they have to say.

When I read this passage from Hebrews this week, one that I have read and preached on many times, one word jumped out at me – the word “entangles.” The Greek word for “entangles” only appears one time in the whole Bible! It can also mean clings, surrounds, besets, distracts -- and it can refer to encumbrances that include body fat and clothing, which is probably more than you really wanted to know.

So the writer of Hebrews is saying that if we want to persevere and finish the race of faith marked out for us, one of the main things we can do is to throw off whatever hinders and whatever entangles us in life. If we think about life of faith as a race, we know that it takes preparation and strategy to finish.

As we've talked about before, when this pandemic first hit, we probably thought about it as a sprint, like 100-yard dash. You just go full speed as hard as you can knowing that it won't last very long so you give it all you got right from beginning. But then as we approached the finish line, we realized that this wasn't 100-yard dash after all, so we kept running thinking that maybe it was like a 440 -- one lap around the track. But when we got to what we thought was the finish line this time, we realized the race wasn't over. Maybe it was a mile -- four times around the track. So, we began pacing ourselves knowing that you can't go full speed and finish well. But when we got to the end of the mile, we realized the race wasn't over. It occurs to us that this may be more like a marathon which is 26.2 miles, which is a lot of laps around the track! So, we prepared to persevere so we could finish the race.

Perhaps we thought that we needed to carry with us a lot of provisions for the race, such as a whole cooler full of water, a change of shoes and clothes, maybe some food, but that might not be so wise because they weigh a lot! They would hinder us, and perhaps we would get “entangled” in the extra clothing and trip and fall. So, we put aside and throw off all that hinders and can entangle us.

When it comes to running the race of faith and as part the race of faith, giving – then what hinders us and what entangles us that keeps us from giving freely and generously? Maybe it's fear -- fear of the unknown, fear of not having enough, fear that maybe God will not see us through. Or maybe it's something, but we elevate it above what God not only wants but commands us to do, such as giving to those in need. Or maybe it is about being good stewards of what God has put us in charge of, all of which really belongs to God and not us. Or maybe we just want something else which requires our financial resources or our time or our talents and

instead of offering those things to God and what God is doing in the world here and now we choose to do something else. My experience is that it is not hard to find reasons not to give.

I've shared with many of you my experience with this. When I first became a pastor, we had a guest preacher come in for our stewardship season. His name was Tom Are and he had a program called "Lifestyle Stewardship." He was, at the time, the pastor of Shallowford Presbyterian Church where I would later serve following Tom's 23 years as the pastor there. This week I found out that Tom died last weekend, surrounded by his family after a long illness. I will miss Tom as a friend, but also because we learned to give by tithing a tenth of our income because of Tom. During one of his messages, he challenged us all to tithe. Because I was in my first year as a pastor, I thought it was something we should do as a family, so we agreed to do it that fall. But when the new year came around and I realized how much a tenth really was, I spent about a week trying to rationalize why I should not do that. It was not hard finding reasons why this really didn't apply to me. There were many things that were hindering and "entangling" my thinking. But in the end, we felt like we needed to do that, and we have ever since.

So, we trusted God, took a step of faith, and we have taken that step of faith every year when we have pledged. And God has seen us through. In fact, God has blessed us. There were some hard times where I don't know how we would make it through, but in the end, we did, and there was always enough.

Today I want to invite you not only to trust God that there will be enough as you make your pledge to do God's work through Johns Creek Presbyterian Church -- I want to invite you to give away a tithe or 10% because God can be trusted, if we will take that step of faith. If you can't do it all at first, then make a plan to increase your giving one or two percent every year until you reach that 10%. I can tell you from experience God can be trusted and it will work out!

Earlier I said that our context can change the way we see things. Sometimes that includes things like watching a movie. Recently, I was watching the movie *The Martian*, starring Matt Damon, for the umpteenth time because it's one of those movies that they seem to run again and again on TV for free. And even though I've seen it many times and know how it ends, it still makes me anxious.

It's the story of a mission to Mars, but it is not the first manned mission there. There is already a base set up on the planet. The crew lands on Mars, but soon a giant storm suddenly hits, and the crew has to make a rapid escape launching their rocket back into space. In the scramble to get on board the rocket, one of their crew members, played by Matt Damon, is lost in the storm, so they have to make the difficult decision to leave him behind thinking that he is dead. But it turns out he did not die!

So, he has to figure out how to persevere and survive alone on his own until a rescue might take place. When the crew finds out that he is still alive on their journey back to earth, they decide not to land when they get to earth, but to loop around it and go back on a rescue mission to pick him up, which adds years to their mission.

The plan to rescue him involves using an older rocket from a former mission still on the planet to lift him for a rendezvous with the returning spacecraft. But because the older rocket was not designed for that, they have to reduce the weight and “throw off everything” that would “hinder” his rendezvous. This means taking everything off of the rocket that is not absolutely essential like the control panel (it will be flown by remote control), and even the windows and the nose of the spacecraft. The hope is that his space suit will be sufficient to keep him alive.

So, near the end of the movie, when they finally get to the point where the two spaceships are trying to rendezvous in space, they're still not close enough at the point. So, the commander of the ship that's coming to rescue him straps herself into this rocket-powered chair. It is still connected to the spaceship by a long tether as she heads out in space to try to grab him. At one point the Matt Damon character is trying to be rescued, but he has to propel himself out of his rocket using the thrust from a hole that he punches in his space suit as a mini-thruster to guide him and so he can be caught by the Commander in her rocket-powered space chair. As you can imagine, it is a nerve-wracking scene. Talk about taking a step of faith! In a very symbolic scene, the tether flying around in space is what he is able to grab as he is flying by and it entangles him, and he is saved. The Commander pulls the tether with him hanging on and she finally grabbed him. She tells the crew she has him -- and the crew erupts and everyone back on earth is listening and they erupt in others, like a great cloud of witnesses!

So, while sometimes what entangles us can hinder us, sometimes being “entangled” can be a good thing -- especially when we are entangled in the grace of a loving God. The Bible tells us that Jesus is like the Good Shepherd who leaves the others behind in search of the one lost sheep, and when that lost sheep is found, it says that heaven erupts in joy. And when God found you, all of heaven erupted in joy! Jesus not only risked his life to save us, he *gave* his life to save us. So, friends, we have a savior and nothing else or no one else can save us. Trying to focus on something else or someone else to save us will only hinder us from running the race of faith with perseverance and finishing what we started.

So today, I want to invite you to take that step of faith, particularly when it comes to your giving. Throw off whatever it is that hinders you and entangles you, take the step of faith, and trust God because God is trustworthy. God is standing there with arms open, not only to save you, not only to bring you home to his presence eventually, but to give you meaning and purpose in this life. Which will not be easy. You will still need to persevere, but you can do it! Remember that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have done it before and who are encouraging you -- so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.