

LESSONS FROM THE LOCKER ROOM

Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-17

We can learn a lot from sports! From Simone Biles' amazing triple/double backward twisting somersault landing, (whatever it's called, it was absolutely astounding), to teams now competing for playoff berths for the World Series, to pre-season practice games in football, there are life lessons from the locker room there to observe and apply. Perhaps surprisingly, for some of us, there are lessons there for our Spiritual lives too. The fact is, sports metaphors abound in the Bible. But that really shouldn't surprise us, because The Apostle Paul, whose letters or epistles constitute nearly a third of the letters in the New Testament, was an avid sports fan. He was particularly drawn to track and field events. Images of foot racing turn up again and again in his writings.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, for example, he asks: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?" And then he advises his readers, "Run in such a way as to get the prize" (9:24). His point: if we're going to compete in the race of life, run to win.

In his letter to the Galatians, he tells us that when he first received his life's mission to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles, he went first to the leaders of the Jerusalem church for advice because he was afraid, in his words, "that I was running or had run my race in vain." (Gal. 2:2) He was afraid that his life's race, all his efforts to that point, might have had nothing to show for it.

Our Epistle reading from the letter to the Hebrews this morning, has a sports metaphor in it too. Though not written by Paul, the writer follows Paul's pattern of drawing lessons from the locker room when speaking about the Christian life. Even if sports is not a thing in your life, or because your favorite team is now way out of the running you're

debating as to whether it's still a thing in your life, I believe you'll appreciate these lessons from the locker room.

The first lesson is this: victories on the field are first won in the discipline of training. Look at this verse from this morning's reading: "...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us..." In other words, victory in our spiritual lives needs disciplined determination. Michigan State once won a great Rose Bowl victory that way. Now I don't mind telling you this story of a Big Ten victory over a Pac 12 team, even though I'm a hard-core USC Trojan, because, first, it's a good sermon illustration and shouldn't be forgotten just because of my personal prejudice, and, second, this victory was won against the UCLA Bruins.

Michigan State won that game when their field goal kicker successfully put the ball through the uprights in the last seconds to win the game 17-14. As the kicker came back to the bench to meet the roaring enthusiasm of his teammates, the coach said, "Nice going, but I noticed that you didn't watch the ball after you kicked it. How come?" The kicker then admitted that he hadn't watched the ball because he had left his contact lenses back in the hotel room, and after a certain distance, he couldn't see it anyway. In fact, he couldn't even make out the goal posts all that well. At this the coach nearly blew a gasket at the thought of this kicker putting the whole victory at risk like that. But, then, he began to realize that what the kicker had done wasn't that risky after all. This was a disciplined kicker who had practiced for long hours. He knew the angle and the distance to the goal even though he couldn't see it. The whole process of kicking the ball was programmed into his body and mind through daily practice. It was muscle memory; automatic. When the ball went through the goal posts, it was that discipline that paid off.

One key to the spiritual life is discipline. What's true in the classroom,

and in the workplace, is also true in our relationship with God. The Spiritual life involves good habits. The disciplines of prayer, meditation, study, and worship are all are part of the disciplined spiritual athlete's life. They keep us aimed at the goal of life even when we can't quite see it. In the life of faith, discipline is the first lesson from the locker room.

The second lesson from the locker room is this: direction. Continuing the verse where we left off: "let us run with perseverance the race set before us...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." Just as important as discipline, is direction. If we get confused and turned around while fielding the kickoff, we just might return it the wrong way. If we hit a home run but trot first to third base, then to second, and then first before going home, our effort will not count until we turn in the right direction. We can be the fleetest athlete in the world, but if we don't stay on course, it's not likely we'll find our way to the finish line. As Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians: "Not that I have already...been made perfect, but I press on...Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me in Christ Jesus." (3:12-14)

Sometimes we refer to this as focus. The person who has his or her life focused, who knows their direction, is most likely to get there. What is our life focus? Are we driven by a great sense of purpose? Most of us have many worthwhile purposes that fill our day. That's normal, and a good thing. But the real question here is, do we have a great, overarching purpose, in which all these other endeavors fit? To be driven by a great purpose means that we let go of anything that doesn't fit, doesn't work with that great purpose. As our writer this morning puts it, "...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. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus..."

Picture that image in your mind's eye. You and I are in the stadium of life. We are on the track waiting for the starter's signal. Everyone who has walked this spiritual life in faith before us is now in the stands cheering for you and me. But we aren't going to run very well, even with all that encouragement, until we get rid of all the excess weight we so often carry with us; until we get rid of selfishness, and arrogance, our wrath, and pride. We can't run a race looking over our shoulders, and we can't live our life fully if we are bogged down with unfinished business: regrets, grievances, unhealed hard feelings. We are to divest ourselves of anything that slows our progress toward our ultimate goal, which is knowing our savior Jesus Christ. If we follow him, keep our eye on him, we will have our direction.

You see, Jesus isn't just a coach who calls out the strategy from the sidelines; Jesus runs beside us all the way. When we stumble, he reaches out and steadies us. When we fall, he pulls us back to our feet. When our hands droop and our knees go weak, he re-energizes us. Even if we should go lame, he helps us; for he will go so far as to carry us to the line, if need be. If we just run the race with him, everything else falls into place. Making him our great purpose gives us the direction. That's our second locker room lesson.

And, here's one last lesson from the locker room for this morning: joy. Even before we reach the finish line, we can have joy as we run the race. From the end of that previous verse: (referring again to Jesus) "...who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." In the second letter to Timothy, yet another New Testament writer continues the sports metaphor, "...I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day...." (4:7-8). This is called, the joy of anticipating the joy.

Most athletes know what these writers are talking about. Studies of some of our greatest athletes have shown that, before they ever head for the track or the ball field or the gridiron, they will see themselves performing effortlessly, flawlessly. The decathlon participant will see himself clearing the hurdles. The wide-out receiver will hear the crowd cheering as he catches the winning pass, the swimmer will feel herself touching that wall just before her competitor. They all will experience the thrill of winning, the joy, long before it actually happens before crowds of spectators. That's the joy of anticipating the joy!

All of these New Testament writers had a profound sense of the one who had called them, the God to whom they had committed their lives. They knew God, not as an abstraction, or a vague idea, or as some Cosmic Principle. They knew God in Jesus as companion, guide, and friend. They were sure that God's grace would carry them across the finish line. They could feel the gold medal on their chests, they could see the laurel wreaths being placed on their heads, they could hear the cheers of those whose opinion really mattered. The joy of anticipating the joy!

You and I can have that kind of joyous anticipation in our lives, too. It comes with these lessons from the locker room. So, discipline your spiritual life with prayer, study, and worship; focus on following Jesus; and let yourself get caught up now in the joy that is coming. You and I are running to cross God's finish line. Take these lessons from the locker room into your race.