

Wm. Blake Spencer God Does What We Cannot Do for Ourselves
 Philippians 3: 12-16

I have one simple request in this my 23rd year of ordained ministry. It's not asking a lot and I don't think it will be much of a bother....and even if you aren't that wild about my request.... could you just.... maybe....sort of...give me a break and let me have it anyway? I mean surely I've earned it by now! I tell you what....Let me have this one thing and then we can get on with this thing called faith and ministry.

All I want is.... an exemption. Preferably one that comes with a laminated card so I can carry it around in my wallet and pull it out at convenient times....and remind you and everyone else that *I am exempt*. I want to be exempt from these words I've have been called to speak from pulpits like this one. I suppose you could say I really don't want to have to practice what I preach. Surely that is not asking much.

I know some of you understand....because occasionally after worship you come up to me and say, "That sermon was directed right at me." Well I'm sure sermons seem that way sometimes..... and that my friends, is why I want to be exempt. All this having to practice what I preach.....well all I'm saying is....it gets old and I want off the hook.

After all some preachers are notorious for not practicing what they preach.....so I say today....give all the preachers an exemption card.

It would make things so much easier....."Look, here's my exemption permit. This allows me to say and do what I want, then I can justify my behavior and actions by saying: "Sorry if you were disturbed or hurt....it's just the way I am. I can't help it." - or- "I'm so tired of always having to being responsible....level headed, fair, strong....

I want an exemption. Oh, I still want to be a Christian, but I want an exemption from all the things that come with following Christ....because honestly....sometimes it all just too hard.

(pause)

O.k....if you are nice enough.....I could include you too..... because life would be so much easier if we all had exemptions. So I say, a round of "exemptions" for the house and it's on me. Can I have an amen?

The faithful in Philippi were tangled up in this kind of discussion. They were arguing with each other as to what it means to live faith? What are the rules, the expectations? Who's included in God's promise? What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to live?

So Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians to help them sort through the purpose of faith.

An in this moment in his letter....the part we pick up today....Paul doesn't use heavy handed theology.....but rather describes faith through the eyes of a runner.

Fred Craddock, a theologian and preacher, writes that "Paul portrays himself here in the least relaxed, most demanding posture he knows: a runner in a race. His language is vivid, tense, and repetitious: pressing, stretching, pushing, straining. In those words the lungs burn, the temples pound, the muscles ache, the heart pumps, the perspiration rolls.

On first glance it can seem Paul is describing faith.... that is so demanding it seems impossible.

"I am not a long distance runner. I can't do that, so why then should I even try?"

But this is exactly what Paul is not saying. Earlier in his letter to the Philippians he describes his life before his conversion on the road to Damascus.

"As a leader in the Temple, Paul writes, I had better credentials than any other leader. I followed the letter of the law as given through Moses, yet I do not

consider myself complete. I follow Christ, I run this race of faith, but I do not do it on my own.

I persevere because Christ Jesus has made me his own, has given me the courage and strength and joy to not only make it, but to transform.... to become a new person with new perspective.

We're not talking about someone who runs a short distance in order to be on time...nor are we talking about fear based running...always one step away from disaster.

We're talking about long distance running.

We're talking about runners who understand that running is not only a discipline but an art, even a way of life, something to enjoy.

We are talking about the challenge of endurance but not forgetting the deep joy that comes with it.....that second wind.....that moment when you realize you feel good and are going to make it.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book "Leaving Church", writes that she gradually remembered what she had known all along, "that church is not the stopping place (it's not the finish line) but rather it is a starting place."

Church is the starting place where we come to terms with the realities of our lives.....where God meets us the way we are and knows us and gives to us what we need,

Barbara Brown Taylor shares her journey of faith with agonizing honesty....she writes: "I saw that my desire to draw as near to God as I could had backfired on me somehow, Drawn to care for hurt things, I had ended up with compassion fatigue. Drawn to a life of servanthood, I had ended up a service provider. Drawn to marry the Divine Presence, I had ended up estranged.

Like the bluebirds on my windowsills at home, pecking at the reflections they saw in the glass, I could not reach the greenness for which my soul longed. For years I had believed that if I just kept at it, the glass would finally disappear. Now for the first time, I wondered if I had devoted myself to an illusion."

Barbara admits that she was running the race of faith for the wrong reasons. She didn't do anything ethically or morally wrong. Rather her story is about hard endless work. She was a very good parish minister. But inwardly, spiritually she was withering, and for quite some time she didn't believe she could do anything to change the course of her agonizing journey.

Her story reminds us what Paul faithfully wrote so many generations ago. Yes, faith is about caring for others and serving each other. It's about giving what we have and who we are....but it is also about our inward being.

In other words, God calls us to faith not only to learn how to give to others but also learn how open ourselves to receive what God longs to give us through others.

If we delegate faith as being a task to be accomplish then all we end up doing is spinning our wheels. In the process, we run out of energy, and along the way we create such high standards for ourselves and each other we simply end up stranded.

If we make faith simply a task.....then all we end up holding is yet another burden....one more burden to add to all the other burdens we try to carry from place to place on our own.

It's hard to run a race weighed down with so many burdens. The reality is....we can't do it....but it doesn't stop us from trying.

Funny thing though....we don't always do what we say....which is another way of saying we don't always practice what we preach.

We say we believe in God's unconditional grace and that God lovingly and graciously forgives us.

We say we are a people with good news, news that God meets us the way we are, but doesn't leave us where we are and is constantly creating new life....continually leading us to love and be loved.

We say the peace of Christ is not something that we will eventually have one day....but is ours to claim and enjoy today.

We say these things but we fail to believe these things.....that these words....these beliefs are about the reality inside us.....about the burdens we try to carry as we run this race called faith.

Oh friends....God knows all about our burdens.....how they cloud our vision and sometimes turn us against each other....how they silence joy, and snuff out imagination.....how they stir up conflict and encourage anxiety...and slowly work to convince us that we do not have what it takes to live what we say we believe.

It's as if we trust our burdens over and above God's grace.

And yet....God's grace is the very gift exempting us from the task of lugging around all these burdens.

When we convince ourselves we can't finish the race.....

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

God frees us to let go of all those things weighing us down!

God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

That's the card we get to carry around. The one we get to pull out and show each other when life simply gets overwhelming.....

Look see....

God has done for me what we cannot do for myself.

So on this Genesis Sunday....on this day of new beginnings....on this occasion to sign up for all the things we call ministry.....

Put on your running shoes.....but not out of duty and burden....

Put on your running shoes and remember

This is a starting place.....where God meets us and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.....

This my friends is the good news.