

“Run!”
Hebrews 12:1-17
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Commencement Homily, Trinitas Christian School
Addressed to the Class of 2012
May 25, 2012

Graduates, tonight we rightly congratulate and honor you for your successful achievement. Twelve-plus years of cultivating hard and diligent work have borne fruit—and because the hardworking farmer has the right to enjoy the fruit of his labor, I earnestly hope that tonight and in the coming days and weeks you will feast with satisfaction and gratitude on this harvest.

But it’s not over. Not by a long shot. In fact, in some ways it is really just beginning. By “it” I don’t mean college, *per se*, but—and you are going to probably think this sounds sentimental and cliché—but what I mean to say is *really* just beginning for you is the race of life.

Now, I hate sentimentality more than anyone—but I hate it most in sermons and things like commencement homilies. Graduates all over the country this month and next are being fed platters of all manner of cheese—and not at their receptions but from the rostrums of their commencements. It is a comic *and* tragic irony—but a fitting commentary on our times—that any educator could have even thought about, let alone actually invited, the author of *Everything I Know I Learned in Kindergarten* as a commencement speaker.

But it is not sentiment when I say that with this graduation you are really beginning the race of life; rather, it is blunt, biblical realism, the kind that is necessary to discipline, to encourage and to soberly warn you toward a successful finish.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...(Hebrews 12:1)

The author of this letter to the Hebrews employs a metaphor well known to all in the first century Greco-Roman world—the competitive runner and his race. Athletic competition held the fascination of the public just as much in the ancient world as it does ours, and the Olympic games of old are merely the most famous of the many different games that all major cities hosted to honor their patron deities. All who

competed disciplined themselves to compete – but it is the endurance of those who ran the marathon that arguably was most admired. And it is precisely this metaphor that the Holy Spirit led this inspired author to use.

Neither time nor the occasion allows either Pastor Brito or myself a detailed exposition of Hebrews 12, so it will suffice to say that this letter was written to a church or group of churches experiencing persecution because of their faith in Christ. The best conclusion, based on the way the author frames his arguments, seems to be that the vast majority of those in these churches were converted Jews – and that their persecutors were their ethnic brethren, angry with the former’s exalting this “Jesus” over Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. Apparently the persecution is taking a toll; the author’s argument suggests many are being tempted to bolt – to deny Christ and return to Judaism.

The author spends 11 chapters explaining why they can’t do that: basically, God isn’t there anymore! The Old Covenant was a picture of the things to come – and in Jesus Christ the substance has arrived; in fact, he says the Old Covenant has passed away. As believers in Jesus the Messiah they have in fact embraced by faith the fullness of all that the saints of old looked forward to. In fact, those saints – whom he goes to great pains in Chapter 11 to point out did not receive in this world the fullness of what they were looking for – surround the Hebrew Christians as a “great cloud of witnesses” who testify to the joyful fruit of running the race with endurance.

And though it is a temptation to go into more detail into the awesome truth that we under the New Covenant have received the very substance of what the saints of old longed for, tonight all I have time to say is: “Run!” Well, I can actually expand upon that at least a bit – so I will. In fact, though I have read verses 1 through 17, my comments will be focused largely on the first several verses of the passage – which I think can be viewed as summary application of the remainder of the text.

There are several charges here, but I believe that two of them stand out as passionate priorities to the author. I do not think I do the content any harm by stating them this way: “Run the race set before you” and “Look to Jesus.”

“The race” is without question the course that God has providentially laid before you; you do not know what obstacles you may meet – but you know you will meet obstacles. Nonetheless, you are still to run – and run with endurance. Long distance runners need endurance to run the course; and how is this endurance achieved? By running...and running...and running.

Not just blindly – runners indeed set goals, distance and time goals to gauge their progress. They look to those goals to encourage them to develop that endurance and to, literally, reach the finish line. Until now graduation was one of the goals to which you looked; every year up to this year tested and stretched your endurance; that testing has been successful because you have indeed endured – and here you are!

But these twelve-plus years, at home, in church, and here at school will not have served you well if you do not continue to run with the kind of endurance necessary for this race, the course that God providentially unfolds before you. In order to run with endurance you must “lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely.” I am sure that as classically-educated students you know that runners in the ancient games ran naked in order to remove every literal hindrance to running well – and that is precisely what the author intends to communicate. You must throw off those things that slow you down and trip you up – literally the unnecessary and the sinful. You will not run well if you are weighed down by the distraction of what may be flattering and interesting to you; do not let a light view of the reality of your own sinfulness cling to you and so deter your running.

Let me explain what I mean. For years now you have been hearing how unique your education is – and it is. You have been steeping, almost literally in an environment that recognizes that thinking Christianly is not a matter of trying to make a synthesis of history, science, the arts and theology but rather is a matter of recognizing the intrinsic organic unity of all these things as rooted in the very nature of the God who Creates and who Redeems. You know that practically no one else your age in this city and county – and, relatively, only a handful more in this state and even country have received an education such as yours.

That fact could actually weigh you down in your race because, instead of being part of the discipline of the race, you may be tempted to see it as one of your trophies. Yes, because you have been at Trinitas you will run faster than most of your peers, you will run with greater endurance and you will have a deeper sense of the goal before you. But watch out, let you become like the hare and conclude that you can slow down, as it were, and even fold your arms and rest because you are running with those you perceive to be tortoises.

The author sins you must beware the sin that “clings so closely” – and I believe the greatest present danger of blessing is proneness to arrogance and elitism; the history of Israel is nothing if not an account of what happens to those who have forgotten that

they have been graced by God's blessing and instead have come to believe that they are themselves the reason for that very blessing. It was Israel's sense of entitlement that, in the end, destroyed them. They could not finish the race.

Yesterday morning you charged the student body to evaluate all things in light of four of what Christian history has defined as the "cardinal virtues" —justice, courage, wisdom, temperance. I would charge you this evening to consider that, biblically, there is something that I believe must take priority in your hearts and minds: Humility.

And that is what brings us to that second charge, of equal importance with the charge to run the race: "Look to Jesus." Run — but as you run

[look] to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)

Before we think about the breathtaking truth that we may run the race with endurance because Jesus, the one who set the course for us has himself run the race before us, we must steep in the meditation that we are talking about God humbling himself to take on a form that would even allow him to run such a race:

...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

He — the God through whom "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities..." for whom all things were created and who "is before all things, and in him all things consist" (see Colossians 1:16-17) — did not count his rightful essence and authority as a thing to be clung to but, instead "he humbled himself."

There is no doubt that the joy that was set before Jesus that led him to endure and to scorn even the shame of the cross was the joy of returning to his rightful place of glory with his Father. Yet there is no hint that Jesus in any way resented leaving that glory in the first place, or despised those for whom he humbled himself.

So, then, if you would now run this race that is set before you—"look to Jesus." For it is by looking to the founder and perfecter of the faith in which you run that you

will not indeed turn to the right or to the left; if you look to him – and in saying that I do not at all suggest that you will look and find him apart from this bride, the church, but you must look to him. If I sound as if I am encouraging you to have remember that your faith must be personal – then you are hearing me correctly. It is this humble and loving look of faith to Jesus, your Savior, that will strengthen and discipline you to run with endurance the race that *he* has set before you.

Recent statistics are that 80% of teens who identify themselves as Christians upon graduation from high school abandon the church by the end of their freshman year at college. I can assure you that it will not be your classical education at Trinitas that will ensure that you are of the 20%; it will be because you look to Jesus – and run with him – and yes, his beautiful bride, your fellow runners – in view.

How much more powerful, then it is, that the blessing of these years receiving such an education as yours is humbly received and displayed in your lives as you go from this place to run your race, bearing testimony to the joining of heart and mind as you have looked and continue to look to Jesus. Run, then, with confidence and with humility, and for the joy that is set before you, even as if was our Lord, who himself both runs with you and awaits your arrival as you finish the course.