

“Finishing Strong”  
2 Cor. 8:7-15  
June 27, 2021  
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In a race, a tie is rare.

Maybe that’s because - - races are not run - - with a tie as the goal.

Races are run - - to determine a winner.

You may remember the Olympic trials in Eugene in 2012.

With all the concerns about the virus this year - - that Olympics seems a long time ago.

But if you remember - - in 2012 there WAS a tie. / Two runners tied for third place.

Even the high speed camera could not determine a winner. / But the POINT of the trials - - is to declare a winner - - not a tie. / And a tie is so rare in the Olympic trials that there was NO rule.

So they invented a rule to determine the winner of this tie in 2012.

The rule is that there is either a coin flip or a runoff, and the runners decide which.

If they disagree there is a runoff.

If they both decline to choose there is a coin flip.

Races - - are about winners.

Soccer and hockey might be OK with a tie, but not racers.

That’s why we have the expression “dead heat”.

If a heat in a race is a tie - - it’s dead.

If a photograph cannot determine a “photo-finish” winner - - there is usually a do over.

There are sometimes reasons for a tie - - and there are famous ties - - but they are the exception. / One of the most famous instances was the basis for the movie “Ford v Ferrari” about the 1966 Le Mans car race.

That movie is one case where you can't really be the spoiler - - because everyone who really cares about it - - knows what happened before they start watching the movie. / And if you don't care enough to know - - what really is spoiled?

The reason for the tie in that case - - was the gracious act of a winning driver.

And there is a lot more to the movie - - which I won't spoil - - in case you haven't seen it.

The questions it raises for me are similar to the scripture reading today:

What does it mean to excel - - in graciousness?

AND - - can we excel in - - cooperation?

Paul wrote this ancient letter to the church in Corinth - - to encourage them to excel in gracious acts of - - cooperation. / He starts by pointing out all the ways they already excel in lots of other things - - they are winners in lots of areas. / But what about graciousness?

In chapter 8 - - verse 7 - - Paul wrote:

“...you excel in everything - -

- - in faith, in speaking, in knowledge, in earnestness...”

So then - - try to ALSO excel in the gracious work of cooperation.

In order to give an example of how to do this, Paul points to Macedonia.

There were several churches in Macedonia that were examples of this.

Philippi and Thessalonica were two well known ones.

These churches that Paul points to were not rich churches. / They had experienced challenges - - and poverty. / So they were NOT the biggest nor most famous congregations. But they were - - gracious. / And Paul wanted the community in Corinth to follow their example.

More specifically - - what these gracious churches did - - was give money.

They gave money to help the church in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church was the oldest - - original congregation. / And this grandparent church had fallen on hard times. / In response these younger churches all gave money to support them. / And the amazing thing about it was that the churches that gave this money were NOT rich congregations! / They were poor - - AND generous.

Why?

Because cooperation was a primary value to them. AND...

Because they followed the example of Jesus - - who was poor - - but generous.

The church in Corinth had a lot going for it - - but Paul said they were still INCOMPLETE - - and they way to FINISH what they had started - - and the way to finish STRONG - - was to EXCEL - - in GRACIOUSNESS.

So how do we hear this ancient text - - today?

Is Plymouth Church an old established church fallen on hard times in need of help?

Like the Jerusalem Church...

Is Plymouth Church a small poor gracious church willing to help others?

Like the church in Philippi?

Is Plymouth Church a successful thriving urban church in need of a spiritual renewal?

Like the church in Corinth?

It seems to me that whatever your answer - - the Scripture reading points to the same place - - as an encouragement - - to follow the example of the church in Philippi.

What was that church like?

It was a small church in a small town.

The congregation was not rich - - but they were generous.

And the primary reason - - was their commitment to - - cooperation.

They were gracious and generous because they KNEW - - that following the example of Jesus - - was not about WINNING alone. / Winning all by yourself might be impressive and get the attention of the news media.

But to REALLY finish strong - - means to finish graciously.

Finishing strong - - for Paul - - meant to complete the work of faith - - through grace.

Do you remember when you were really charged up about faith?

Do you remember when you felt inspired to help others?

That was a BEGINNING - - not an end.

And according to Paul - - when you think back to your earlier times of inspiration - - the question to ask yourself is - - how do I bring that beginning - - to a STRONG finish?

How can we live - - so the things of faith that began in us - - will FINISH STRONG?

Paul's answer - - is in graciousness and cooperation.

Give it away - - and you will finish strong!

It's the opposite of the rules of racing.

According to Paul - - there is NO DEAD HEAT!

When we run - - for others - - we finish strong.

I chose to focus on this scripture reading for this morning - - because I think it is something Plymouth Church can DO - - and IS doing - - and it can be a guide and an encouragement in the months ahead.

Worrying about the future is NOT a path to finishing strong.

Disappointment about not being in first place is NOT the path to finishing strong.

Graciousness - - and continuing to give it away - - IS the path.

I thought and prayed a lot about my decision to retire now.

I believe it is a good decision and right for me.

The reason is because I do NOT see it as a FINISHING point.

It is the next step on MY journey of faith.

I don't know exactly what it will lead to - - but I know it is where I am called.

Meanwhile - - this congregation is in a STRONG place right now.

The leadership at Plymouth is excellent.

There are some strong building blocks here for the future.

Leaving YOU in a strong position was important to me.

I have tried to do that - - and we have all summer to figure out next steps.

So on THIS Sunday - - what does it mean for YOU - - to finish strong?

How can you follow the example of graciousness that Paul recommends?

What is the next step for you in your faith?

As you think about those questions, I'll leave you with a little story about the importance of everyone doing their part - - in order to finish strong - - and create a winning atmosphere...

There is a story or parable, called "Net Results" told by Rabbi Edwin Friedman.

"One day Harry decided to improve his wife's tennis game...

Not that SHE cared much about tennis...

He found opportunities for her to learn - - but she never did.

He bought her the latest how-to books...

He left magazine articles on tennis around in hopes she would read them...

In response, Harry's wife had more and more trouble.

She would get sick just before a game.

Finally after she hurt her arm in a game Harry decided to teach her himself.

He bought her a new racket and shoes that were perfect.

He chose a perfect day weather wise - - on a perfect secluded court.

She did not seem overly excited and though she had a headache she agreed to go.

She forgot to wear her new shoes

and brought her old racket instead of the new one.

He went over how to hold the racket - - and hit her the perfect serve.

She barely moved but managed to hit the ball back.

After dozens of attempts he encouraged her to work on her follow through.

After a while he asked her: "Don't you want to play - - you don't seem interested".

"Well this was YOUR idea you know", she said.

Trying a new approach, he served the ball high up, and then ran around to her side of the court - - held her arm with his hand to guide her racket - - to hit the ball. / Then he took off again - - and beat the ball back to his side of the court - - lobbed it up high again - - and ran back to her side...

Then he stopped asking her or positioning her hand.

He just held on to his own racket this time. / Lobbed the ball high up and ran to her side of the net - - and hit it back to his side. / He had figured out the best way to hit it now and each time the ball came down - - on whatever side of the net - - he was there.

And so the match continued...

And Harry's wife stood there - - wondering when she could get out of the sun.

So hopefully the point of story is clear.

Some things - - are not SOLITARY pursuits.

Faith is like that.

Faith is not something designed - - to be WON - - by one person.

Or by one really great congregation.

Or by one denomination.

Strong faith - - is lived in cooperation - - and graciously.

Jesus calls us - - to acts of caring and compassion.

We can do that in all kinds of ways.

But just like in the story about tennis - - no one can do it FOR you!

It is YOUR calling - - and mine - - and hers and his - - and ours...

Whatever you all do here in St. Helens after I leave - - will NOT be done in ISOLATION  
 - - but rather it will be connected to the acts of lots of other followers all over the place - -  
 INCLUDING me. / The things I do in faith - - the giving I do - - the service I do - - the praying  
 I do - - in years to come - - will continue to be a part of what you are doing here.

As people of faith - - we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

Maybe one day we will find out that a TIE - - really IS the strongest FINISH.