“The Marathon of Faith”
Rev. Mark J. Eldred
Preached on 5/19/2019

I got caught in an interesting place this morning. On Marathon Sunday, I park over by Cleveland State and walk over to church. I don’t know why I do that – maybe worry that my car will get stuck over here after the marathon, but it has become a three-year tradition. And this year I watched the start of the marathon from a new place. I was stuck out in the middle of Euclid at one of the HealthLine stops. It was an amazing spot to see the start of the race as runners came whipping by me on both sides. I have to charge you all that if some year you are able to get up just a bit earlier on a Sunday and come downtown, I hope that you can join in in witnessing the start of a marathon. It is truly amazing to watch the mass of runners run by –the diversity, the hope of the start of a race, the collective energy of a mass of runners running in a unity. I hope that one year you will be able to see this amazing thing that I have had the privilege to witness now three years in a row.

I reached out to some friends for what is the new popular way to learn about things called crowd sourcing on social media. I didn’t need social media as I have a plethora of running friends to directly reach out to. I used this opportunity to pick the brains of my friends for the answer to a question pertinent to both our scripture today and to this very day in Cleveland, the day of the Cleveland Marathon 2019. The question is this: “Why would anyone in their right mind want to voluntarily run 26.2 miles?” So I reached out to some friends and asked, “One: why do you run? Why did you start running? And
two: specifically, why do you run marathons? Why is it that you want to voluntarily run 26.2 miles on what could be a cold and rainy morning, or even a hot and humid day like today?”

As I suspected might happen, I received a different answer from each of them. One was running for a cause, a charity, to give money to a cancer foundation – the goal was to give back in some way. Another person ran because it was a personal goal and a personal challenge to be more fit at a specific age, and the end goal of a marathon helped in the discipline of training for months with a running group who had the same goals and aspirations. Another person ran because their friend asked them to, they enjoyed the opportunity to meet new people, to build new relationships through a common interest of running, and to join the community of runners and experience how it feels to be out there with a bunch of people focusing on the same goal through something way bigger than a daily personal running routine. She said, “The massive group of runners is always an awesome thing to be a part of. It’s one thing to see it, and quite another to be it”. Another runner friend said that he started running as prayer – much like my ‘prayer walks’ during my chaplain days that I talked about a few weeks ago. He prays through training and running – uses the time as intentional time with God to lift up prayers of thanksgiving and prayers of struggle and strife in our world. These are all wonderful stories that actually mirror many of the reasons that people attend church or a faith setting.

But the story that moved me most regarding marathons was a friend who said that they ran because they had a high school cross-country track coach who told them, “you’ll never be a runner”, and right then and there it became their life goal to get a picture of themselves crossing the finish line at the Boston Marathon. They have since qualified but haven’t yet ran the Boston. They told me they run races and marathons to take back the narrative of a part of their life that had caused them shame – the narrative that they weren’t good enough in some way (they were a larger kid for their age that couldn’t keep up with the skinny kids) – and they said every time they crossed a finish line of any
run that they signed up for, they left that race a changed person and the various finish lines were opportunities for a new beginning for them.

This last story makes me think of today’s scripture Revelation and the new commandment Jesus has provided for us in the Gospel of John. I began to see some similarities and some trends in all of these answers, but it was this last story that made me sit with Revelation and Jesus in a new way. It makes me think about the Monday through Sunday church that Old Stone Church has been, is, and can be. What it is asking of us in this day and this time – the complexities of the needs of people in greater Cleveland and their faith journeys. It makes me think of the wide gamut of folks that walk through our doors on any given day, and it asks of me to break this last marathon story down a bit because there is something there.

In Revelation, we are at the end of a great Bible of the knowledge of our faith ascribed to “Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants” (1:1) through John of Patmos to those exiled for their beliefs – new Jesus followers in hiding from the empire of Rome and the power structures that wished to harm them for what they believed. Today’s scripture asks of me what I imagine the finish line of a marathon, or a life, of faith might feel like – it makes me think of why the first heaven and the first earth would need to pass away for something to be made new? What might need to pass away in our day and time that we might begin to seek a new heaven and a new earth here and now?

And this narrative of my friend spoke to me as I read the words of Scripture, it stuck with me. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciated every answer that I received from the other runners about running marathons, but this last story made me think of these very people John of Patmos was speaking to and about what our faith struggles look like today. This person was told at a young age that they were too heavy to run – that their very self wasn’t good enough for the task at hand – that the person who they are and see in the mirror every day shouldn’t try and run – and this young person had to carry that with
them for years and years; this idea that they weren’t welcome. Aren’t we seeing this in our world right now and even in some of our churches—so many opportunities that people in power seem to be taking with those who have no power and who are vulnerable to shame them, to insight fear, to force out, to other, and I could go on and on. On the micro level, here is a young person made to cast aside a part of their true self and to think, “I guess that I am just fat and will never be a runner”.

I feel like this marathon story gets at the heart of today’s marathon of faith. Through this Revelation of Jesus Christ, God is asking us to minister to the time that we are in, here and now—each of us, as God is a God from Alpha to Omega; a God here with us in the past, now, and forever more. That means to take a closer look at the world around us and what faith struggles might mean in our communities. I sense that we are being called to more fully understand the complexities of our world. And on a day-to-day basis I see a lot of shame walking around this community. I see a lot of fear and grief and anger in Greater Cleveland. I think of my fat-shamed friend and that is some day-to-day faith struggle that perhaps people can relate to, and I wonder where the church is in these every day conversations? They were told they could never be a runner and it makes me wonder who we might be telling over and over that they could never be a good Christian, or a real Christian, or a real believer, or a real person of faith capable of running the faith marathon right alongside us? Who is being excluded from God’s house, from God’s love, and from God’s eternal love? Who is being exiled from the churches in our time? When and where can we sign up for a marathon of faith with the unified goal of loving as Jesus loved?

As I think there is something we might all be able to learn from things like marathons, I want to lift up what my friend said about finishing a marathon. Each time they finish a marathon, they “take back the narrative” of a part of their life; each time they finish a marathon they “leave changed”. Each time they finish a marathon it is “a new beginning” for them. I don’t know about you, church, but I want to leave church like that. I want my life in faith to be doing this for me. I want the church family who I worship with and
spend so much time with to be experiencing these same things in their faith lives, and I have seen the potential of it in churches.

Here is a person getting so many things out of a marathon that we are supposed to be offering access to as a universal and loving church of God. Here is a human being leaving a marathon changed. Here is a human being putting the time and effort and discipline and miles in, hard training miles. It would be easy to quit when training for a marathon. It would be so easy to walk away when training to run 26.2 miles just seems like too much. It is so easy to quit after injury, or when someone in your running group makes you mad, and you get to thinking, “what is the point of all of this?” It is so easy to leave the church when we get angry, or frustrated, or bored, or complacent, or injured – only part way in to our own marathons of faith. So many are finding it easier to walk away than to stay in the conversation, the ministry, and the faith journey. And my friend said, “You know, I don’t really tell many people that story, but you asked. I don’t think about it much anymore because of all the finish lines that I have crossed since.”

I thought to myself, “dear friend, what a gift it is for me to witness your old heaven and your old earth passing away in front of my very eyes as I read your story. What a sincere and true gift that must be to be able to let go of the old through the gift of running in your life!” Dear Church, what can we be doing in our world that we might be moving people toward this kind of finish line? What kind of race might we be helping people run together in this world that they might have access to a path of becoming whole again, that they might reclaim a part of their own lost narrative, that there might be no more tears, that we might be loving as Jesus taught us to love, that death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

I wonder if we couldn’t start by seeing the abundance in places of transformation around us through things like this Cleveland Marathon, or events on Public Square and around our city, or here in worship with one another? That the marathon of Cleveland not be a pain in my traffic day, but a place where we rejoice in the abundance of potential
change, of new beginnings, of overcoming challenges, of triumph and transformation, and the presence of God’s Glory. That we can begin to see the home of God here among the mortals more each and every day in the races that they, and we, run, and in some little glimpses of hope in God working in and through the lives of ourselves and of others. Might we remember that only God will have the final power dynamic. I am hopeful that by the grace of God I will get to that finish line and drink of the spring of the water of life – a new heaven and a new earth; a place with no more thirst, no more tears, no more mourning, or crying, or pain – all things new. A marathon of faith where everyone wins. Amen.