

The Death Race
 Philippians 1:21-30
 September 18, 2011

Video Clip - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Mt31BAEwto>

Last Sunday we remembered the 10th anniversary of Sept. 11, 2001 looking at the Apostle Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome, Romans 13, where Paul challenges us with the continuing debt to love one another. Despite all the brokenness, sin and evil we find in this world, even the type of evil which was carried out on 9/11/2001, Paul tells us that, as Christians, we have the continuing debt to love one another. It is a debt in which we need to continually pay upon during our life here on earth and yet will never pay off. Why? Because God chose to love us first. "That while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

This morning we are beginning a brief look at another of Paul's letters, his letter to the Christians in Philippi. The apostle Paul was a rather unique individual. Many today struggle with the Apostle Paul. Some aren't even sure if we should read his letters, which creates quite a problem because it would eliminate a pretty significant part of the New Testament. Paul was a very strong personality. That is what made him who he was. Very intelligent, a Jewish scholar who knew the Word of God, as described in the O.T. A persecutor of the earliest Christians. Most likely even played a part in some of their deaths. But something happened to Paul. He had a conversion experience like none other described in the Bible.

Found in Acts 9. While he was on the road to Damascus, he was struck down. Caused to go blind and heard the voice of the Lord, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And then the Lord spoke to Ananias telling him to go to Saul. "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

There really is nothing else which could describe the change that took place in Saul, who would become Paul. The man who went from being one of the great persecutors of Christ and Christians, to his greatest advocate. "Zeal" is probably the word that describes Paul best. In fact he called himself a "zealot," in a bad way when referring to his old life. God knew that if he could channel Paul's energy and determination for the right cause, for God's purpose, great things could be done.

Paul would turn out to be one of the most influential leaders of the early church, responsible for spreading Christianity across the Great Mediterranean Sea and to the west. He planted the church in Philippi on his third missionary journey. A couple years later he finds himself in Rome. Actually he finds himself in prison or under house arrest. Not under house arrest as we know it today, where one might have an ankle bracelet on being the only thing holding him or her from freedom. When Paul is under house arrest, it says he is "in chains," and he has guards watching over him. But they allow him to write. And he writes to the Christians in Philippi where he began the church.

[Read Philippians 1:1-30](#)

Today, endurance and extreme sports are very popular. More and more people want to push the envelope with death defying acts. Today, marathons and triathlons are not enough anymore. They have ultramarathons, where some run for 50 or 100 miles, perhaps up to 24 hours. When Reed and I were in Pittsburgh for the Mennonite Church USA Convention this summer we were walking over where Reed was going to run in a so called “fun run.” Why they put those two words together I don’t know. But I suddenly noticed that the man walking in front of us, whose body looked rather abnormal, was wearing a t-shirt which said “I survived the - - - ultramarathon.” That’s when I pointed out to Reed that things weren’t looking so good for him. You see I could do that. I was just looking for a nice restaurant to get a bite to eat.

But today, ultramarathons are not even enough. There are now events like the annual “Death Race” in Pittsfield, Vermont, described in the video clip. The competition is so brutal that organizers require the entrants to sign a three-word waiver. It says, “You may die.” A man by the name of Paul Allentuck, travelled from Washington D.C. to compete in this year’s death race. Allentuck seems like just a normal person. He is in his 40’s, owns a small landscaping business and is married with three children. He has run seven marathons, four ultramarathons, three Ironman triathlons, and somewhere between 30-40 other triathlons. He said rather simply that the Death Race was just “the next thing.”

Endurance and extreme sports are becoming more and more popular in our culture today. The word “extreme” actually comes from the Latin word phrase, *in extremis*, which means “at the farthest reaches” or “at the point of death.” But as more and more people are engaging in extreme sports, even willing to risk death to participate, how about the number who are willing to die for Christ?

What’s the next thing for the apostle Paul? He’s straddling the line between life and death and wonders what is better for him. If he lives, he’ll continue to engage in “fruitful labor,” which he knows can bring glory to Christ and be beneficial to the new believers in Philippi. But if he dies, he’ll “depart and be with Christ.”

Paul seems to be leaning towards life here. He says, “I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again” (Phil. 1:25-26). But Paul knows that ultimately his life is not in his hands. Currently, it is in other’s hands. Actually it’s in God’s hands and he’s willing to leave it in God’s hands. Paul pushes himself to the edge of death because he wants to see what he is capable of, striving for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Have we lost that drive in the church today? So often we turn away from risk and focus on what is comfortable. The Death Race involves incredible commitment and preparation from participants, and so does the race of the Christian faith.

What if upon baptism or membership request one was required to sign a three-word waiver when they joined the church? The same as the Death Race: “You may die.” Would that turn people away or attract them? And should that really be our concern? The promise of the Christian faith is that if we want to live, then we must die to ourselves.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”
Mark 8:34-35 (NIV)

Will Willimon, the Bishop in the Methodist Church whom I also quoted last Sunday, says this: “the goal of the gospel story is not to make us free, to be those who live and die on our own terms, but rather to have our lives linked to something and someone worth living and dying for.”

Do we really understand how anti-American, or counter-cultural the gospel message really is? Just as the Lord said to Ananias regarding Saul, who would become Paul, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name”(Acts 9:16). The same as Paul’s words to the early believers in Philippi, “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also suffer for him” (Phil. 1:29).

When was the last time we told new attenders or visitors, or those contemplating committing their lives to Christ: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also suffer for him?”

For those of you who are suffering today, whatever way it may be, know that you may be at the exact place where God has called you to be. Know that it is a privilege to suffer with Christ, as well as believe in him. Most of us see the value in believing in Christ, but few consider it a privilege to suffer along with him. Endurance athletes such as Bruce Allentuck know the value of pain. They understand they cannot compete in the Death Race, or even a marathon or a triathlon without intense training. No pain, no gain!

Yes, we are justified by our faith in Christ, which is a gift from God, so no one can boast:
“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.
Romans 5:1-5 (NIV)

Not every Christian trains for a marathon, but every follower of Christ has opportunities to live in a manner worthy of the gospel, whether in our prosperity or in our suffering.

As someone else has pointed out, “the great tragedy of life is not that people die for their beliefs. It is that people come to the end of life without finding anything to live or die for. “You may die” is really too soft a statement. The truth is “you will die.” But what will you do before then?

Or for those who say that those two dates on the tombstone; the day you were born and the day that you die really mean nothing, it is what you do with the dash in between. The dash represents what you are willing to live and die for. Only God knows how long the dash is going to be. The big question is for those of us who have been presented with the gospel message,

when you come to the end of that dash, where are you going to be? With Christ, or without Christ?

The great tragedy of the annual "Death Race" in Pittsfield, Vt., of those each year who begin the race, only between 10-20% ever cross the finish line.