

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas - August 18, 2019
The Inheritance That God Has Prepared
Colossians 1:9-14 and Hebrews 12:1-3

Have you ever showed up for something that you were completely unprepared for? I can still remember a conversation with my maternal grandfather. He was visiting my family from out of state, and he arrived at my high school one afternoon to pick me up from the first day of soccer practice. When the final whistle blew, I grabbed my bags and trudged over to his car. “Hi, Jonathan,” he said, always calling me by my given name. “How was practice?”

My head sank. “I’ve never been this tired, Granddad, and I’ve never hurt this much.” It wasn’t that I was a bad soccer player. I was actually quite good at it. That year, I went onto serve as the starting center forward and one of the leading scorers on the team, as had been the case every year prior.

My challenges that day were not about a lack of skill, but a lack of conditioning. In the offseason, I wasn’t running. I wasn’t lifting weights. I wasn’t pushing myself. And on the first day of practice, it always showed. It was like I freed myself from an ordinary life and began my training by running a marathon. For spectators, it’s easy to spot this. There’s a big difference between the players who

are in shape and the ones who have considerable work to do before the first game of the season. And it's never wise to begin ones training by running a marathon.

Here in Akron, the annual marathon often passes near our home. And while no one in our family has ever competed in it, we do walk up to the main road and cheer them on. In their faces, you can see the whole range of expressions. They are pained, hot, thirsty, and sweaty. They are focused, purposeful, determined, and smiling. The whole gamut is there. And for those who actually complete the race, there is more emotion still, shown in the form of pride, accomplishment, and confidence.

We know, scientifically, that the act of running, and exercise, in general, boosts energy, releases endorphins, and produces a natural "high." These are the little rewards along the way, encouraging athletes to stay the course. And so it is with faith.

Today, I invite you to think back to that time in your life when matters of faith began shaping your identity. I imagine that most of us started out rather slowly. And more to the point, faith is often, at first, primarily an intellectual pursuit. A matter of belief. We ask if this system of thinking fits into our worldview. We want to know if these principles seems true, and moral, and right.

We also wonder what will be asked of us. And if we are honest enough to admit it, we hope that the demands on our time will be kept to a minimum. Believing that all is generally well in our lives, and pleased with who we already are, we convince ourselves that we are interested in faith to help us through any difficult times ahead. In the meantime, we wonder if the church has anything inspiring to teach us.

In the beginning, no one expects us to move mountains. We are disoriented, and more than a little anxious. But, in time, we begin to believe this stuff. It makes sense, and it improves our lives. It eases our anxieties. It provides a needed community of support and encouragement. And before we know it, we are learning to love in ways that we never thought not possible.

We are encouraged to lay down our lives for our friends and to love even our enemies. Our worldview is shaken and it is changing. Political divisions, once so important, give way to knowledge that we, our neighbors, and all of creation, are made in the image of God. Soon, we are called to serve even those with whom we disagree.

Pretty soon, it occurs to us that we are already running the race. And more than that, we are enjoying it. We are grateful for the changes that we see in ourselves.

We recognize that we are less bitter and more hopeful, less judgmental and more understanding. We walk by faith, and not by sight. Or, as Tom long explains it, faith “prays boldly for those who mourn, serves tenderly those who weep, works tirelessly to ease the pain of those who are wounded. Inwardly, faith moves hearts; outwardly, faith moves mountains.”¹

And it all happens, not in a vacuum, but as part of a larger system. The Presbyterian tradition is committed to the collective wisdom of multiple generations. Here, wisdom is shared and received. And the Holy Spirit is revealed, not in the form of authoritarian pronouncements from the pastor or any other leader in the life of the church, but in the relational nature of discernment. Here, the official titles for our leaders can be misleading, for church elders can be of any age. And they make decisions, not as individuals, but through discussion, and collaboration, and compromise. It’s been this way for hundreds of years.

Yes. Our process is slow, but it is also deliberate. Voices are heard. Motions are made. And the work of Jesus Christ is accomplished. You can see it in our life together. This afternoon, the greater Akron community is invited to join us in the fellowship hall for a free meal at 5 p.m., no questions asked. That event will be

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 114.

followed by an ice cream social featuring musical entertainment. Then, next weekend, we are participating in Akron Pride. Together, we are serving God's purposes. Together, we are moving mountains.

And we do all of this as a part of a great cloud of witnesses, knowing that they are the ones filling the stands at the soccer match. They are the ones passing out water to the marathon runners who have still more miles to go until they sleep. They are the ones who remind us that we are never alone in the journey, never separated from God and neighbor, and never too weary to lose hope. So here we are, and here we stand. Ready to run the race, and confident in God's promises. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.