

Several months ago, Phil and Katie Rabe told me they want to join Triune. They said that their 3 teenagers were baptized as infants but they have not been confirmed; so they asked if I could teach a confirmation class for them. I said I would be delighted to. Two other teens in the congregation joined the class as well. So, for 6 Sunday afternoons, I met with these 5 young people, to talk about our faith, to ask questions, to explore what it means to love God and to love our neighbor, what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. They had homework too: they read the Gospel of Mark, 4 chapters a week, and then we talked about it. Each student had a mentor from the congregation who was part of the process. The students “interviewed” their parents and their mentor about matters of faith, and then they wrote three pieces: a faith journey about how they have experienced God in their lives; a statement of faith, what they believe; and finally, a statement of intentions, how do they intend to live their life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Our final afternoon together was a special time: Deb and I set up a circle of chairs around the communion table, and one student at a time came with their parents and their mentor, to share with that small group what they had written. The students had put a lot of thought into their statements; they had good insights and reflections. We also asked them what gifts God has given them, to share with the world. These were holy conversations. After each conversation, that student and his/her parents and mentor went for a walk around the perimeter of the building, to four “stations”, where a person would read a passage of Scripture and a reflection on it for the youth.

But what exactly is confirmation, you ask? In churches that practice infant baptism, confirmation comes once that infant has gotten to be a teenager; the teens go through a class to study the faith, and then they “confirm” the baptismal vows that were made on their behalf. They do not need to be baptized again, but this is the time to make their own commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Today, two of these students will be baptized; the other three will be confirmed. They will answer the exact same questions.

So today’s sermon is primarily a message for these young people, but of course, it is a message for us all.

Within my first week of arriving at college, I entered what was called the “*Cake Race*,” the annual 3-mile cross-country race for first year students. It was called the “*Cake Race*” because faculty, staff, and other townspeople in this small college town contributed homemade cakes to be awarded as prizes to the runners. The day that I ran in that race, there must have been 50 or 60 cakes, all lined up at the finish line waiting for the runners.

Well, I had never been very good at sports in middle school or high school, but I wanted to be a good sport and I didn’t want to miss out on the fun. Besides, I thought, how bad can 3 miles be? So I entered. Well, it might as well have been 10 miles to me... and needless to say, by the time I finally crossed the finish line, the tables loaded down with cakes had been empty for a long time!

But there was an amazing thing about that race. As I approached the final stretch, along with a few other stragglers, here were all these people, lining both sides of the course: professors, staff members, townspeople, with their children and dogs, all out there, cheering us on, waving little flags, encouraging us, and congratulating us, at least for finishing the race, if not for winning a cake. It seemed to me that we stragglers got as much attention and encouragement as the fast runners.

This morning's text is from Hebrews 12: 1-3. This book is really more of a sermon than a letter, so the author of it is known as "the Preacher". In these verses, the Preacher talks about the Christian life being like a race we're running.

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

The Preacher begins this passage by talking about that great crowd of folks who are encouraging us and cheering us on, just like those professors and townspeople at the Cake Race. In the chapter just before the part I read, the Preacher lists all the many people from the Bible who have gone before us and who are encouraging us in our faith. He calls them the "great cloud of witnesses": Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Miriam, Rahab, David, Samuel and the prophets. All these people, he says, surround us, cheer us on, and encourage us to keep the faith, to persevere, and to place our trust and hope in God.

Our great cloud of witnesses today includes people the Preacher didn't list, people of faith throughout all the centuries: Peter, Paul, Lydia, Timothy, St. Francis, Martin Luther, and Mother Teresa. Our great cloud of witnesses includes people we have known in our own lives: parents, grandparents, teachers, neighbors. Our great cloud of witnesses includes each other here at Triune: social workers, rehab counselors, nurses, mental health care workers, attorneys, a chiropractor, friends in the art room, Circles support members. All these people encourage us, cheer us on, and love us as we run this race of faith, this race of life.

As you young people embark on this race of the Christian life, you are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses: people of faith from the Bible and through all the centuries, but also folks at this church who love you, who are pulling for you, who are eager to encourage you and support you.

So, here you are, embarking on this long-distance race, this journey of faith, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses. But how do you go about running this race? I guess the Preacher thinks he's a coach, because he gives us three pieces of coaching advice:

First of all, he basically says, travel light. You can't run if you're loaded down. So, he says, "Get rid of anything that is weighing you down or tripping you up. Take a good hard look at yourself

and see what is bogging you down in your Christian life, see what is keeping you from living into your calling.

Maybe it's your worries that drain your energy; maybe it's resentments of others that has got you stuck; maybe it's your fears that hold you back, or your feelings of failure that you can't shake. Whatever it is that's weighing you down, hand it over to God, whether for healing or forgiveness, or redirection, or peace of mind, so that you can travel light as you run this race. And remember that your great cloud of witnesses is there to help you in this process of letting go of heavy burdens, this process of healing.

Secondly, the Preacher says, "*Run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*" The word choice here is not accidental: we do need to persevere, because the Christian life is not easy. There will be uphill and downhill; there will be difficult terrain; there will be confusion about which direction to go.

Just as serious runners need training and discipline, commitment and focus, so we too, in our Christian life, need those same things. Serious runners benefit from good coaching, someone to encourage them, to give them tips, and to challenge them; and that's a major role of the great cloud of witnesses for us Christians. Runners can learn a lot about running by reading and talking with coaches and other runners, but reading and talking are incomplete without actually getting out there and running. Likewise, we Christians can learn a lot from reading and talking with our great cloud of witnesses, but that's not enough. We've got to get out there and actually live the Christian life: praying, studying, forgiving, serving, worshipping, and trusting God. We like to talk about praying and forgiving, but we get good at it only as we practice it over and over and over. We don't get good at praying only by talking about it, but by actually praying; we don't get good at trusting God only by talking about it, but by actually taking one step at a time, one day at a time, putting it into practice; we don't get good at forgiving only by talking about it, but by actually forgiving others.

Just as in a marathon, there will be times in our Christian life that seem too demanding and we simply want to give up, to get out of the race. The Preacher here reminds us to run with perseverance this race that is set before us, not to give up.

Finally, our Preacher and coach tells us how to handle the long hills and how to get our "second wind": he says to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. The Preacher calls Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Jesus has "*pioneered*" this race; he has gone before us and set the course. Jesus has "*perfected*" this race. He knows how to run it... and he shows us how to run it.

Throughout the Christian life, it's all too easy to stray from the course, to get distracted and go off in another direction, and find ourselves on an unintended detour. But, by keeping our eyes on Jesus, we see where we're going, we stay headed in the right direction. As we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, we realize that he's at the center of that great cloud of witnesses. Jesus Himself is cheering us on and encouraging us to be diligent and disciplined in our training, faithful in our running and focused on our goal.

And so, this day, as you young people embark on this journey of faith that's like a long-distance race, hear these words from a long-ago sermon, *"Since you are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, lay aside every weight, travel light, and run with perseverance the race that is set before you, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith."* Amen.