

Let It Go, Let It Be, Let It Come—The Spirit Moves
...toward the Goal
Hebrews 12:1-3

A few years ago I decided I wanted to run a half-marathon with my daughter Stacey. Stacey lives in Los Angeles, so I flew to LA to do the Rock & Roll run with her. Running 13 miles with a band to greet you every mile or so sounded a lot easier than just listening to myself breathe hard. The morning of the race, we walked from Stacey's apartment to the place where the race would end, and with thousands of other people, we took a bus to the beginning of the course.

I was a little nervous to begin with. It was really early in the morning—maybe 5:30 or so—and it was kind of cold, but I knew I'd be hot while I was running, so I kept trying to figure out how many layers of clothes to wear, and what I was going to do with those layers as I peeled them off during the race. I'd never run that far before...what if I couldn't make it? And then the bus started to drive. And it drove...and drove...and drove. It felt like we were never going to get to the starting line. I had no idea 13 miles was so far. We went on the freeway! It could have been 113 miles, for all I knew. And my stomach got tighter and tighter the further the bus drove, and especially every time we went up and over a hill, because I knew we'd have to climb back over that hill on foot. By the time we got to the place where the race started, I was so nervous about the whole thing, I probably would have ridden that bus home if they'd given me the chance.

And then, finally, we started to run, and it was fine. I ran some, I walked some; it turns out you can live through a half-marathon...who knew?

Often when we're doing something new—for the very first time, or maybe when it's such a big thing it will only happen once in our lives—we are anxious as we come to its beginning, especially if we've had some time to anticipate what's ahead of us. Maybe you confirmation students have felt a little bit like this as you've thought about the big step you're taking today. In fact, I know you have—because some of you have asked big, important questions, like “What will change after I'm confirmed? Will I have to be or do something different—especially around the church?”

And the truth is, each of you will have to answer that question for yourself. As far as the church is concerned, you are doing today everything you have to do to make you a full member of this Campbell United Methodist Church congregation. You can vote when the church makes big decisions. You can serve on committees. You can be liturgists and leaders and greeters. You can be Wednesday Wonder Workers. Maybe most importantly, now that you have decided to become an official member, you can—and I hope you will—think of yourself as a *host*, an owner, of this church. This is the most important part of the responsibility of church members: to welcome other people, and to let them know that this is a place where they are welcome and accepted here, just as they are.

But way more than what you do around the church, here's what's important today: You can treat this day—your confirmation—as no big deal, or you can see it as a significant moment in your life, a starting place on a long road that will take you somewhere.

And where *will* this road take you? Where is that finish line? What's the goal of trying to live a life that makes God happy, a life of trying to put your shoes into Jesus' footprints?

Some people would say the goal is about being sure you get to heaven after you die. I suppose that might be true, but a lifetime seems like a really long time to be getting ready for your real life. Like a 90-year bus ride to the beginning of the race. I think God has hopes for us—a goal for us to keep our eyes on—in this life too. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism—who I know you studied about in your confirmation class—believed that each of us “going on to perfection” in this life. What he meant by perfection is not that we would never make a mistake again, but that we could get to the point—in this life!—where everything we do comes out of love. Love for God, love for other people. Unselfish love, the kind of love that doesn't ask first, “What's in it for me?” or “Will it hurt?” Wesley believed that if we keep our eyes on that goal; if we stay as close as we can to Jesus, we might change enough—our hearts can grow enough—to love almost the way God loves us.

I want to tell you about someone who seems like she got pretty close to that goal. Her name is Kayla Mueller. Kayla died earlier this year, when she was just 26. You may have heard about her in the news; she was killed by ISIS after she was kidnaped while she was helping orphans and refugees in Syria.

Kayla grew up in Prescott, Arizona. She went to high school there, and then she went to college not very far away, at Northern Arizona University. But somewhere along the way, maybe in high school, she started to look different from lots of the other kids around her. She was interested in people who lived far away. She cared about the earth, and about places where people were suffering—Palestine, Darfur, India. She volunteered at summer camps for immigrants, helping them to learn what they needed to know about life in the U.S. She worked at a shelter for homeless women and children. In college, she started clubs to make other people more aware of what was going on in Palestine and Syria and other places where there is no peace. She explored Buddhism *and* she stayed connected to the Christian campus ministry at her college. Kayla's concern for other people made her courageous. She did things—big, important things—that most of us would have been afraid to do.

Before she was kidnaped in Syria, Kayla said this: “This really is my life's work, to go where there is suffering....I find God in the suffering eyes reflected in mine. If this is how you are revealed to me [God], this is how I will forever seek you.”

Kayla was an extraordinary person. She made a big difference in the world. Not very many people will do the things she did in her short life. But Kayla was a normal kid, too. I want you to see this little video of her taken one summer while she was in college:

<https://youtu.be/rabtB5K8ISA?list=PLqgLEhY9R2wQHtvls0JLrDsPNG3FArNIF>

Kayla was running her race. She wasn't riding on the bus, waiting to arrive at the starting line; she was doing it; and she started when she was very young. Her heart leaned toward people who were suffering; and for her, the goal—the finish line—was to give her whole self, joyfully, to help them. And that's what she did.

Most of us have no idea when we're 12 or 13 or 14 how our lives will turn out—the work we will do, or where we will live, who will be beside us in our adult years. But it is not too early for you to make a decision about *the kind of person you want to be*. You are making a statement about that today, with your decision to be confirmed. You are saying, I want to be someone who brings a little bit of Jesus into every place I go. A little more kindness and generosity. More attention, to see who is not being included, and who is suffering. More courage, to do the right thing even when I have to step out alone to do it.

And, may I say to all the rest of us: it is never too late to make that decision again.

The writer whose words we read this morning, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, put it in terms of a race. We are surrounded by witnesses, he said; people who are watching us to see what followers of Jesus look like, and people who are cheering us on. So take off all those extra layers and bags you're carrying, so you can run. So you can run as long as it takes to get to the finish line. And when you get tired, or afraid you won't be able to make it up that next hill, look up and you'll see Jesus in front of you, on the very same road. If you don't see him there, maybe that's a sign that you've lost your way, veered off onto the wrong path. All of us do that from time to time.

And so we pray—we have to pray—every day, “Here I am, God. Help me today to pay attention. Give me strength and courage and patience to go wherever the Spirit leads me. Help me to love other people the way you love me.” It's like breathing, that prayer; it lets us breathe in the fresh air and energy we need to keep running...all the way to the finish line.

We are blessing you today as you start your own race. Here's this whole church-ful of people cheering you on. They're pointing out the course, saying, “Watch for that next turn,” or “Come on—you're almost to the top of the hill!” We're ready to give you a hand if you fall, and a place to rest when you get tired. And always, we'll be reminding one another: Don't forget to look up, and breathe.