



SERMON

The Rev. Dr. Kent J Ulery
Interim Associate Conference Minister
October 13, 2013

Marathon Running in Sacred Places

One hundred twenty-five years. “Having FAITH in the community since 1888,” your congregation has been serving Hales Corners and beyond for 125 years. Happy anniversary everyone!

For the trivia fans among us, did you know, written out in Roman numerals, 1888 holds the record for requiring more letters than any other year – MDCCCLXXXVIII, 13 letters in all – a record it will hold for another 875 years!

Newspapers 125 years ago contained the birth notices for John Foster Dulles and Joseph Kennedy Sr., Knute Rockne and Jim Thorpe, TS Eliot and Eugene O’Neal, Irving Berlin and Harpo Marks...along with the obituaries for novelist Louisa May Alcott, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Henry Bergh, and John Stith Pemberton who established the Coca-Cola Company.

On the sports pages in 1888 were reports on the first indoor baseball game, the first organized rodeo in this country, the longest US men’s singles tennis tournament match in history (80 games), and the USC Trojan’s first football game (which they won 16-0).

In the business section announcements were made of the invention of the ballpoint pen, the first revolving door, a bicycle tire you could fill with air, the first waxed drinking straw, George Eastman’s new box camera with film that actually rolled, the first movie (entitled *Roundhay Garden Scene*, it was only 18 frames long and lasted a full 2 seconds), and something called a timecard clock. There also were articles about the establishment of the Department of Labor, though the business lobbyists prevailed in insuring that that Department would not have a seat in the President’s cabinet.

In the entertainment section there were reviews of new works by Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Herman Melville, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Jules Verne, Lew Wallace, Oscar Wilde...but the only writer making any real money was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who published 6 adventures of his fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. Oh yes, a poem was buried in the June 3rd edition of the *San Francisco Examiner*, page 4, column 4, for which the poet was paid \$5, which included this verse:

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville -- mighty Casey has struck out.

In the arts section of the newspapers 125 years ago the impressionists finally were legitimated when Paul Gauguin paintings were exhibited in Paris, though the art world was shocked to learn that Gauguin's good friend, Vincent van Gogh, cut off his left ear after the two of them quarreled. 1888 was the year Rodin sculpted "The Thinker." And, for you music lovers, that was the year Debussy composed *Arabesque*, Grieg composed the *Peter Gynt Suite*, and Tchaikovsky composed his *Fifth Symphony*.

But, while generally a time of peace and prosperity, all was not well in 1888 as extreme weather made headlines with the worst snowstorms in US history. The "Schoolhouse Blizzard" hit the Dakota Territory (including Montana, Minnesota, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas) killing 235, many children who never made it home through the snow. Then came the "Great White Hurricane Blizzard" shutting down the eastern seaboard. The National Weather Service reported 40 to 50 inches of snow, coupled with 48 mph winds, creating drifts 4 to 5 stories tall, resulting in 200 ships being grounded, 100 sailors lost, 300 dead on shore, \$25 million in fire damage due to fire stations being snowed under. That storm led to New York City's decision to construct a subway system.

In the nation's capital 125 years ago the Washington Monument opened to tourists, the National Geographic Society was formed, and Susan B. Anthony organized a Congress for Women's Rights. But the big political news in the papers of 1888 was that Grover Cleveland won the popular vote in his bid for a second term as President, but he lost in the Electoral College to Benjamin Harrison, who had carried the swing states of New York and Indiana by a razor thin margin of less than 1%.

Before leaving office, President Cleveland gave voice to the mean-spirited, anti-immigration, racial prejudice which led to riots and murders throughout the country, when he declared that the Chinese -- after having built the first transcontinental railroad were clustered for safety in the Chinatowns of our major cities, denied citizenship, and subjected to the Chinese Exclusion Act -- were "impossible of assimilation with our people and dangerous to our peace and welfare."

One hundred twenty-five years ago, in a time not so unlike our time -- in a time of sporting events and artistic creation; in a time of technical inventions and natural disasters; in a time when the country was divided between competing political ideologies and by blatant acts of xenophobia and sexism; in a time when unbelievably hurtful words were spoken even by religious leaders who damned others as "living in sin" and "going to hell" -- yes, in a time not so unlike our time, one hundred twenty-five years Louis Kerler gathered friends and neighbors to birth an alternative congregation devoted to a less judgmental and a more tolerant attitude, to an accepting and benevolent Christian talk and walk, to what is now Emanuel United Church of Christ.

I wonder how many persons have been baptized into the Christian faith by this congregation over the last 125 years? How many confirmations have there been? How many times individuals have come to the table in need of God's forgiveness? How many couples have stood before this altar to exchange marriage vows? How many times has your church community gathered to give thanks for the lives of beloved departed, bearing witness to belief in the resurrection?

I wonder how many times since 1888 the members of this church have laughed in these pews, or wiped away their tears? How many sermons have been preached? How many Sunday school lessons taught? How many social justice stands taken? How many meetings held? How many songs sung? How many prayers raised? 125 years certainly would make for a lot of pot luck dinners...and a lot of mission offerings and projects undertaken. So I wonder: how many lives have been changed, both here in Hales Corners and around the world, because of your ministry?

The epistle to the Hebrews is right: today we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, including the saints who gave birth to this congregation one hundred twenty-five years ago, and the saints who built this sacred space you call your church home, and the saints who persevered generation after generation, through good times and bad, on faith and a prayer – your spiritual ancestors who are, even now, up in the stands encouraging you to keep on running the race which has been set for this church.

The ancient world was full of athletic stadiums. International competitions were held in every major city and port. At archeological digs you still can see the track, the field, and the hewed stone stands for the fans. Imagine you are an athlete in such games, surrounded by everyone who has ever been part of Emanuel Church in Hales Corners – that great cloud of witnesses -- here to witness you run.

Ah, but what kind of race? A sprint, like the 100 or 200 or 400 meters? Perhaps something longer, say the 1500 meters or even the 5,000? No. After one hundred twenty-five years you know the race you have been called to run. The most difficult and the most grueling. Emanuel United Church of Christ is in it for the longest haul of them all. You are going for the gold in the marathon.

The author of Hebrews, like a great coach, offers five tips for running such a race.

Tip One: get rid of those weights you've been dragging around your ankles. The sins you have been carrying around which serve only to slow you down, the congregational behaviors impeding your progress, the individual behaviors you know in your heart of hearts are not of God, it's time to set all that aside and run!

Tip Two: keep your eyes focused on the one at the front of the pack. That would be Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who, on the cross, ran a race much more difficult than even the marathon, and so knows how to lead you to the finish line.

Tip Three: don't lose heart. Sure, there will be moments along the way when you will want to just give up, pack it in, and walk off. Those are the moments when it is most important to keep on running. Never grow weary of doing good. Never.

Tip Four: endure trials for the sake of discipline. There will be setbacks; there will be pain; there will be times when, like Olympic athletes, you'll be ready to tell your trainers "Enough!" But, as Paul coached the early Christian Church in Rome: "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint."

Tip Five: lift up your drooping hands, strengthen your weak knees, run straight ahead... and, get this, don't let yourself be put out of joint. I know that's easier said than done. "After all that has happen?" "After what she said?" "After what he did?" Yes, for if you allow that to get in your way, you just cripple yourself. Better to heal the wounds.

And so, concludes the scripture lesson for today, pursue peace with everyone, seeing that no one fails to receive grace, because otherwise bitterness will spring up and cause trouble. Implication: if you refuse to forgive, if you refuse to reach out to those who see things differently, if you refuse to love even those who have hurt you or those you love, you'll never make it to the finish line.

Speaking of finish lines, let me teach you a Greek word, which only appears in the Bible a couple times, but whose meaning is critically important to remember. The word is *apokaradokia*. Repeat it after me. *Apokaradokia. Apo...kara...dokia. Apokara...dokia. Apokaradokia*. Isn't that a wonderful word? Just the kind of word which is fun to say, whether one knows what it means or not!

In order to understand what it means, I want you to picture in your mind the posture of runners reaching for tape...up on tip-toe, upper body leaning forward, neck outstretched until veins are showing, arms surging ahead with every last ounce of energy within them to be first in a photo finish. That posture is *apokaradokia*! The word means "to watch with head erect and outstretched, to direct all of one's attention, to live in constant expectation." Profoundly, the only ancient Greek manuscripts in which that word is found are Christian ones.

Well, forget the Greek word if you must, but do not forget the runner's posture. For one hundred twenty-five years Emanuel United Church of Christ in Hales Corners has been running a marathon. You've not yet reached the finish line. But let there never be discouragement here. Let there be no defeat. Run. Run with eyes lifted in constant expectancy of the strength God gives for you to keep on running...for at least another one hundred and twenty-five years.

This sermon was preached on October 13, 2013 at Emanuel United Church of Christ in Hales Corners, Wisconsin. Created in celebration of the church's 125th Anniversary, it is based upon Hebrews 12:1-4, 7a, 11-15a. © 2013 by Kent Ulery. All rights reserved.