

Mile 18: Who Is the Greatest?

February 21, 2021

Bendersville and Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 18:1-9

So, I did something a little bit crazy this winter. I signed myself and five of my friends and family members up for a big relay race, called a Ragnar.

The race is in August, in West Virginia, just a little bit south of Pittsburgh. And it is nutty. Basically, the team members rotate, relay-style, through 24 legs of the race to run a total of 120 miles on wilderness trails that wind through forests, valleys, and mountainsides. The team runs day and night, and the members are tent camping when they are not running. Our team still needs two more members, if any of you want to volunteer!

Here's the kicker, though. I don't even really like to run. As a kid I *hated* running and I despised any sport that required running. Which was most of them. In high school I finally joined the swim team – not because I was a great swimmer, but because my school had a policy that if you did a sport you would not be required to take PE. In PE you had to run. In swimming you didn't. So I joined the swim team.

But somehow, even though I have never considered myself a runner, and my pace is slow as molasses, I keep finding myself drawn to running events. And I've discovered over the years that even though I most decidedly do not like to run, maybe...I *do* like to run? A little bit? Sometimes? Especially when there is beautiful scenery and good friends and a campfire and s'mores involved.

So for the last couple of months we have been taking a journey through Matthew's gospel. Not every last bit of it, but certainly the high points. From the story of the wise men to the sermon on the mount to parables and miracles and healing stories, we've gotten a distinct taste of the joy and the excitement and the beauty that the disciples are experiencing as they follow Jesus.

And then last week in the story of the Transfiguration and in Jesus' call to his followers to take up their cross and follow him, we saw a shift beginning to happen. Jesus begins to buckle down and get serious. And he warns his followers that although discipleship is lifechanging, lifegiving, spirit-nourishing, soul-lifting, it is also incredibly challenging as it requires us to lay aside something of ourself to allow God to change our heart of hearts – to change us from the inside-out.

And I have to admit, this week when I was putting together our series for the season of Lent and looking ahead toward the rest of the stories in Matthew's gospel, there was a part of me that just wanted to scrap the whole thing and do something different. Something lighter. Something more fun. Because after the year that we have just had – this year that has felt like one big long neverending Lenten season – a year of giving up so much and taking on so much more and radically changing everything about the way we live, the last thing any of us want is more Lent. We want Easter. We want resurrection. We want hope and promise. We want the snow to melt and the darkness to lift and the sun to shine brightly. We want to be out of this season of wandering and sacrificing and being reminded over and over again of our own mortality.

But the rest of Matthew's gospel doesn't do that. It doesn't get easier, or lighter. It doesn't give us happy miracle stories or healing stories. At least, not yet. The stories get harder. *More* challenging. And I don't know about you, but I have been about "challenged out" for awhile now.

But in the end, I decided that we are going to do this. We are going to rise to the challenge and engage with some of the harder stories of Matthew's gospel. It's like signing up for a big race when we really don't even like to run, but then discovering in the journey that there is beauty and grace and delight and joy even through the challenge.

Or, maybe it is more like running a marathon. Now, I have to say that in all of my "I don't like to run but I'm going to go do something crazy that involves running anyway" adventures, a marathon is not a challenge that I have ever tackled. I've thought about it. I've done a few half marathons. But a full marathon – 26.2 miles, all in one fell swoop – that's more than I've been willing to commit to.

But I have a lot of friends who have completed marathons. And most of them say that the hardest leg of the race is not the last .2 miles (although that can be a brutal little quarter of a mile stretch), and it's not mile 25 or mile 24, when you are almost there and the legs are ready to give out. It's miles 18-23. By that point, you are exhausted. Like, beyond exhausted. You have completely run out of steam; you may or may not have ever run that far even in your months of training for the race; and you are doing the math in your head and realize that as tired as you are, you still have 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 miles left to go. It takes a TREMENDOUS amount of mental strength to push through that hardest leg. But if you can do it – if you can push through, then the finish line is just on the other side.

So we are calling this year's Lenten sermon series "Miles 18-23." In this marathon of a year; in the race, the marathon, that we call our journey of faith; on Jesus's road to the cross and then to the resurrection on the other side of the cross, we have hit the point that we are tired and our spirits are wobbly and we are running out of steam and we

can maybe see the end in sight but it is still a long way off and we wonder if we have the *chutzpah* to keep going. And this is where it gets hard and requires us to dig deep and be all-in. And if we can do that, if we can (in the words of the writer of Hebrews) “run the race that is set before us” then the joy of the finish line – the joy of finally getting to that day of resurrection – will be unparalleled. But to get there, we first have to buckle down and get through miles 18-23. Get through Lent. Get through the second half of Matthew’s gospel. So here we go, friends.

In today’s scripture, the disciples are not really in the best of all places. When the scene opens, the disciples are in an argument – almost like squabbling siblings – about who among them is going to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Obviously, Peter thinks it’s going to be him. “Jesus called me blessed,” Peter says. “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!*” Obviously, it’s going to be me. Obviously.”

“Psssh, he called *everyone* blessed,” James says. “Even the low-lives. *Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek.* That doesn’t make you special.”

“*On this rock I will build my church!*” Peter continues. “I’m a rock! Jesus said it! That’s got to mean something.”

“*Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block.* Remember that?” John chimes in. “You lost your spot. But *I’m* the disciple Jesus loves. I think when I write my memoir, that’s how I will refer to myself.”

“Oh, get off of it,” Judas butts in. “Just because you three went for that hike with Jesus up the mountain last week, you think you’re all that. What it really comes down to is trust. Jesus trusts me with the keys to the safe. Enough said.”

And just as they were about ready to come to blows, Jesus jumps in. And he brings a little child, not much more than 3 or 4 years old, and sits the kiddo down in the center of the room.

Now, here’s what you have to understand about children in the ancient world. They were *not* the center of the universe, like they so often are viewed today. The mortality rate for children and babies at that time was *incredibly* high, and that was way before the time of birth control and so families would have lots and lots and *lots* of kids – pretty much assuming that quite a few of them would not survive. Remember Jacob and his 12 sons? Yeah. That would’ve been very common back then. Kids were loved, kids were cared for and protected...but the whole “the children are our future” and “children are a bastion of innocence and purity” – that’s really a modern idea that did not exist back then.

Kids (or at least, sons) would carry on the family name; they would provide economic stability when they got old enough to work – which they did very young back then. But when they were really small and too young to work, they had zero status, zero position, zero standing in society-at-large. They were the most vulnerable and the most prone to disease and death of anybody. They were completely dependent upon other people to care for their every need. They were powerless and they were largely considered insignificant. Their whole role as children was to grow up into adults and to not be children anymore.

“You want to be great?” Jesus asks his disciples. “Become like this 4-year-old. And in that culture that would have meant: Expendable. Vulnerable. Insignificant. Powerless. Dependent.

Those traits of self-sufficiency and independence and comfort and influence that we prize so much? The ways that we strive to be these things and elevate those who are? That’s the way the world works, but that’s not the way the kingdom of God works.

- The kingdom of God is a place where those who are powerful are only truly great if they can kneel down and serve those who are at the bottom of the barrel. If they can unite their hearts and souls with those who they have tried their whole lives NOT to be like, and come to truly consider them beloved friends.
- In the kingdom of God those who are grown-up and successful are only successful if they can roll around in the mud and play with a 4-year-old. Or if they can take a day off of work to build a snowman and drink hot cocoa because in the grand scheme of things their work is not as big and mighty and important as they think it is and God will continue to spin the world on its axis even if that deadline isn’t met.
- It’s a place where those who are self-sufficient and who do not think they need anybody else to survive are greatest when they can allow themselves to be wholly reliant on somebody else. When we can stop trying to be perfect all the time and recognize the places where we still need to grow and be lifted up and supported.
- The kingdom of God is a place where those accustomed to the spotlight fade into the background and allow other voices to shine, and where those used to getting their way and dominating the conversation step aside and put their own desires and wishes and whims on hold.

And then, Jesus takes it a step further. And this is where this passage gets *really* challenging. Kinda like adding a hill and a headwind to mile 18. *“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.”*

So not only is Jesus telling us that if we want to be great, we need to become like the most vulnerable and insignificant among us; that if we want to experience the beauty of the kingdom of God we need to stop acting as though we are God – perfect and indispensable and all put-together – but he also warns us that if we use our status to trample over those “underneath” us – not only does it not cause us to become greater – it actually kills us. It literally kills our souls to claim status and position at the expense of those who have nothing.

So this week, I would like to invite you into a simple – and yet challenging – Lenten practice. A way to stretch our runner’s legs a little bit with some of these difficult teachings. And this week, our assignment is to practice humility. There are a lot of ways that you might do that, but I have three suggestions for you.

- Maybe you take a day off of work for no other reason than to play. And give thanks to God that even when we are not showing up and bringing our A game, the sun still rises and sets and God still shows up.
- Maybe you stretch yourself this week to do something that you are not good at. And you call a friend and ask for help. And then give thanks to God for the gifts of God abounding in that friend.
- Or maybe you call up somebody who you are usually inclined to avoid. And invite them to coffee. And ask them “how is it with your soul today,” and then just listen without offering advice. Be fully present with them in their life and in their reality. And then give thanks for the way God is stirring within them.

And as we practice humility; as we humble ourselves and remind ourselves that God is God and we are not; may the kingdom of God begin to come into clearer focus and may the presence of God within us shine more brightly.