



Simple Gifts

Words to Inspire the Spirit

IMMANUEL CHURCH-ON-THE-HILL

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The Race of Life

By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

“Halfway there! Keep going!” People lining the streets cheered us on, as others in the streets handed out cold towels, cups of Gatorade®, and freeze pops.

I recently had the opportunity to participate in the Marine Corps Historic Half Marathon. Now, before you think this piece is going to be a reflection on running, not quite. But I do think that often our life experiences offer us lessons in seeing how God shows up in our everyday.

This race amazed me because it was an incredible example of what community can be. I am not a “regular” half marathon runner, but as I ran, I was encouraged by other runners and those in the community who volunteered their time to cheer us on.

One man stood in his yard, enthusiastically waving a large American flag while his dog barked next to him. A woman across the street from him slowly strolled out on her porch, appearing to have just woken up, grasping a cup

of coffee, just being present as the runners passed her house. Some had music blasting from their porches or tugged coolers down to the street to hand out drinks and snacks as runners came by.

By Mile 6 or 7, I was getting pretty darn tired. What normally happens at this point is my brain starts to talk me out of running. I have the thought that I should just slow down. If I'd been running alone, I might have stopped altogether. But I wasn't alone. I ran alongside a friend, and I had the support of thousands of people, building me up, encouraging me all along, keeping me going. Some runners ahead of me moved much faster; some behind me walked or ran a bit slower. Some pushed strollers, with babies going along for the ride. You could see runners of all ages and abilities. And we all encouraged one another along.

The reason I am sharing this experience is because this is what the Church can be when it functions well. People in church are often tired, worn down, experiencing both joys and sorrows. Some may feel like giving up. Others may need encouragement or to be challenged. But everyone who comes, no matter who they are, needs to hear the good news of God in Christ Jesus. That God came for us all, out of his immense love for the world, to save us, by his life, death, and Resurrection.

We as the Church are meant to build up one another in this love and truth, to challenge and hold each other accountable, to encourage and cheer on one another, to be present with each other in joys and sorrows. We aren't meant to be perfect, but to be present.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians writes: "From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (4:16).

Someone once said that the Church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners. This is who we are and where we go week in and week out, to find rest for our weary bodies and souls.

We are all in need of the encouragement, accountability, and community that comes from the Church. In this race of our earthly lives, we have a destination. It is God's Kingdom, and it is already breaking in. We are both already there, and not quite there.

We need one another in the Church to help encourage and guide us along. Most especially, in all this, Jesus is present with us. We, as the baptized members of the Body of Christ, are intimately connected to Christ himself, and he never leaves us to fend for ourselves.

So, yes, perhaps this was a bit of a reflection on running. But not on the importance of running. Rather, it is a reminder that we as the Church run a race together, which is this life in Christ.

No matter who you are, hear this: there is good news for you in Jesus. And in this earthly race of life, you are not running this race alone. Jesus is with you wherever you go.