

A Sermon Delivered by  
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church  
Glenside, Pennsylvania

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany  
Holy Eucharist: Rite-I  
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8:00 AM

*Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. (1 Corinthians 9: 4-27)*

Today's Epistle lesson is a metaphor for life. We are running a race, the so-called race of life, and we are mindful that there are others also competing in the same race, though in a different lane. Paul suggests that the competition is fierce, and there is no guarantee that we will win, let alone even cross the finish line. But that is beside the point. What is important is that we "run in such a way that (we) may win it."

This poses a number of unsettling questions about the nature of competition and cooperation; where the two are compatible, as well as where they actually rub up against each other more frequently than we care to acknowledge or admit. It is likely that a good case can be made for both points of view, but that is not the purpose of my message this morning. What is very clear at the outset is this; that the apostle Paul sees the dynamic of competition to be integral to our respective journeys, or races, in life. And that's a sobering thought.

Three years ago when I was serving a church on Philadelphia's Main Line, I was asked to participate in the annual local high school Career Day. The high school has a reputation for being one of the best in the state, and they are quite proud of the accomplishments of their graduates over the years. So I was delighted, and frankly a little bit surprised, that they asked me to come and represent what a clerical or religious career was like. I was told to report

early in the morning for coffee and donuts, and then to participate in an orientation for the day.

That's when I sensed things were going to be quite a bit different from what I had originally anticipated. We were urged to join the hundreds of teenagers in the high school auditorium, mostly juniors and seniors, as they were presented with some jolting information about careers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We all watched a career documentary film, and I was given the same hand-out that the students received. I admit I was somewhat stunned to read the following;

*The world in which today's young people are coming of age includes these astounding realities: worldwide, the amount of technological information available doubles every two years; fiber optics telephone lines can transmit 150 million simultaneous phone calls around the world, and every six months that number triples. More than six billion cell phone text messages are generated every day. Internet users initiate 2.7 billion Google searches per month. College graduates in 2006 (just two years ago) included 1.3 million in the U.S., 3.1 million in India, and 3.6 million in China. In 10 years the Number-1 English-speaking country in the world will be.... China. We are currently preparing students for jobs and technologies that do not yet exist, in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet.*

I can't speak for you; but that captures my attention. All that information may well be true, but I am a bit perplexed to know what to do in the face of this. I would like to draw upon the sacred and scriptural writings that in the past have offered some assurance and comfort, but the truth is, there is not a whole lot of encouragement that the rigors of life will diminish when we look to the Bible for perspective. Just the opposite. The Bible tells us life will continue to pose challenges, and we need to be spiritually tough enough to deal and cope with them.

I suspect that is what Saint Paul had in mind when he emphasized the intensity of competition in the races of life that we invariably encounter. In fact he went so far as to suggest that competition is inevitable because we are destined to be registered and entered into the Religious Olympics. In

fact, that is one of life's spiritual truths and realities – competition abounds and surrounds us. “Survival of the fittest” ...what we heard about this past week as we reflected upon, and celebrated Charles Darwin's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, and his pivotal work and book – The Origin of Species.

“Do you not know,” said Saint Paul in a similar vein, “that in a race the runners all compete?”

But here's the good news. Paul also encourages us to run the race in such a way that we might actually win it. In other words, keep a positive outlook, maintain hope, and be prepared to go the distance. All this is an apt metaphor for the way in which we can work out our salvation by disciplining ourselves to be followers of the morally upright and spiritually righteous way. We have the capacity to discover the components of discipline and stamina needed to get us through to the end.

And you know, it's true. Life can be tough, and most of us have learned that even though we may not be Number-1 at the end of the race, if we are true to ourselves, and run the race that God has designed especially for us to run, given our unique skills, talents and abilities, then we can indeed be the true spiritual winners of life, worthy of calling ourselves Christian enthusiasts.

We ask all this to be considered ...

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.