

## ACROSS THE FINISH LINE

John 15:7ff

9"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. 11I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. 14You are my friends if you do what I command. 15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.

Ben. Ben Petersen. Come on up here. I'd like to have a little conversation with you.

PAUSE

Why Ben, what's that you're wearing? It's very nice.

**It's a medal, Pastor Hillenbrand**

A medal? A medal for what?

**For the Spartan Half Marathon held in York, Pennsylvania last weekend.**

Where you there, Ben? Because, you know, I was there too.

**No Pastor, I was not there.**

Oh, that's right, that's my medal.

**Shameless self-promotion. Couldn't you just have held it up yourself if you wanted to show off? You had to make me bring it up here around my neck?**

I'm a humble man, Ben. I don't want to show off. I just want to make a point.

**Okay. Sure. And exactly what point would that be, Pastor.**

(excitedly) That I finished. I made it. Woo woo!! Look at this shirt, Ben, so soft and comfortable. And here's my actual number that I wore.

**Very nice, Pastor. So, aside from shameless self-promotion, did you ACTUALLY have a point?**

Well of course.

**And?**

Well, it's about the encouragement.

**The encouragement?**

Yes. Two things. My nephew Chris and I run about the same pace and neither one of us had trained as much as we should have – so... we both agreed that it would be easier to run together than it would be to run alone. So we committed to staying together throughout the race. When he needed to slow down, we slowed down. When I said I wanted to walk for a few seconds, we walked. We grabbed water together, ate jelly bean energy boosters together, and kept an eye on the watch together.

**So, you kind of spurred one another on – served as partners in running.**

Exactly. It was a great help – really. And not only that, but this college, York College, the sponsor of the race, does this incredible thing at the Spartan Half Marathon. They have each of their sports

teams take positions at every mile marker, and when you run by their station they cheer you on and ring cowbells and act as if you are the most important runner at that moment.

**And you liked that? It didn't seem artificial or rehearsed?**

Of course, in my head, I knew it WAS somewhat artificial – that they were doing it for everybody. But somehow it made me feel just a little bit like they were actually my supporters – that they really wanted me to do well.

**And DID you do well?**

Truthfully... not as well as I was hoping to. I really wasn't as ready as I had hoped to be and so I wasn't able to keep going like I did with my last run a year ago. So I was glad for those college students who kept encouraging me to keep going and to push forth. I think they helped me – as did my nephew Chris, who was by my side.

**So why do you bring this up today? How does this relate to today's text?**

Well, Jesus uses the word “friend” numerous times in the passage, and I notice that He makes quite the point about Him being the kind of friend that not only cheers us on in our journey through life -- stands on the sidelines with encouragement -- but goes far, far beyond that.

**Ooookay. I think I know where you're going. He says, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”**

Yes. Which means He, the God who created all things, came here, to earth, in the flesh, for the express purpose of leading me to the finish line. He wanted me – and all His people -- to be able to navigate through all the hurdles and push through the pain to get to the goal.

**And He did it by ACTUALLY running the race Himself. That is, He took everything that would hold you back: the threats and temptations of the Devil, the tricks and trials of the world, the corruption and misguided notions of your own flesh, and He took them to the cross.**

Exactly. He knew that I couldn't cross that finish line without Him – that I would ultimately fall into the pit of destruction because of my sin.

**And so, He became the perfect runner you couldn't be, and successfully navigated all the pitfalls and problems so that you could join Him at the finish line and enjoy the prize of eternity.**

That's a friend indeed. That's the FRIEND I NEED. Jesus was there for me on the cross.

**So, in a way, He was like your nephew Chris – right by your side the entire way.**

But even greater, because my nephew Chris had his own pains and problems to deal with. Like me, he was not the perfect runner. But Jesus is the PERFECT One, who needed no help, but voluntarily laid aside His claims so that He could save ME – and YOU – and THEM.

**So Jesus is our greatest FRIEND, in our faith journey, because He is the One who enables us to cross the finish line – He is the One Who carried us on His shoulders so that we could have a forever future.**

Exactly. But, you know what? There's more that this silly medal makes me think about as I consider friendship.

**Yea, so what's that?**

As I think about those teams that stood at every mile marker and cheered me on, I think about how God also raises up a support team in the Church.

## **A support team?**

Yea, He says in the text: “15I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. 17This is my command: Love each other.

**So you're thinking that Jesus here is encouraging us to represent Him to each other – that His FRIENDSHIP with us can help us to spur one another on in our journey of faith. Am I right?**

Yes, you hit the nail right on the head. I'm thinking about those York College kids and how they didn't know me from Adam. Nevertheless, as I went by their station they treated me as if I was their best friend and urged me on to finish the race.

**And you're thinking that that's how God's people should be with one another – that we should encourage one another and build one another up.**

Yes! That's what the Church is – a HAVEN for God's people to gather together and remind each other of the promises of God. A TRAINING CENTER where we learn not only how to share Christ with those who don't know Him, but also where we bolster each other to run the race.

**That makes me think of a passage from Hebrews. (Grabs bible) Here it is: Hebrews 10:24: “let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as we see the Day (of Christ) approaching.**

Great refrence, Ben. That passage makes me realize that I'm not just here to get my dose of strength from the Word of God, pray my prayers, and be on my way out the door – and neither are you. We're called to be like those York College kids.

## **Bearing one another's burdens.**

Encouraging one another to “stay the course” in faith.

## **Praying for each other.**

Reminding each other of God's promises.

## **Studying God's Word together.**

Rejoicing with those who rejoice

## **Weeping with those who weep.**

Bringing meals to those in need.

## **Offering a word of praise to someone who has shared their gifts.**

Singing together and making music to our God.

## **Serving together with one another in mission.**

And then, having been fortified by our brothers and sisters here, we go out there and share our Greatest Friend, Jesus, with the people who don't know Him. Cause we want them to be part of the family also – we want them to share in our community of brothers and sisters who love and serve one another.

## **So, will you run another one?**

Another half-marathon?

**Yes.**

I don't know. You never can be sure what tomorrow holds. I'd like to. But my legs sure hurt after this one. For a full day I could hardly walk. And, in our faith journey we can get weary too. Some days it can seem like we're never going to make it to the finish line. Trials, temptations, frustrations, pains and problems.

**But Jesus laid down His life so that we could. As we trust in Him, and with the help of our brothers and sisters, we will make it. That's His promise.**

Well, Ben, thanks for your help.

**Can I keep the medal?**

No. But here's a cross.

**A cross?**

Yes, so you can cross the finish line yourself.

**Oh, I get it. A cheesy pun that actually wraps up the message well. In the cross of Jesus, combined with, or crossed with the help of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we will make our way from death to life.**

For Christ is risen.

ALL: HE IS RISEN INDEED!