

FINISH LINE! - Among many things associated with the season of fall, it seems that a lot of marathon races tend to take place right about now - New York City; Marine Corps. in D.C; the Baltimore Marathon ... and for a good reason! October & November is the time when the weather is ideal for running in the crisp, fresh air in this beautiful season.

But when I think of those marathon races, I always think of the look of those runners as they cross the finish line – usually exhausted and “spent” and ready to collapse --- and that is after they have been following a rigorous and carefully designed training plan for months to get ready for the race! Which is one reason why running has never been my idea of “having fun”!

But, it is an image that comes to mind, though, as we find ourselves coming to the “finish line” and nearing the end of this current liturgical year of prayer. The Church’s prayer and the Gospel Readings for these final 3 weekends encourage us to be attentive to how we run and prepare to finish the “spiritual marathon” of living Christian discipleship. Like the runners, the journey of faith is a long undertaking that requires stamina, energy, dedication and focus over an extended period of time --- as the famous saying goes: “It’s a marathon, not a sprint”!

So, just how do we go about “training for” and running this spiritual race? Well, during these 3 weeks we hear from the 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel about several elements that should be a part of our “running plan” for “finishing strong” as disciples of Jesus --- and the 1st of these is remaining focused!

So, what is going on here in this familiar parable? Well, at first reading it seems to be a pretty straightforward lesson about being ready and prepared – but, that is not exactly what Jesus says at the very end: “Therefore, stay awake...”!

In their very close and detailed studies of Matthew’s gospel, Scripture scholars have come to realize that Jesus intended the image of the oil in the lamps to represent good works willed by the Father. So ... the parable urges disciples to persevere in good works – in other words, to not grow tired of doing good and being good! Notice that when speaking about the 10 virgins with their lamps, the parable states that “they all became drowsy and fell asleep” – the difference between the wise ones and the foolish ones is this: the foolish ones actually “fell asleep” spiritually long before that midnight hour arrived and they had dozed-off physically!

The point that Jesus is making is that it is risky to “fall asleep”, to lose focus and become tired of being good and doing good! Even when we know what the right and good thing to do is! Remember how things were like in the mid-to-later stages of the Covid pandemic --- think about how we all spoke about “being tired” of washing hands, wearing masks, watching our distances, limiting our social outings ... and whenever we may have “let our guard down” the infections started to rise again!

I am tired of being honest at work or school when everyone else seems to get away with so much; I am tired of not taking just a little revenge when I have been hurt; I am tired of sharing my money with the poor; I am tired carving out time in my busy day to pray ... any of that sound familiar?! Of course it does; we all feel that way from time to time – but the important thing is to: 1. Acknowledge it and then 2. Correct it! Because, it is right when we are tired that evil can “slip in” to our lives – just like our physical bodies: when we are overly tired and fatigued is when we are most susceptible to infections and illness and injuries!

So ... How to make the correction? Easier said than done, of course – but a good place to start is to make a deliberate and intentional decision to re-commit and to re-focus on seeing the challenges of the “doing good/being good” lifestyle not so much as a burden to be endured but as opportunities to be eagerly identified and embraced – like a “running plan” -- actively looking ahead for chances (which was what the foolish virgins

did not do – they were not looking ahead in bringing enough oil with them). This is not about trying to be “spiritually superior” than others or “holier than thou” in attitude as if living the spiritual life is some kind of contest or competition – and, it is not about somehow trying to impress God or convince God to love us – seeking to grow in holiness is really about responding to God’s loving presence in our life!

So, remaining focused is a key element in our “spiritual running plan” --- and next week, we will hear about a 2nd element that will help us to finish strong as disciples of Jesus in the realm of the Kingdom of God!