

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 26, 2018

Proper 16: John 56-69: *Life is not how we begin it but, how we finish it.*

Preached

By

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

I have an Australian friend who told me a great story about the Sydney Swans of the Australian football league. Australian football is what you and I call Rugby. It is the most successful sport in terms of TV viewership in Australia. An exception to the success of the league for many years was the Sydney Swans. Until recently, the Swans had the worst record of any team in the league. They also had the worst attendance. Most of their home games were played in front of empty seats. But a strange thing happened. The team got a new coach and a few new players and they started winning. Before long, the team that had been the laughingstock of the league was now a powerhouse. And since everybody likes a winning team, you can imagine what happened next. The stands began to fill. Thousands of people who had no interest in the team before began to attend games religiously. Soon it became almost

impossible to get a ticket to a Swans game. One Sunday afternoon the Swans were playing a rival team in front of a capacity crowd. As the TV cameras zoomed in on the revelry and joy in the stands, one camera focused on a single man who was cheering and waving a sign that he had obviously made himself. Grinning proudly, he held up his sign for the whole world to see. The sign said: I WAS HERE WHEN NOBODY ELSE WAS HERE!

I love that story. It reflects the age-old story of fair weather fans that are with their team only when the team is winning. But here was this one fan who wanted the world to know that he was there when nobody else was there.

Jesus knew what it was to deal with fair weather fans. As he began to share the difficult details of his ministry, many of his followers started getting disenchanted. Just a short time before they wanted to crown him king. They wanted to push him into the political arena. They wanted him to establish his kingdom in this world. They were not in it for the long haul. They wanted it to happen now! So, one by one, as they sensed that he was not going to give them what they wanted, they drifted away. Even some of his closest followers seemed to be losing their enthusiasm. This was alarming. Just listen to the sad tone contained in Jesus words. “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you

also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Who could have given such an answer except Simon Peter? “Lord, to whom shall we go?” Don’t you love Simon Peter? Impetuous. Excitable. Sometimes speaking before his mind is fully in gear. But Simon Peter was in it for the long haul. His commitment was no momentary, fleeting experience; good only when things were going his way. Certainly Peter got discouraged from time to time. After the crucifixion, he was ready to go back to his fishing nets. We can understand that. After all, he felt terribly let down. He had invested all of his hopes and dreams in this man Jesus. Now Jesus the Christ lay dead in a borrowed tomb. Still, Simon Peter’s commitment to Jesus never failed. He might show a little weakness on occasion, but he was in it for the long haul.

As your priest and pastor, I have watched people come to this church and become members and worship for a while and then they are gone. They just never show up again. I watch boys and girls go through our Sunday school and never become part of the Confirmation class. I see members of our Confirmands who graduate from high school just disappear. I watch people bring their children to Sunday school and church, but then drift away as the

children become young adults. I have seen people who have spent many years in the church, who have a disagreement with another church member or with the priest, and are never seen again. I have seen people who see themselves as entitled and when they don't get their way, they simply leave in a huff. What a treasure, what a blessing, what encouragement are those of you who are in it for the long haul. You have a very special kind of faith. I have seen that special kind of faith over and over again in this church.

You know this, my sisters and brothers. You know life is not a sprint. You know life is a marathon and life is hard, indeed. Life's obstacles are many and just because we are Christians does not mean that the way will be made smooth for us. We get cancer. We have heart attacks. We have strokes and diabetes just like everybody else. We watch family members suffer and die. We lose our jobs. We grieve the loss of loved ones. At such times we need faith for the long haul because life is not easy. We cherish success stories reminding us that it is possible to take a bad situation and turn it around. Others have done it and so can we. Success comes to those who are willing to hang in there when the going gets rough.

One of the worst things that can happen to some people is to have too many successes early in life. We think all of life will be that way. But it will not. Life

is hard and life is not a sprint. Life is a marathon. And the great secret in life is not how we begin it, but how we finish it. Many of us are good starters. We have talent, we have enthusiasm, and we start off with a burst of promise. But sustaining that good beginning, well that is the problem. That's true in our commitment to Jesus Christ, to our spouse, to our places of employment and in a host of other endeavors. How are we at finishing?

Several years ago, I was on vacation in Charleston South Carolina on a very long stretch of beach called the 'Grand Strand.' I read a story about a man who was adrift on a life raft in the ocean far off the coast of South Carolina. For fifty-five hours Robert Louis Watson clung to that life raft. Finally he could hold on no longer. He slipped off the life raft and into the ocean where he drowned. About one hour later the raft was spotted by the Coast Guard. His friend, Greg Palmer, was willing to hold on a little longer. Consequently, Palmer was saved by a coast guard helicopter that took him to a Charleston hospital. Like so many people, Watson gave up too soon and slipped into the water. Many people make that same mistake. They give up too easily. They quit before the final results are in.

Here is the challenge for this week. When the enthusiasm fades, when the passion cools, when the numbers drop off, can you maintain your intensity?

That is the mark of a champion. Finishing is what faith is all about. I said I am grateful to those of you who are here for the long haul. Some of you have been disciples of Jesus Christ all your lives. You've seen us priests come and go. You watched the church grow and change with all the excitement that goes with that. Some of you long time members have watched Holy Trinity Church decline in the past. But, through good times and bad you have been here.

Some of you have had your personal stumbles. You've gone through times of death, loss, grief and disappointment. Perhaps somewhere along the way you have doubted that God could possibly forgive you and accept you after you have let God down. But still you have hung in there. Maybe some of you have become disenchanted with the meaningless life you've been living and you're beginning to realize that you want to draw closer to God. Maybe that's why you're hanging in there right now. You're hoping to have a fresh experience of God's grace. I believe that if you will endure long enough it will happen.

I read a story many years ago by Max Beerbohm, who wrote the book, "The Happy Hypocrite: A Fairy Tale for Tired Gentlemen." The main character in this story is a man named George Lord. George has led a wasted life filled with greed, gambling, superficial relationships, broken promises to women, as well as too much alcohol. One day he is having a lavish meal with his lover

when he sees a young, innocent woman. He falls in love with her at first sight. . He desperately wants to marry her, but she has vowed only to marry a man with the face of a saint. George Lord obviously doesn't have such a face. Not long after this, George passes by a mask shop. He goes into the shop and has the owner create a lifelike wax mask that he believes will allow him to look like a saint. He returns to the woman who has won his heart. He proposes and she accepts. This marks the beginning of a moral conversion in George Lord's life. He donates much of his money to the poor. He repays everyone he has cheated. He treats kindly people whom he had never noticed before. In short, he enters into the life of a saint. Sometime later his old lover sees him on the street and seeks to unmask him before his wife. A struggle ensues and the mask is ripped off his face and thrown to the ground. His old lover laughs in triumph. Now, he must turn and face his wife. But when he does, he is shocked by her question. She asks, "Why did you have a mask created that looks precisely like your own face?" While he sought to live like a saint, an unknown, an unseen power had been at work. George Lord had grown into his face.

Maybe there is someone in this church today who is hoping to grow into the face you have shown the world. Faith is hanging in there when the day looks dark and the options are limited, because you know that somehow God is at

work in your life. So you have decided that by the grace of God you are here for the long haul. You have placed yourself into God's hands and you say with Simon Peter who denied Jesus the Christ three times: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.*" That is what faith is all about. Faith has to do with having a great race and an even greater finish. Our life in faith is not about how we start it. Our life in faith is all about how we finish it. AMEN.