

Proper 15, Year C
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The Venerable Patricia Soukop

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

On May 30, 1999, 33 drivers sat in their race cars on the 2 ¼ mile oval track, waiting for the command that sends chills of anticipation down the spine of every race car driver: “Ladies and gentlemen, start your engines!” When the cry rang out, those 33 drivers, some of them rookies of the race and some of them veterans, fired up their race cars and took off around the track at lightening speed in an attempt to win the Granddaddy of auto racing – the Indianapolis 500. Some would be involved in crashes that day, some would encounter engine or other mechanical problems, and some would have a smooth ride. But all of them had one thing in common – they would have to make a few pit stops during the course of the race to take on fuel and have their tires changed. The average length of time to do all of this during a pit stop, by the way, is 8 seconds.

Anyway, on that particular day, driver Robbie Gordon was running a very good race. He made a couple of scheduled pit stops, and by the end of the race, he found himself leading with only a few laps remaining. He was running dangerously low on fuel, however, and his crew urged him to come in for a final pit stop to take on fuel. But he chose not to, as he knew that doing so would cost him the first-place finish. The white flag came out, one lap to go! Gordon cruised into the backstretch, looking up at the stands and at the checkered flag that was now being waived up ahead of him. But suddenly his car was no longer gunning at 217 MPH. His engine had cut out; he had run out of fuel! With all of his competitors sailing past him, he found himself coasting to a stop, short of the finish line. Instead of passing beneath the checkered flag and cruising into Victory Lane, he now found himself pushing his dead race car toward pit row.

Prior to the start of the race, the drivers heard the command to start their engines. I wonder if perhaps there should have been another admonition to keep their engines running. It seems that Robbie Gordon was so intent on claiming the prize that he overlooked the very thing that would make finishing the race possible.

In our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews, we are admonished to “run with perseverance the race set before us”. Perseverance can be translated as “patient endurance”. This means that we must not only start the race with the goal of crossing the finish line, but we must also consider the necessary preparations beforehand and the pit stops along the way that will enable us to finish strong in doing what God has set before us.

Back to the racetrack for a moment. When preparing for a race, a driver doesn't merely show up at the track that morning and climb into his car. He or she must spend months prior to the race making tweaks and adjustments to the car so that it will perform at its peak on that particular track on race day. By the time race day arrives, the driver really is one with his car, and he knows every minute detail of its function. So as track and weather conditions change during the race, the driver instinctively knows what adjustments must be made to the car in order to stay in the race and cross the finish line. Only one person will take the checkered flag in a race, but every driver hopes to cross the finish line. But this can only happen if the driver keeps his engine running once he has started it. He can't be ignorant of the conditions around him on the track, and he can't be negligent of the steps that he must take based on the changing conditions.

Now in case you are wondering why I have such an interest in auto racing, my dad was a race car driver, and cars were his life. I grew up in auto body shops, watching him rebuild cars and restore wrecked vehicles to better-than-new condition. I learned early on the importance of caring for vehicles, and my dad drummed into my head the importance of never letting the fuel level fall below ¼ tank. He taught me that if you know your vehicle and take care of it, it will take care of you, regardless of the obstacles that you encounter along the road.

A race car driver is able to deal with the obstacles that present themselves during a race because of his careful preparation and discipline and his intimate knowledge of his vehicle. Although he hopes to be the first to pass beneath the checkered flag, he must not let the idea of that deter him from focusing on what he must do to cross the finish line. He cannot be ignorant or negligent, or his engine will die. We as Christians are given the command to start our engines, as it were, at our baptism. We begin our race with the promises that we make or that are

made for us, and throughout our lives, we work our way around the track as we endeavor to live into those promises.

But things are going to happen in our lives, just like things happen during an auto race. We find ourselves involved in collisions of competing priorities. We find ourselves trying to dodge the debris that the winds of life strew across our path. We find ourselves being held back from charging recklessly ahead by the cautionary flags waived by our family and friends. We too must focus not on winning the race but on crossing the finish line. And we must not be ignorant or negligent in making adjustments to our lives along the way.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that we are surrounded by a great a cloud of witnesses who give us strength and courage. One commentator has said, “As we strive toward our goal to finish with faith, in peace and holiness, we run surrounded by people. The people in the stands are people who have demonstrated faith – faith that persevered, people who by the grace of God overcame great obstacles, and finished the race. These are people of the Bible, the men and women of the Church throughout the ages, people known personally by you and by me whose witness encourages us.”

It’s important to note that witnesses and spectators are two different things. A spectator is someone sitting on the sidelines, watching. A witness is someone who has gone through something himself and has struggled with the same things that we are. These holy men and women are all rooting for us, cheering us on, urging us to seek out spiritual resources in our lives so that we may keep our engines running and finish the race. These spiritual resources include gathering with other Christians, hearing and reading God’s word, praying without ceasing, and participating in the sacramental life of the church.

While each of us must engage in our spiritual disciplines to prepare ourselves for the race, the great cloud of witnesses surrounding us reminds us that our goal collectively is to be the Body of Christ in the world around us. None of us can do it individually; we must strive toward our goal as a team. A race is not won by the driver but by the entire racing team. When a driver climbs into the cockpit prior to a race, he is not on the track alone. He is part of a large team,

and it takes every member of that team working together for the driver to make it across the finish line. The team decides what changes need to be made to the car, when pit stops need to be made, and how much fuel should be taken on. The goal is to keep the engine running and the car handling as smoothly as possible given the changing track conditions.

As the Body of Christ, we must recognize the changing needs in the world around us and react to those needs by making adjustments in our own lives. There must be teams of people ready to spring into action whenever the need arises, whether it be sorting and boxing food for the food pantry, serving a hot meal to those in the community who have no place to call home, sewing hats for the homeless, or gathering blankets and warm clothing for those who have no heat in their homes. Needs can change in an instant, and collectively we must be prepared to react to those needs.

Jesus has gone before us, as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, to show us the way that leads to victory. In other words, the race for the kingdom of God is underway, and at some point the checkered flag will come out. Lest we end up like Robbie Gordon, who never reached the finish line because he was so intent on the prize that he overlooked the very lifeblood of his vehicle, I have one thing to say: “Ladies and Gentlemen, keep your engines running!”

Amen.