

Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
The Twenty-Third Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 21:5-19

Enduring to the End

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
November 17, 2019
9:00 am Sung Eucharist

Recently, I was quite moved by a photo that I saw on social media. The photo was of two women who were runners in the Pittsburgh Marathon. The two women – Laura Mazur and Jessica Robertson – had never met each other before that day. But they were holding hands as they crossed the finish line.

The story behind the photo is a really inspiring one. About halfway through the marathon, around mile 14, both women looked around and realized that they were the last two runners in the marathon. Everyone else had either passed them or dropped out.

Now Laura had run a number of marathons before. But this time she was particularly disappointed in her performance and was about to quit. Jessica, on the other hand, had never run a marathon before, and she wasn't sure if she could finish.

The two started talking, and they instantly clicked. They made a deal with each other. Laura told Jessica that she would stay with her through the race. But only if Jessica also agreed to stay with Laura.

And so the two ran together – side by side – for the rest of the 26.2 miles. It took more than seven hours for them to run the entire marathon, but they finished. They endured to the end. And they held hands as they crossed the finish line.

Endurance. Today's reading from St. Luke's gospel is about endurance in the face of adversity. Jesus prophesizes to his disciples about how one day the enormous stones of the Jerusalem Temple will be thrown down. There will be a time of wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues, he says. The disciples will be arrested, imprisoned, and betrayed by family and friends. They will even be put to death because of hatred for Jesus' name.

But Jesus ends with a hopeful message. “[N]ot a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

As we approach the end of ordinary time and the beginning of Advent, our gospel readings take an eschatological turn. Eschatology is a fancy theological word that simply means the study of the last things: the Second Coming, death, heaven, hell, and the Last Judgment. Eschatology comes from *eschatos*, which is the Greek word for “last.”

It's easy to focus on the frightening aspects of today's gospel text – the violence, the persecution, and the disasters. It's easy to feel hopeless, especially given all that's going on in our world today. I'm thinking, for example, of the bloodshed in Syria, the riots in Hong Kong, and the flooding in Venice.

But adversities aren't just on the outside. Each of us has also dealt with internal challenges throughout our lives, such as struggles relating to family, relationships, work, physical or mental health, or finances. And those internal struggles can be just as frightening as the external ones.

That's why it's important to remember that the message of today's gospel is ultimately one of reassurance and hope. Endure to the end, Jesus tells us. Do not give up. Because not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.

The Greek word for endurance in today's gospel text is *hypomonē*. *Hypomonē* is about standing fast in the face of persecution or temptation. Not only is *hypomonē* the focal point of today's gospel text, but this word is also used in the New Testament Book of Hebrews. There, the Christian life is described metaphorically as a race. According to the writer of Hebrews, we must endure if we want to get to the finish line.

But we do not get to the finish line by trusting in ourselves or in our own spiritual fitness. Rather, we can only get to the finish line by trusting in Christ Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus was the one who endured a shameful and horrible death on the cross for us, so that we could be saved from our sins and have eternal life. We need not – and, indeed, *cannot* – do it alone.

This is why the story of Laura, Jessica, and the Pittsburgh Marathon is so significant theologically. Like Laura and Jessica, we are called to endure to the end, even when all seems lost. But we cannot get to the finish line alone.

The Christian life is never about going at it ourselves. Each of us needs the help of others – that is, our sisters and brothers in Christ – so that we can endure. That's why we worship in community. That's why we feed on the Body and Blood of Christ together.

But most importantly, we need the grace of Jesus Christ – the one who endured the horrific suffering of the cross – to help us get to the end.

The Christian life is about endurance or *hypomonē*. As St. John Chrysostom said, endurance is the queen of the virtues. Indeed, the Christian life is about pushing ahead – even when it seems like there's no hope.

Because there is *always* hope. And Christ Jesus is right there with us, holding our hands as we run towards the finish line. By our endurance we will gain our souls.