

Finished

First Reading: John 12:12-19

Second Reading: John 19:14-18, 28-30

When asked what I love about running, my answer is simple ... finishing. The answer has probably changed through the years. At one point I may have said competing, or at other times I may have waxed philosophical about the sublimity of “the runner’s high,” that rush of endorphins offering the sense of floating along just above the pavement without effort, pain, or stress, the oxygen plentiful, your limits, vanished ... That was a long time ago. These days, crossing the crack in the pavement, that functions as my finish line in front of our mailbox, is the closest I get to the satisfaction of having accomplished something. So when Donna asks — “How was your run?” — the best answer I can muster is, *I finished*; and at this point in the journey, that’s enough for me.

There can be a freedom that comes with finishing. At the end of the college semester, you turn in your final exam, and exiting the building can feel like walking out into the the sixth day of Creation, a world of freedom and possibility — you can pursue whatever you choose. You can go on a hike, swim in a lake, drive to the beach, take a nap, or any of those other

“wholesome” things college kids are wont to do — whatever you choose, and without the cloud of a deadline hanging over your head ... Finito!

Retirement. That’s a finish line. I recently came across some photos from my father’s retirement party. There was the obligatory t-shirt with the corny inside joke screen-printed on it. I have a friend, who was a general presbyter, which is the title for the person who has to navigate all petty church fights, ego clashes, and church closings. He wanted his retirement t-shirt to say — “Not My Problem!” I like that. Anyway, at my dad’s retirement dinner, which in a small town means a slab of leather steak, a baked potato, and salad served at the Knights of Columbus Hall, the eating was followed with testimonials, cake, and a toast. And my dad relished every moment of it.

Our friend, Janet Goetz, retired from her company after close to thirty years. There would be a celebration scheduled for later, but her last day in the office was a bit of a buzzkill. She had awoken that morning, exhilarated by the thought of enjoying the office atmosphere one last time, reminiscing over what had been shared and accomplished together. On a day like that you want to hear some respected voice intone, *Well done, good and faithful*

servant. You are thinking cake, cards, hugs, and maybe even champagne.

Janet entered into a dark and silent office. No cake, cards, or even any of those little butter mints. You see, Janet's last day in the office coincided with a scheduled, corporate golf tournament, so most of the office was out working the event, and the only other person assigned to cover the office for the day called in sick. So, there was Janet ... in the quiet ... her own desk cleared ... all alone. The postal worker did come by with the mail, and told Janet she'd miss seeing her. UPS delivered a package for someone. But after those miniature moments of human interaction, she was as Gilbert O'Sullivan crooned ... "Alone again, naturally."

However, do you know Janet? If you do, you know Janet wasn't going to sit still for that. No rain allowed for her retirement parade. So, you know what she did? She picked up the phone, called the florist across the way, and said, "I want the biggest floral arrangement you've got ... big! What do you have? ... Good. Do you have a card to go with it? ... Great, so here's what I want you to do. Write on the card — To Janet ... You did it! You have done such a wonderful job! Love, Janet. Then stick the card on the arrangement, and bring those flowers on over here." Janet set those flowers

on her empty desk, and after admiring them through the day, picked them up and took them home with her ... and wow, they were glorious!

The scheduled celebration would come and she would delight in it, but this was her last day, the completion of a thirty year journey of dedication, satisfaction, camaraderie, and she wasn't going to let the timing of the day diminish the honor of arriving at the finish line. El fin.

For the runner, the student, the retiree, the mountain climber, the surgeon, the artist, the accountant on April 15th – there may be exhaustion, even the stupor of mental weariness at the finish line. And let's not forget the caregiver. A friend's father was in the ministry for over forty years. Forty years of pastoral presence in times of weal and woe, stress and trial, life and death, but he said the most difficult, most challenging work of his life was caring for his wife through the last couple of years of her dementia.

Many of you know that struggle, having survived it. Many of you know that struggle, because you are living it now. It is so hard, so hard, and yet you did it ... with love, and you wouldn't have wanted anyone else to do it. In that tempest, you survive month to month, then week to week, then day to day, then hour to hour. You've had that conversation with the hospice

nurse. You've heard the nurse say, "Yesterday I said we were week to week, but I think we're talking about a matter of hours now."

The finish line arrives and there is sorrow, but not as you expected. For there is also relief. And know this. There should be no guilt with that. You've been living on fumes, and as weary as you are, your loved one was even more weary, and there is goodness in letting go. You were there with them as the finish line approached, a finish line as inevitable as it is blessed, for as exhausted as your loved one is at the finish line, they fall no farther than the loving embrace of God.

It is neither unnatural nor inappropriate to embrace the relief, in fact the relief may be the poignant grace of death, a sense of accomplishment that we helped someone get to the finish line, a time to own Paul's words, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." In this, relief brings a glow to your heart and a smile of contentment to your countenance. It is finished.

It is finished — Jesus' dying words on the cross in John's Gospel. Well, that's a bummer. Sounds rather defeatist, as if Jesus is waving the white flag, giving up, admitting failure. Caiaphas, you win. Pilate, you are the

victor. Philip, Andrew ... what can I say ... sorry. Of course, we the readers have the cheat code here. We've turned the page and read the epilogue. We know, as the old preacher said, *It may be Friday, but Sunday's coming!* We're pulling out the pastels from their closeted winter's nap, ironing out the wrinkles, and getting ready for Easter Sunday. Tune the timpani, drain the spit out of the trumpet, and fill the choir loft, *Jesus Christ is Risen Today...*

It's not finished. We've read the next chapter. In fact, we know the next chapter wasn't enough for those earliest believers, so they added another chapter to that. Finished? No, we're just getting started. Paul is still Saul and Cornelius is clueless about his future houseguest. Ephesus, Corinth, Smyrna, no one knows how they will be remembered yet, and Matthew doesn't have a clue they'll name a big ol' church after him, just down the road here. Finished? Get out of here!

Jesus isn't finished. We know that. But the witnesses within earshot of the cross on that dark and heavy Friday afternoon did not know that. *It is finished* doesn't sound like Good News to them. *It is finished* sounds like depressing failure to them. Movie critics would love the story to end here, as would the Oscar yearning actors jockeying for a role. They covet the sight of

moviegoers exiting the theaters clutching wet tissues and looking like you just found out your best friend died because you hadn't listened to the voicemail asking you to refill his prescription. They love leaving you raw, empty, and hopeless. The screen fades to black as the gasping, dying voice of Orson Welles intones, *It is finished*.

John knows it isn't finished. He's still has lead in his pencil. So, why would he have that to be the benediction of Jesus on the cross? We know John doesn't write anything without pointed intention, so why would he have Jesus' dying words be that which could be interpreted as admitting defeat?

Well, as the grad student who has just turned in their thesis will tell you ... as the marathoner, wrapped in an aluminum blanket and sucking down a Gatorade will report, as a caregiver, finally enjoying the comfort and warmth of her own bed, and waking to the sunrise of a new day will impart, another translation of *It is finished* could be *It is accomplished*, or *It has been achieved*.

Earlier in John, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as*

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up — Do you remember that story in Numbers? Moses makes a bronze serpent, sticks it on a pole crafted from the branch of a tree, and lifts it up. And those who look upon it are healed. Lifted up ... on a tree ... we are healed — *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ... Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”*

Later, in John, Jesus’ disciples (*much like your grandmother, forever afraid you are not eating*) try to get Jesus to at least go through the drive-thru at Bojangles. So Jesus answers, *“My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to **complete his work.**”* Subsequently, when describing Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, John tells us, *“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them **to the end.**”*

Flip over four chapters after that, as Jesus prays for his disciples and the future church, he prays, *“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him ... **I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.** So now, Father,*

*glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed ... I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy **made complete** in themselves.*

Lifted up ... that the world might be saved ... my food is to complete God's work ... he loved them to the end ... the hour has come ... glorify the Son ... **I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do** ... so that they may have my joy **made complete** in themselves.

It is finished. Jesus isn't giving up. Jesus is not admitting defeat. No, in that moment on the cross, Jesus is lifted up. Jesus is enthroned. Jesus is glorified. His work of redemption is made real for all eternity.

It is finished. It is not a defeat. It is a coronation. And we are the beneficiaries. All that Jesus said before that moment, and all that would transpire in the coming days was validated in that moment.

It is finished. As the resources Rebecca shared suggest, perhaps thinking back to Jesus' utterance on the cross, we can "find the strength to say 'we are finished' with letting fear win in our own hearts, minds, lives, and communities." Seeing the selfless love of our Lord and King poured out for our redemption, perhaps we can say we are finished with letting fear

and suspicion polarize us from our neighbor, from the stranger, from our families. Perhaps, as Jesus demonstrated on the cross, we can say we are finished with allowing hate a harbor in our hearts.

And perhaps, one day when the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done, we will have no room in our hearts for fear because our hearts will be overflowing with gratitude. For we will know that because Jesus said, *It is finished*, our only prayer can be, *We did it! Thanks be to God.*

Amen.