

Series: The Most Amazing Race
Title: “A Race to Grow”
Text: 2 Peter 3:18; Acts 2:42-47
Key Word: Lessons
Proposition: Everyone will learn valuable life lessons by overcoming roadblocks and connecting at intersections.

Good Morning Everyone. We are delighted that you have chosen to join us in worship. We honor you today because you have set aside time from your busy lives to connect with God. We firmly believe that God is here. God is here to love you, to speak to you, to hear the sweet sounds of your voice, and to show you His ways.

During the past few weeks, we have been running the Most Amazing Race. The writer of Hebrews described this Most Amazing Race like this: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* (Hebrews 12:1, 2) I am grateful that we run this race with a great cloud of witnesses who encourage us along the way. We have completed our first pit stop where we connected with God and others in worship. Today, we will head toward our next pit stop, Grow into the image of Jesus. In order to reach this pit stop, we must overcome some roadblocks and make some special connections at a few intersections. However, it will be worth it because we will be one-step closer to our final destination.

Jesus said one day, “*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...*” (Matthew 11:29a) Paul, a follower of Jesus and leader of the church once wrote to Timothy, “*Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of...*” (Two Timothy 3:14) Peter, another follower of Christ and leader of the church wrote, “*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” (Two Peter 3:18) The scriptures encourage us to grow up.

What does it mean to grow up? It means such things as being fully developed, having marks of wisdom, not just knowledge. It requires self-discipline and commitment to an authentic walk with Christ seven days a week. It involves determination to obey God and to submit to the truth of His Word at any cost. It includes the ability to nourish myself as an individual believer in the Scriptures. A mature person reaches out with compassion and cares for other people whose needs are different from ones own. We know our children are growing up when they are willing to share in the responsibilities of the household – all of the above with the attitude of a contagious, positive spirit.

We may be like the thirteen-year-old kid that is six feet-ten inches tall whose dad says to him, “Son, I think you ought to think about basketball.” He has the height for it, but there is not a person who would question his lack of maturity for it. Put him on the same court with Tim Duncan of the San Antonio Spurs and he’d put him to school. Duncan loves that kind of person on the court with him. Why? Not because the kid can’t match him physically, but he hasn’t the resiliency nor the maturity. What does he need to do? Grow up! Even if he never grows another inch,

he has plenty of height to play on any pro basketball team. What he needs is to grow up. In the words of Bobby Bowden, Florida State football coach, "He has the engine, but his hands are not on the wheel." Growing into the image of Jesus puts one's hands on the wheel. The road is challenging, with many twists and turns. There are many roadblocks along the way. Most of which, come from the inside rather than the outside. However, we can overcome.

Busyness can disrupt our growth into being like Jesus. Some folk say, "*I too busy to be involved in a group.*" "*I find it hard to find time for my time alone with God.*"

Busy-ness can also be an addictive drug, which is why its victims are increasingly referred to as "workaholics." Busyness represses our inner fears as we scramble to achieve a desirable image to display to others. We become "outward" people, obsessed with how we appear, rather than "inward" people, reflecting on the meaning of our lives.

A television show pointed out that the cheetah survives on the African plains by running down its prey. The big cat can sprint seventy miles per hour. However, the cheetah cannot sustain that pace for long. Within its long, sleek body is an unreasonably small heart, which causes the cheetah to tire quickly. Unless the cheetah catches its prey in the first flurry, it must abandon the chase.

Sometimes Christians seem to have the cheetah's approach to their walk with God. They speed into doing things for God with great energy. However, lacking the

heart for sustained effort, they fizzle before they finish. We vow to start faster and run harder, when what we need may be not more speed but more staying power-- stamina that comes only from a bigger heart. Motion and busyness, no matter how great, yield nothing unless we allow God to give us a bigger heart.

Inadequacy can keep us from knowing the pleasure of God's heart. Some people say, *"I am afraid that I can not join a group because I don't know the Bible like everyone else. I'm afraid that I will not have any worthwhile to say."* One day in July, a farmer sat in front of his shack, smoking his corn cob pipe. Along came a stranger who asked, "How's your cotton coming?" "Ain't got none," answered the farmer. "Didn't plant none. Fraid of the boll weevil."

"Well, how's your corn?" Didn't plant none, fraid o' drouth."

"How about your potatoes?" "Ain't got none. Scrairt O tater bugs."

The stranger finally asked, "Well what did you plant?" "Nothin," answered the farmer. I just played it safe." Feelings that we are not good enough are like insects and drought, they can keep us from joy of growing in our relationship with God. Playin it safe brings no growth, no fruit.

Comfort or Pride can get in the way of growing deeper in our relationship with Jesus. Some people believe, *"Jesus and I have a good thing going so I don't need to be involved in a group."* *"I was saved a long time ago, so I am OK."* Such an attitude has a whole lot of "I" in it. It is as if they do not need anything or anyone at all. Such an attitude can lead to depression, loneliness and separation.

In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Trent Reznor, the lead musician of the rock band Nine Inch Nails, muses on how his anti-religion stance helped lead him into his lapse into depression: “In my head, that spilled over into an utter-chaos outlook: ‘I don't need anything, I don't need anyone, and I don't need to believe there's any reason to anything.’ It was a self-centered approach. I was lonely and had a bleak outlook on everything. I think people have an inherent need for belonging, to feel they are part of something.”

How can we fill this need for belonging? How can we be a part of something? How can we overcome these obstacles? As we run the most amazing race, we can make some **great connections at a few key intersections.**

At the intersection of Scripture and Prayer, we connect with God and others. I love to encourage people to make it a lifelong habit to spend time in the prayerful study of the Scriptures. God's Word is wisdom for those who need wisdom, its power for those who are weak, its encouragement for those who are discouraged, it is hope for those on the brink of despair, and it is life for those who are facing death. God builds great Churches on the foundation of His Word. Let's devote ourselves to it. We'll preach it from the pulpit, teach it in every group. We'll sing it in our worship songs. We'll commit it to memory, hiding it in our hearts so that we might not sin against God. In addition, we will learn to live it every day of our lives. The apostles' teaching matter as we run the most amazing race.

As the early church ran the Most Amazing Race, they became a learning church. Luke says they were devoted to the apostles' teaching. You might say the Holy Spirit opened a school in Jerusalem that day. It might have been tempting for these early believers to look back to Pentecost and recall the way the Holy Spirit had worked in dramatic ways, and think, *we don't need to learn. We just need more of the Spirit. Why do we need the apostles when we have the Spirit to teach us?*

Interestingly, when Luke says the Holy Spirit came to dwell in these 3,000, he says nothing about wind, fire, or tongues; he says they became learners. They sat at the apostles' feet, hungry for instruction. When the Spirit of God invades our lives, that's what he does: he makes us hungry for God's truth. When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives we can not wait to study the Scriptures with others.

Notice, too, how the Holy Spirit confirmed the authority of the apostles with many miracles (Acts 2:43). The believers were in awe because of the miracles that the Apostles performed. Therefore, they trusted the Apostles' teaching even more. If you saw me heal a blind man this morning, you would probably listen to what I had to say. Miracles were prevalent during the early years of the church, because God designed them to authenticate the apostles' teaching. Today changed lives confirm the apostles' teaching. Therefore, when we study the Scriptures here and at home, alone and with others, committed to obeying them, we will witness changed lives.

We grow at the intersection of Christ-centered friendship and service. Our friend Luke in the books of Acts chapter 2 says the believers were devoted to fellowship. That word has become overused in Christian circles; we use it so much we hardly remember what it means. The original Greek word for fellowship was *koinonia*, which meant "to hold something in common" or "to share something."

The early church spent time together. They worshiped together. They went from house to house breaking bread together and sharing meals with one another. In addition, they took care of each other. They had the attitude that, "Your needs are more important than my wants. I'll sacrifice my extras if it will provide you with some of the basics." In addition, the Bible says that they sold their possessions and shared the proceeds with one another. This did not become standard practice in all churches, and it didn't occur in Jerusalem because of heavy-handed legalism. No one was forced to give up their belongings—nothing like that. This sharing of resources happened because of love. Many of the early believers were extremely poor.

It wasn't that they didn't have enough money to upgrade to digital cable or to a flat screen TV—they didn't have enough money to buy food. Therefore, some of the affluent believers sold some of their possessions and contributed the proceeds to be used to meet the needs of those who had nothing. The point here is not socialism but compassion. We don't and shouldn't live in a socialist society, but God has called us, the church, to be compassionate with one another and look out for poor among us.

We see that God blessed their generous giving, by adding to their number those who were being saved.

Why does a church grow? Luke gives us part of the answer: a church grows by having favor with all the people. These early believers were still rubbing shoulders with people in their community. They didn't sever all relationships with unbelievers. Instead, they tried to meet needs outside of the church fellowship as well as within it.

A church wanted to see if their people saw a relationship between ministering to others and spiritual growth. When asked, "To what extent has your ministry or service to others affected your spiritual growth?" 92 percent answered positively. None responded that service had a negative effect on their spiritual growth.

Sixty-three percent indicated that service was equally significant in their spiritual growth compared to other spiritual disciplines, such as Bible study and prayer.

Twenty-four percent responded that service to others had been "a more significant factor" to their spiritual growth than Bible study or prayer.

Over half (58 percent) of those who were not actively serving others felt either "not satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with their level of spiritual growth. Christ-followers grow at the intersection of friendships and service.

We grow at the intersection of consistency and acceptance. I want you to notice the references to time in this passage. *(v. 42) and they were continually devoting themselves... (v. 43) and everyone kept feeling a sense of awe... (v. 46) and*

day by day, continuing with one mind... In the New Living Translation, 44 says... (v. 44) *and all the believers met together constantly ... [NLT]* this was not just an occasional thing for the early Christians. Church was not a one-day-a-week event for them. It was a constant, continuous, day-by-day experience. They didn't come to church, they were the church. They didn't go to church. They did church everyday, every minute.

Do you know what I've discovered about great churches? They don't just do church one day a week. Their people are involved in service and involved in fellowship almost every day. I'm not talking about long, boring meetings that drain the energy out of everyone in attendance. I'm talking about life-giving service and fellowship that is infused with the presence of God. I'm saying that if we want to be a great church, we need to spend time together serving the world and we need to do it often.

I love to see when the couples of our church spend time together, when their kids play together, when the men golf together, and on and on. Fellowship—us being together, enjoying one another's company, loving one another—this is a crucial aspect of the life of the church. If the only time we see each other is on Sunday morning, we don't have time to cultivate the sense of community that God wants to see developed among his people. Here's the bottom line: We're doing life together. The easy parts and the hard parts, the happy parts and the sad parts, the part where we serve together and the part we play—we're all in this together. We deserve to spend

time together and we need to do it often. As Luke later wrote: *“In addition, every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”* (Acts 5:42)

There are great churches and there are successful churches. Frankly, I don't know what the limits of our success will be. Maybe someday we'll have additional sites where people connect with God, grow in the image of Christ, and serve the world. Maybe we will have a million dollar budget associated with success—who knows. Much more important, however, is that we achieve greatness. We need to be great in the way that the early church was great. We need to connect at their intersections. Scripture and prayer, friendships and service, consistency and acceptance connected them with God and the world. The race they ran was all about consistently spreading the Good News of God's amazing love.

If we make connections at the intersections, then growth is inevitable. Lives will be changed. God will add to our number. We're a great cloud of witnesses running the Most Amazing Race for the glory of Jesus Christ. 2684