

Series: The Most Amazing Race

Title: “A Race Worthy to Win”

Text: Matthew 28:18-20

Key Word: Pit-stops

Proposition: Everyone will identify and strive for the “pit stops” of the Most Amazing Race.

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. I trust that you have come expecting something. Perhaps, you may expect acceptance, direction, hope or healing. Perhaps you hope to hear great music and a meaningful message. Deep down inside though I believe that what you are really expecting is God. You do not have to look to long for God is here.

I enjoy watching TV reality shows. These shows offer supposedly unwritten dramatic or funny situations. They report actual events. Instead of professional actors, ordinary people star in these shows. Its strong emotional subject matter or wildly dramatic scences attract viewers. Off-screen producers occassionally coach participants to act in certain ways while positioned in exotic locations or abnormal situations.

MTV’s “Real World” and “Road Rules” were one of the first reality shows in the new millenium. I love such shows as the Fox Network’s “American Idol”, ABC’s “Extreme Home Makeover” and NBC’s “Biggest Loser.” However, my favorite is CBS’s global adventure “The Amazing Race.”

In this show a team of two people who know each other race around the world in competition with other teams. Contestants race to arrive first at “pit-stops” at the end of each leg to win a prize and to avoid coming last. Those who arrive last may be eliminated or significantly delayed in the following leg. Contestants travel to and within several countries in a variety of ways including planes, taxis, rental cars, trains, buses, boats, and by foot. The clues in each leg of the race are placed in a brightly colored box attached to a pole. These clues guide the team to the next destination or directs them to perform a task, either as a team or by a single member. These challenges are related in some manner to the country or culture where they are located. Teams are progressively eliminated until three are left; at that point, the team that arrives first in the final leg is awarded a million dollar prize.

I enjoy the competition during the challenges and the relationships of folks under the stress of competition, culture shock, and the difficulties of travel. During each episode the host, interviews the contestants. They discuss the race and their relationship between themselves and the other contestants.

“The Amazing Race” reminds me of another adventure. This race also involves “contestants from different walks of life, who travel from one “pit-stop” to another on their way to a glorious final destination. They too are guided along the way by route markers and clues. Occasionally “Detours,” a “Road Block,” or a “U-turn” disrupts their momentum and challenges their patience. Sometimes a “fast

forward” pass awarded at the completion of a challenging task, moves them directly to the next pit stop. The stress of competition tests their focus on the ultimate goal.

The writer of Hebrews describes this Most Amazing Race. *“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 can not think of a better race worthy to win.

I hope that as we run this race together during the weeks to come, we will see the connections between God and ourselves and with others. We will understand that it is a race that helps us grow into an image of Christ. This race moves us to serve our world. This race is worthy of our investments.

This race offers a prize worth more than a million dollars. A million dollars may buy us gold, power, a large house and a fine car. However, it will do nothing for us on the day when we leave this earth. The most Amazing Race offers the ultimate prize, spending eternity with God in heaven. Nothing can compare with spending eternity with our family, friends, and neighbors.

Tonight the season premier of The Amazing Race will draw millions to their television to watch the contestants in the adventure of a lifetime. Today, we launch our premier series, “The Most Amazing Race” hoping to draw you into an adventure

that will change your life and our community. We believe that you will be encouraged to invite others along this journey for there are thousands who deserve to participate in The Most Amazing Race.

If you would gaze out into our world, you will see that many either have forgotten and abandoned God or have never heard about God's amazing love. The Barna Research Group found that between 1960 and 2000, the Episcopal Church in the U.S. declined 55%. The United Methodist Church declined 49%, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) declined 49%. During the past five years, mega churches have doubled in number and size. This means that with about 85% nominally U.S. Christians, only about half of them regularly attend church. These casual Christians are simply unchurched. They are mere viewers of The Most Amazing Race.

The Barna Organization conducted surveys in 2005. They found that many Americans embrace a different aspect of a biblical worldviews. Only one third of all adults believe that moral truth is absolute and unaffected by circumstances. Only 45% of born again Christians believe in absolute moral truth. Only 50% of adults believe that the Bible is accurate in all the principles it teaches. Just 25% of them are convinced that Satan is a real force. Only 40% of born again adults adopt this perspective. Only 40% of American population believes that Jesus Christ of Nazareth lived a sinless life.

One's worldview affects their life. It serves as a person's decision-making filter. It helps them make sense of the complex and huge amount of information,

experiences, relationships and opportunities in our world. Knowing what a person believes to be important, true and desirable, has a dramatic influence on a person's choices in any given situation. It affects one's media use, profanity, gambling, alcohol use, honesty, civility, and sexual choices. No wonder there is so much conflict, disruption, disease in the race of life.

Studies point out that a person's worldview is shaped and is firmly in place by the age of 13. It is refined through experience during the teen and early adult years. Eventually it is passed on to others in their adult life. Therefore, we must be committed to developing the worldview of our children. Not only is the future of our community and nation at stake so are the souls of the next generation. It would seem that we are falling behind in the race for the souls of our children, friends, and neighbors. However, God has given us a game plan to win the Most Amazing Race for the souls of our future generations. We cannot afford to be spectators of this race; we must become contestants who *run with perseverance the race marked out for us*.

How is this race marked out for us? What are the pit stops along the way? Jesus has clearly marked out the race for us. In His parting words to his followers, Jesus said, "*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:19-20) Jesus says, "Go and develop radiant followers of Jesus Christ. How do we run this race? We run this race by running toward the pit stops.

When we connect with God and others, we arrive at our first pit stop.

Jesus instructed his followers to baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The early followers of Jesus were to baptize people because baptism unites, connects the recipient with the God who is three in one. It connects one with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in the mystery of His death to sin and resurrection to new life. This special, spiritual connection shows that God is working in ones life in such a way that they are willing to live the life that He intends and marked as one of his many followers. We celebrate this special, spiritual connection in worship where we make other connections with God and others. In worship, God also connects with us as we sing praises unto God, pray together as one, and as we remember God's special connection to us in those special moments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In some sense, Christ-followers can be grouped into two categories -- marbles and grapes. Marbles are single units that do not affect each other except in collision. Grapes, on the other hand, mingle juices: each one is a part of the fragrance of the church family.

As we read the book of Acts, we see that the early church did not bounce around like loose marbles, ricocheting in all directions. We see them as a cluster of grapes, squeezed together by times of testing, bleeding, and mingling into one another and into living Christ.

Worship is that kind of connection, a spiritual merging of God and His people. Sadly, many miss this kind of closeness. Sermons and songs, while uplifting and

important, provide only a part of this spiritual encounter. Involvement with others while praying, singing and sharing together enables us to taste the sweet wine of the Living Jesus.

When we grow into the image of Jesus Christ, we arrive at our second pit stop. Jesus told us to teach them to obey everything he commanded us. Jesus has called his followers to a service of teaching others to become more and more like him. A disciple of Jesus is one who follows in the steps of his master or leader. The word for disciple in the original language meant learner. So a follower of Jesus commits to a race of life-long learning to be obedient to all that He has commanded us.

A Christian is not someone who has simply had this religious, spiritual experience where many would say one is born-again, converted, or saved. It is not just the removal of guilt. It is much more than that. A Christian is a person who knows that God will not allow them to be the same. It is a life of learning to do what He tells us to do.

When we serve our world, we arrive at our third pit stop. Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples of all nations. He wants us to leave all that we know and to move out into the world to tell others about the Good News. The fruitfulness of any venture does not begin with waiting for something to happen, but going after it, whatever it is.

For example, suppose a friend of yours needs a job. What advice would you give? Would you say, "Well, Bob, you're a sharp guy." If I were you, I would sit by the phone and wait for a Fortune 500 to realize that you're available and call you with an offer?" Would you say that? No, of course not. You would probably say, "Bob, if you need a job, then hit the streets, start knocking on doors, and eventually someone will hire you."

The other side of this coin is that if you have a business, do you want to wait to see if the most talented people seek you out, or do you want to go after them and offer them a job? The most talented people have many offers; if you do not seek them out, they will not know you exist. In my experience as an employee, the best jobs I have had are the ones I pursued. In my experience, the best staffs I have are the ones I went after.

How does this relate to living out The Most Amazing Race? If you want to live a worthy life—make a difference in the lives of others—then go after it. We cannot wait for the world to come to us. We must go to the world.

We have a building with a sign out front; if we wait long enough, a few people will find us and might decide to visit. However, if we really want to reach this community, we have to go—we have to reach out. We do that in a variety of ways. One way is by advertising through direct mail and newspapers. Another way is to provide outreach ministries such as clothing and food drives, repairing homes, tutoring adults and kids, serving at the clothes closet, and many other ways. Another

way is through our student and children's ministries in which we provide uplifting alternatives for their activities. Another way is by visiting people in their homes, giving them a flyer about the church, and inviting them to come and see. Another way is by telling someone you know about what Jesus has done for you and what he can do for them, too.

Just like the contestant in *The Amazing Race*, we have to sacrifice time and energy, to enter the race of saving lives. We need to forget about watching the show and become contestants in the day-to-day race to share God's Good News with all people.

Friends, let us run the race that is worthy to win. The best way to do that, as individuals, as a church, is to focus on developing radiant Christ-followers—taking the last words spoken by our Lord Jesus and living them out in our daily lives by racing toward each pit-stop: connecting with God and others, growing into the image of Jesus, and serving our world. 2387