

Still running the race of faith

Hebrews 12:1-2

Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church

March 11, 2018

Happy anniversary!

We are glad to be invited to help you celebrate the 27th anniversary of Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church. We were here two years ago on a Sunday morning to celebrate your 25th anniversary. It was May 29, 2016, and our congregation joined yours. I preached, Kathleen Marsh did a children's lesson, John Mardis sang, Japhy Holt danced, and we shared communion. Our two congregations shared communion and celebrated our oneness in Christ.

Two years before that, on November 9, 2014, you came to us. Your congregation joined ours in our building and you led worship. Your choir sang, Pastor Thomas preached, and Clarence Williams and the Rising Sons played and praised God.

2014, 2016, 2018 ... I think you are due back at our place in 2020! Or maybe we shouldn't wait that long.

But today we are here, celebrating with you another year in ministry, another year being God's people together, a 27th anniversary of being church. Your anniversary theme is "Still Running the Race of Faith," based on Hebrews 12:1-2.

Hebrews 12:1-2. Hear the word of God:

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne.

He did not give up. Jesus did not give up.

Did Jesus give up when the Pharisees prodded him with questions and tried to trap him?

Did Jesus give up when they plotted to kill him?

Did Jesus give up when the people of his own hometown rejected him?

Did Jesus give up when his disciples misunderstood him?

Did Jesus give up when one of them betrayed him and another denied him?

Did Jesus give up when it was time to go to Jerusalem for Passover and he knew what would happen if he did?

Did Jesus give up when they arrested him and stood him in front of the representative of the mighty Roman Empire?

Did Jesus give up when they led him off to die? Did Jesus give up because of the cross?

No! He did not give up. Why not? Because of the joy that was waiting for him. He ran the race, all the way, because of the joy he knew was waiting for him.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus!

Will we give up when fewer and fewer people are making Sunday worship a priority?

Will we give up when the gospel of love seems drowned out by the shouts of hate?

Will we give up people love their idols -- money, reputation, guns, personal security -- more than the living God?

Will we give up when Jesus calls us to offer our own lives as living sacrifices acceptable and pleasing to God?

No. We won't give up! We will keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and run with determination the race that lies before us. Because of the joy. Because of the joy that is waiting for us, we will keep on running. We will keep on keeping on.

Let me tell you a few things about this race ...

It's a marathon, not a sprint. I was a sprinter. It's all in, all you got, full speed ahead ... and then it's over. It's a burst of energy, giving everything you have ... and then, in just a very short time, it's over.

But a marathon is a long race. It's a long time until it's over! Running a marathon requires focus, steadiness, tenacity, endurance, and extraordinary discipline of the will. You have to make yourself keep on keeping on, even when you don't want to, even when your body is telling you to give up, even when your spirit is telling you to give up, even when it's hard, even when it hurts. To run a marathon you have to know yourself, know your body well, take care of your body well. You have to be keenly aware of your breathing, your need for water, your need for nutrition.

Running the race of faith is a marathon and if you are going to make it you need to know yourself, take care of yourself, be keenly aware of the breath of God's Spirit in you, be keenly aware of your need for living water, your need for

the living word. And you need to be steady, sure, in it for the long haul, keeping on when it seems easy and keeping on when it gets hard.

And think about this: when you run a marathon you can't see the finish line! In a sprint, the finish line is right there and you run as fast as you can to that line. But in the marathon, you can't see the finish line. You don't focus on the finish line, you focus on the next step and the next and the next. Running a marathon is about now, right now, right now running steady, right now staying faithful, right now serving God day by day by day. You don't know what's around the next corner, but you keep on running 'til you get there, and when you get there ... you keep on running!

Twenty-seven years -- that's a marathon! Not twenty-six miles, but twenty-seven years. It's more than a generation. Are there any of you here who have been here from the beginning? Any of you who have grown up in this church, parts of the second generation of this church? It's an accomplishment -- a whole generation of serving God and serving people in Waterloo, Iowa. It's something to be proud of. But you're not there yet. You're not done yet. It's a marathon!

The second thing about the race: you don't run alone. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus! Because he is running with you. Jesus is still running the race, with you!

But you also have to keep your eyes fixed on each other. You are running this race together. Did you watch any of the Winter Olympics just completed? Did you see any of the speed skating team pursuit. In team pursuit, two teams of three skaters each compete against each other skating around a 400 meter oval. A team wins by getting its entire team across the finish line first, not by crossing the line with one or even two of its skaters first, but by having its last skater cross the line first.

You may remember the heartbreaking race when two female skaters left their teammate behind. She finished a full four seconds behind her other two team members and was left in tears. And, of course, the two finishing ahead of her gained nothing by going ahead.

It must not happen with you! It must not happen with you ... Keep an eye on the ones falling behind, the ones falling away, the ones on the fringes, the ones nobody else is paying attention to. You will not, you cannot, finish the race without them.

And we're running, too. You, the people of Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church are running, and the people of First Congregational United Church of Christ are running, too. We're running the same race. We're on the same team.

And others are running, too. The good folks of Amazing Love Burmese Church are running, and the people of First Baptist Church. The people of Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church are running and the people of Jubilee United Methodist Church. The people of Bethany Bible Chapel are running. And

that's just a few people in a few churches in this solitary town in this solitary nation.

There are a lot of people running. There may even be a lot of people running we didn't know were on our team. So let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and on each other, because Jesus is running with you, and Jesus is running with us, and Jesus is running with them.

What are we running for? Who are we running for? Ourselves? For whom did Jesus go to the cross? For the world! God loved the world so much that God gave his Son ... for the sake of the world.

You have been a congregation for twenty-seven years, but you have worshipped in this building for four years. Your first worship service in this building was held on March 9, 2014. That Sunday was the first Sunday in the season of Lent and on that day in our church, we began a Lenten worship series entitled: "We have met the enemy and he is us," based on the record in the gospel of Matthew of what Jesus said and did after his arrival for the last time in the city of Jerusalem. The purpose of the series was to remind us, to let Jesus remind us, that enemies of God's people are not "out there."

Doubters and scoffers and unbelievers are not our enemy. Atheists and humanists and hedonists are not our enemy. People who hate the church, ignore the church, have no use for the church are not our enemy. The world is not our enemy. The greatest threat to God's people is not what anyone else might do to us, but what we may fail to do for them. We have met the enemy and he is us!

God intends us to be a witness people, a servant people, shining God's light into this shadowed world, witnessing to the good news of God's love and serving God by bringing back to him all those God loves -- men and women and children -- from every corner of the earth. God calls us to love the world, as he does, to love and serve our neighbors, as Jesus did, not to overcome the world in order to save ourselves, but to give ourselves for the sake of the world, to save it!

You know that. It's in your mission statement: "We are empowered to love the unlovable, reach the unreachable, and teach the unteachable."

And it's in ours:

In fellowship with Christ and with each other:

- *we gather for worship and for work, proclaiming that all are welcome here;*

- *we listen attentively to the word Christ speaks, allowing God's word and God's way to reshape our words and our ways;*

- *we share eagerly the meal Christ offers, inviting others without prejudice to join with us, sharing the blessing, comfort, and healing power of intimacy with God;*

- *we send our members into the world, commissioned to enact the love of God through evangelism and works of charity and service and justice.*

May you, and we, serve God by loving the world.

With God's help, following Jesus' guidance, empowered by God's Spirit, may we, the people of First Congregational United Church of Christ, fulfill our mission. May we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, running with determination the race that lies before us, not giving up, never giving up, for the sake of the joy that is waiting for us.

And may you, the people of Christian Fellowship Missionary Baptist Church fill your mission, with God's help, following Jesus' guidance, empowered by God's Spirit. May you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, running with determination the race that lies before you, today and tomorrow and the tomorrow after that and for the rest of this year and, Lord willing, for the next twenty-seven years and more! The Lord be with you.