

MAKING IT TO THE FINISH LINE

Luke 9:28-36

He is still considered the greatest high school athlete of all time. I'm not talking about Harrison Barnes, nor of LaBron James who went from high school to star player in the NBA. I'm not talking about Tiger Woods who was ready at a young age to play with the pros. I'm talking about the first high school student to run a mile in under 4 minutes and the only one to ever do it as a junior. In fact he did it five times in high school. One person has done it in high school two times and two others once each. His high school record in the mile lasted over 36 years. In high school he made the 1964 U.S. Olympic team. In his career he held the world record in five events—the mile, 1500 meters, 800 meters, 880 yards, and the medley relay. He is the youngest man ever chosen for athlete of the year by *Sports Illustrated* in 1966. His name is Jim Ryun.

Yet no matter how well Ryun ran, no matter how many records he had, he never reached the “promised land” of Olympic Gold. In 1964 in Tokyo he caught a flu and ran poorly. In 1968, at the peak of his career, he got mono. It slowed his training for the 7,000 foot altitude of Mexico City. Still he ran a great 1500 meters only to lose to Kip Keino who ran a brilliant race and grew up in high altitudes in his native Kenya. In 1972 Ryun seemed back to form, but he was tripped in a qualifying heat. Even though film showed that he had been fouled, the International Olympic Committee ignored his appeal. Ryun came so close, but not quite reached the ultimate goal.

Neither, it seemed, did Moses. After boldly defying the king of Egypt, after leading the people of Israel out of Egypt, after guiding them through 40 years in the wilderness, he was not able to enter into the promised land. He had come so far, but not enough. He came up short.

We hear stories of people who rise out of obscurity to victory, who overcome impossible odds to triumph. But the very fact that the odds are against them shows that more come up short than win it all. Only one team out of the 12 wins the Big-12, one out of 64 makes it through March Madness and the Final Four intact. If we looked at all of life, there are a lot more losers than winners, more who come up short than those who end up on top.

But what do we do if we seem to come up short? Look what has happened to “winners.” Look at Tiger Woods. Brad Lidge was the top reliever for the Philadelphia Phillies when they won it all in 2008. Last year he was terrible. Look what happened to Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, and Mickey Mantle after baseball. They struggled to adjust to life after sports. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush must seem lost after being President. Jim Ryun went on to become a congressman from Kansas. He was re-elected several times, but then lost to same person he had beaten two years before. In the next election he lost in the primary. We may make it to our goals, to our “promised land,” only to find that we are still short. It is like standing at the North Pole and asking, “Which way is north?” We have nowhere to go but south—downhill. Romans 3 puts it this way, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

But someone else didn't fall short. He completed His journey. Jesus talked with the same Moses described in our Old Testament lesson and Elijah. According to Luke's Gospel, they discussed the “Exodus” He was to fulfill in Jerusalem. Jesus took His “Exodus,” not up to the pinnacle of success, but into the depths of hell. He ran a race not to be first, but to be the very last—to put all the suffering, all the defeats, all the shortcomings of the whole world on His shoulders and died with it on the cross. He didn't stop and say, “I've had

enough!” He didn’t worm His way around it. No, He took the path all the way to hell. But by doing that, Jesus defeated the sin that turns all of our lives into falling short of the finish line.

My grandfather was a pastor. He came to the United State over 100 years ago from Germany to study at the seminary. He was one of the young German men sent to our country to become a pastor to the German Lutheran immigrants to the United States. His first call was as a circuit rider in the Black Hills. Some of His travels were done on horseback. The farmers told Him that if He got caught in a blizzard, to let go of the reins, then let the horse decide where to go. If it stopped, he was to get off, but hold on to the horse and see if there was a barb wire fence that needed to be cut. (He was told to always have a pair of pliers with him for that purpose.) One time he got caught in a blizzard. He did as the farmers told him and let go of the reins. Twice the horse stopped, and he had to get off and cut a fence. But a third time the horse stopped, but he could find no fence, only a small hill in front of him. He couldn’t get the horse to budge. So finally he got bold enough to climb the hill, then on the other side he fell down about six feet. The horse had stopped him right in front of a sod house.

It can seem to us that we have fallen short in life. We feel we have to go on to find happiness, but God doesn’t seem to take us there. Instead He lets people dear to us die. He lets the job market shrink as we get near to graduation. He lets our children and grandchildren drift away from church. He lets people disappoint us. But often what we fail to see is that the “promised land,” that the goal isn’t something far away in the future. It is what Jesus has gained for us now!

Moses did not go into the promised land, but He did see it. He died knowing God’s promise was true. He died in arms of His God, the Father who has rescued him and the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

We too can the promised land even better than Moses did. We see not a section of the earth that will not remain, but the cross and the empty tomb. We know even more than Moses did that God’s promise is true. It is not a matter of where we fall. Jesus went the whole way, took the “Exodus”

to hell for us. He said, “It is finished.” In other words, “It is done, complete, finished, fulfilled!”

So we live as those who do not have to fear falling short. Whether we are in first or last place in terms of athletics, grades, salary, payments, recognition, successful family or any of that, we still make it the whole way with Jesus. Because it is not a matter of how far we get, but how far He has come to reach into our lives and make us His.

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February 14, 2010
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014