

**The Art of Pilgrimage: The Second Sunday in Lent:  
*There is No Finish Line***

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**The United Church of Gainesville  
February 17, 2008**

**Taking the Journey**

I am thirteen, and in the comfortable suburban community of River Edge, New Jersey, my friends and I do a lot of walking at night. We walk to Friday night recreation at the First Congregational Church. We walk to the pizza parlor where I develop the habit that I keep until this day of eating pizza so hot it blisters my mouth because if I didn't eat my three pieces fast my friends would eat them first. We walk to the bus stop to take a bus to the movies in Hackensack, and then after the movie, we get ride the bus back to River Edge and we walk the rest of the way home. And as is the wont of boys this age we also run. "Race you to the stop sign, street lamp, or big tree," someone shouts, and we're off.

I discover that among my friends, I'm pretty fast.

Having tried out for the basketball every year in junior high and being told, every year by Coach Corcoran, "If anyone drops off the team, Larry, you'll be the next person to make it," and never being called up to the team, I've given up on sports that involve handling a ball.

So after a year of racing my friends, I go out for the track team At River Dell High School. I run the quarter mile.

I discover there's a big difference between running to the next stop sign with my friends and being conditioned to race by a track coach. On my first day of track practice I almost throw up. After my first week, I can hardly walk.

The first meet comes. By some fluke there are enough runners for two heats. I'm in the second heat, the grade B runners, my first race. I don't even have a uniform. They have given me used track spikes.

The gun sounds. I run like I am demon-possessed. At the first turn I am in first place. I'm still in first on the back stretch. I think I may just be a natural. And then, one by one, rather quickly, absolutely everyone passes me. I so completely run out of gas that I'm not sure if I'm even picking up my feet. At the finish line I am a wheezing, gasping, dead last.

I get better over the years but never great. My best friend George Howe turns out to be the state champion quarter miler. I always run for second or third. I run on the mile relay team, but I am never the final, anchor leg (which in my junior year is run by Don Parcels, younger brother of NFL coach Bill Parcels). I never have a chance to break the finish line tape.

Until the last regular meet of my senior year against Ramsey High. Our star sprinter at River Dell is suspended for some team violation. My friend George is going to run the 220 and the 100 yard dashes instead of the quarter mile. I am now our first place runner in the quarter mile. I

actually have a better time in the quarter mile than the guy from Ramsey High School. I can win this one.

For the first time ever the coach gives me our one and only set of starting blocks. I try them out. As I jog back to the starting line, someone yells, "Look out Larry." I glance over my shoulder to see an errant discus coming toward me. I put my arms over my head and try to duck. The discus hits me in the head and knocks me out. When I come to with a concussion and a broken hand, the coach says, "So Reimer, you want to run now or wait for the mile relay?" I sit there looking like Road Runner after he has been hit on the head with an anvil. I don't even know where I am. So much for my chance of breaking the tape at the finish line in the quarter mile.

Fast forward. I am 37, and I have rekindled my on and off relationship with jogging. It's summer and we're on vacation in Highlands, North Carolina. I am puffing up and down the mountain roads trying to get in shape. I wonder about my goal as an adult runner without track meets, uniforms, and my friend George. In a sporting goods store, I see the new poster for Nike. It's a lone runner on a country road with an endless string of telephone poles and wires stretching out into the distance. The motto is, "There is no finish line."

And I get it. There is the beginning experience of running, where I'm huffing and puffing, wondering when I'm going to get there, if I'm doing this right. But at some point I realize, like the runner in the poster, that I'm not running for a finish line. I'm running for the sake of running. And I realize that back in high school, that's what it was all about. I loved running. I didn't need finish lines. Now again, that's what it's all about.

How many of you have at some point taken up a new skill, perhaps running, or a musical instrument, or an art form or craft, or any new sport (ask our first time skiers on our high school trip this weekend about their experience) or a new language and felt utterly uncoordinated and uncentered? The beginning is agony. We keep asking those around us if we're doing it right. When will I get this?

And then, at some point, without realizing it, we're doing it. We understand the meaning of no finish line. We simply enjoy the process of running, sewing, playing.

**READING "With the Master" – Philip Vernier,**

**Leader:** *The spiritual life is a journey. St. Gregory reminds us, "Whosoever would understand what is heard must hasten to put it into practice."*

*Therefore do not wait for great strength before setting out,*

**People:** *for immobility will weaken you further.*

**Leader:** *Do not wait to see very clearly before starting out:*

**People:** *One has to walk toward the light.*

**Leader:** *Have you strength enough to take this first step?*

*Have you courage enough to accomplish one act of fidelity or reparation, the necessity of which is apparent to you?*

**People: Take this step! Perform this act! You will be Astonished to feel that the effort accomplished, instead Of having exhausted your strength, has doubled it, And that you already see more clearly what you have to do next.**

*(From Lenten Reflections, 2008, Sandy Reimer, ed.)*

**Choral Response – “Within Our Darkest Night” – Taize’**

**Choir first time, then congregation 2x.**

### **There Is No Finish Line**

It's 1996, and I go to Page Hall of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church where Ted Runions has set up a labyrinth soon after he had it made. I know Ted. He is tending the labyrinth that day. I ask him how to walk it. He says "There's no rule. If you wish, you may take a question with you and see what comes up as you come out." It's cumbersome at first, confusing. I'm not sure if I'm doing it right. But suddenly I'm walking that labyrinth, and it becomes a spiritual practice. I realize that something about holding a spiritual question while walking, following the different turns, pausing, starting again, finding the center and then coming out again becomes the journey. At some point of walking the labyrinth I don't worry if I'm doing it right. There is no finish line.

I have discovered a new path, a new avenue to my center and to God. Over the years I have walked the labyrinth regularly. It's always different. Once I got lost on the labyrinth, which I decided was a good metaphor for my spiritual journey that year. Sometimes when I have been so deeply concerned about my grown children and my grand children I have sunk to my knees in the center of the labyrinth and held each of them in prayer. I sometimes have stopped in front of our spiritual stations set up around the circle. Each took me deeper into the wonder of this church until I stopped, serendipitously in front of Wayne Nagy's sound board where he keeps a pantheon of all the toys Kathy Funke hands out each Sunday. That was an unexpected turn. While walking the labyrinth is always different, it always brings me a new level of meaning. I feel my soul expanded as I realize there is no finish line in the spiritual journey.

#### **Reading:**

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just some of us, it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give*

*other permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

*(Marianne Williamson)*

*You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light shine... Words of Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16*

**Choral Response: In the Lord I'll be Ever Thankful**

**Choir first time, then congregation 2x.**

### **The Pilgrimage**

The Nike slogan, "There is no Finish Line" is also a slogan for any spiritual practice. The call to pilgrimage is a call to step out of the ordinary and take on a path of faith. To begin any new spiritual path is as difficult and confusing as any other new learning. And we are often paralyzed by wondering if we have it right.

I believe our mantra for the pilgrimage of lent could well be this early advertising slogan of Nike, "there is no finish line." The meaning is in the journey, the answer is in the questions.

The spiritual journey is like a circle of rituals, some brand new, some repeated with a slightly new twist over and over. The various experiences lead us deeper, but they're not graded and measured. It is amazing to me that as I grow older I keep I keep learning what seem like quite obvious and simple truths as I engage in new and repeated spiritual practices.

If we think of it, none of us has ever made a single discovery in our lives, nor have we taken significant steps forward in this church without some initial confusion, at least at pinch of pain, and a transitional time of wondering if we'll get it figured out.

Jesus tells us that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And he says if we don't shake out that salt and use it, what good are we? And nobody, he says, with any sense, hides a light. Our light is meant to shine, to be given away.

Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact the kingdom of God is with and among you." (Luke 17:20-21)

Come to the journey, the pilgrimage, the labyrinth, Taize' services, the Lenten Reflections book, and whatever spiritual intention you make for yourself. And as the sequel to Nike's "There is No Finish Line", there is also Nike's newer slogan, "Just do it."

And speaking of circles, and just doing it, my sons live in Jacksonville and they run the Jacksonville River Run each March. They asked me this year to run the 5k version. "Morgan did it last year, dad, and she was pregnant," says Matt. I tell him that Morgan is half my age, and was barely pregnant.

I haven't run since 2002 when I had my abdominal surgery. In 2003 I had a post surgical repair. In 2004 I had meniscus knee surgery, and

then another abdominal surgery from overdoing my knee rehab. I am not sure about my body.

But as part of my newest spiritual journey, I give it a try again. I discover this month that I can indeed run. I am running each morning. I have that metaphor again for my spiritual journey. There is no finish line. I don't hope to win the Jacksonville River Run. But I am, as the gospel according to Nike says, "Just doing it." The light is shining again.

**Reading:** *Peace is not the product of a victory or a command. It has no finishing line, no final deadline, no fixed definition of achievement. Peace is a never-ending process, the work of many decisions.*

*(Oscar Hammerstein II, musical comedy lyricist)*

### **PRAYER**

O Wayshower, one who gives us direction for new paths of our hearts, we pray for a path to friends, friends who will listen to our stories, who will look at our pictures, and laugh at our jokes. We pray for a path as we listen, look and laugh with them, and who in the sad times and the glad will be sad and glad with us. Show us a path without finish lines to friends.

O Wayshower, one who gives us direction for challenges to our lives, we pray for a path to make a difference in this world, tuned to the needs of the outcast, clear amidst the confusing calls of so many, meeting the need of the other and giving us joy. Show us a path without finish lines.

O Wayshower, who opens hearts to love, give us tenderness to care and be cared for. Show us a path to love.

O Wayshower of the path to healing, we pray for healing of our wounds, and of the wounds of those we hold so dear that their pain draws lines in our faces. Show us a path to healing.

O Wayshower, pick up our feet as we put them down, as we seek new dimensions of truth that never end.

Amen.

**Choral Response: "Ubi Caritas"**  
**Choir first time, then congregation 2x.**

### **\*BENEDICTION**

**Sung to the tune of Tallis' Canon**

When darkness falls on every side,  
When hatred stains the hurting heart,  
To you we call, most powerful Guide,

To kindle now the precious spark.

Lift high the lantern's living light,  
That mercy's song may on us fall.  
Wayshower\* in uncharted night,  
Shed your dear light upon us all.

(Caitlin Matthews in A Celtic Devotional)

\*Wayshower is a prophet or guide who leads us on the spiritual journey.