

Jon Hauerwas – February 12, 2017 – “Eyes on the Prize”
1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and 2 Corinthians 4:1, 7-12

My father, grandfather, and great-grandmother all loved to garden. Each was especially fond of roses. As family legend has it, my grandfather, who had a reputation for being a rather mediocre student, used to claim that it was the family roses – which he gave liberally to all of his teachers – that ultimately made high school graduation a reality for him.

Now, of course, I doubt that this last part is true. But, it is safe to say that roses have come to symbolize many different things in our society, including love, friendship, victory, and sympathy, for example. We take roses to the hospital, we give them to our loved ones on Valentine’s Day, and pageant winners receive them by the armful. In Pasadena, California, some 18 million roses are required each year to decorate floats in celebration of New Year’s.

If you’ve ever watched a top figure skater at the winter Olympics, you know that roses rain down on the rink following a brilliant performance. And, in May, as soon as a new champion is announced at the Kentucky Derby, the winning horse and jockey are isolated and decorated with blankets of roses.

As we consider these various images, let us hear again our first lesson this morning. Paul writes, “Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a *perishable wreath*, but we an imperishable one.”

Here, I imagine the Olympics, or the Rose Bowl, or the Kentucky Derby. Even in a modern context, we have carried forth this ancient tradition of adorning our champions with flowers - of honoring them and their successes in this way. And it seems to me that Paul employed this language – the language of athletics, and competition, and perishable wreaths – because these images have held such deep resonance for centuries.

This year’s Super Bowl concluded last Sunday. Just consider, if you will, all of the energy, and the money, and the people who participated as athletes, entertainers, event staff, security, and spectators for that event. Even more, consider the hundreds of millions of people tuned into watch the game worldwide.

And what will the victors receive? Money. Status. Championship Rings. Champagne. The Lombardi Trophy. Their names will be placed in the record books.

Players will be recognized by fans in the streets. And one day, some will likely be inducted into Canton's NFL Hall of Fame. It all gives the impression of that which is classic, timeless, and eternal.

But, on second thought, we know better, don't we? Accolades, of course, are not bad in and of themselves. But, the reality is this. No matter how many fans are watching, and no matter how many people are cheering our names, earthly rewards will pass away.

The Old Testament book of Isaiah puts it like this. "All people are grass; their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever." Here, Isaiah reminds us that we, like flowers, are only here for time. And one day, we too will expire. That which is enduring, that which is truly timeless, is to be found only in relationship to God.

This brings us to our second lesson and the notion that our bodies are like clay jars. It's an interesting metaphor. We're not likened here to a mighty, medieval castle, or a coat of mail, or an iron shield. No. According to this text, we are fragile,

breakable, and prone to decay. And yet, despite our obvious frailty, we are the vessels in which God has entrusted a very precious treasure. How could this be true? And what are we to make of the many who live their lives as hollow vessels? As those who lack hope and live in absence of a defining purpose. Can they be transformed from empty containers into something more pleasing to God?

The first congregation that I served as an ordained minister was in Worthington, Ohio. There I became friends with a woman named Margaret Peterson Haddix. Margaret served on Session and was the chair of the Mission Committee for which I had responsibility as a staff person.

In her professional life, Margaret is a *N.Y. Times* best-selling author who has written a number of novels for adolescents. And because of her success, she is often asked for advice from other, aspiring writers. To them, Margaret offers these words. She tells them that the most important part of the entire, creative writing process is the ending.

All too often, she says, writers begin with a list of good ideas and then basically just make the story up as they go along. But, the problem with this approach is that the author doesn't know how the story is going to end until much of the book

is already written. And all along the way, the author has missed many opportunities to deepen the plot in the way that the story is told.

In other words, the most important step for a good novelist is to imagine the ending first, and then, to spend the rest of the creative writing process working toward that goal. This means that the ending of a good novel is not just an exclamation point. It's not there just for emphasis or to wrap things up. But instead, a good ending is the result of a whole series of smaller goals which have been working together in cooperation over time. And that's why, when we get to the end of a great novel, we are just blown away. Because we start to see how all of the parts are connected, and how they have been from the very beginning.

Sadly, many people choose to make things up as they go along. They live minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day without a thought to long-term goals or a sense of enduring purpose. And while it's certainly true that things may not end disastrously if this is the approach they choose, it is likely that they will miss many opportunities along the way.

Just consider again that image of the athlete. Competitive athletes will tell you that it is crucial for them to understand how their overall lifestyle serves the purpose

and the goals they have in mind. And when they consider this carefully, they will soon begin to analyze how they eat, and train, and sleep. Each day, a great athlete will consider their long-term goals. They won't just make things up as they go along. But, instead, they will remember the game plan, and all of their efforts will be focused on a specific goal - which is, finally winning the race.

Now in the church we're not competing with one another in a spirit of self-righteous one-upmanship. But we are striving together in community. Here, we exchange ideas, and engage in social action, and worship together, and support one another during difficult times, and hold each other spiritually accountable. And time and time again, we come back to this place because we understand that it is here where we are most likely to achieve our goals together, as a community of shared interest and purpose.

We become better disciples, then, or to put it another way, we win the race, when we come to realize how faith is powerfully impacting every aspect of our lives - from the way that we make decisions to the way that we engage others. And, ultimately, as we mature in our discipleship, we begin to both understand and appreciate how our lives are continually being transformed by the power of God's Spirit.

In closing this morning, I remember again that image of my grandfather, pinning all of his hope for success on the favor of the family roses. In time, he matured too. He enjoyed the many pleasures of this world. But, he consistently kept his eyes on the prize. He was a deacon, an elder, and a faithful husband and father. He knew that his life had a greater purpose. And when he died and we placed roses on his casket, we knew that he had won the race, indeed.

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.