

REFLECTIONS – By Paul Negstad
October 30, 2022

I'd like to begin with some thank you's. Thanks to Sue Morris for her design and art work on our stewardship poster. Thanks to Krisha, Lucy, Deanie and Nancy for their presentations these past few weeks. Thanks to Jan Carlson, Karen Huntzinger, Nancy M-A and Doreen for baking pancakes and Rachelle Hughes for adding waffles to the menu, thanks to Jean Severson for handling all the stuff I threw at her this year, thanks to the kitchen crew this morning, and thanks to all of you for joining us for breakfast and showing up ready to run. I have never seen a more impressive group of runners at the beginning of a race and I am confident that whoever is wearing bib no. 2023 is going to do really well in this year's Stewardship marathon. Depending on your perspective, I either warned you or promised you there would be lots of visuals and symbolism during this year's pledge drive. And so it begins. If you haven't already picked up your race/pledge packet, please pick it up following the service. If you don't find a packet with your name on it, please take one of the extras that are available. This year, we are offering you two ways to make a pledge. The first is to use what has been our traditional method of filling out and returning a pledge card. The second is to make your pledge online. Starting this morning, we will have several laptops available in the Narthex for anyone that wants enter their pledge through our church website. You can also do this on your home computer. When you leave the church this morning exit through the starting gate to symbolize the start of this year's pledge drive. We are encouraging everyone to continue to come to worship dressed to run and wearing your race bib each Sunday through November 20th. There are extra bibs available if you need one for anyone else that comes with you on Sunday so that they can be part of the race too. For those of you watching on line; we mail your pledge packet tomorrow and it will include a race bib for you to wear at worship, whether on-line or in-person the next 3 Sundays.

Before I begin my reflections on Stewardship, I have a couple of requests to make of you. The first is to recognize that what I will be saying has been shaped by my own personal experiences, starting with the example that my parents set for me up through the past five years working on Stewardship at Westminster. My hope is that you will take some time over the next three weeks to think about what being a good Steward means to you based on your own life experiences. The second request is that you remember that there are three T's in Stewardship – Time, Talent and Treasure. During this pledge drive, the emphasis is on Treasure, but please include Time and Talent as you consider your Stewardship commitments.

Five years ago, we used the words of the 15th century nun Saint Teresa of Avila in our pledge drive. Her words really brought home to me why our individual Stewardship commitments are so important and so this morning I would like to paraphrase her words to ask for God's blessing on this year's Stewardship Pledge Drive. Would you pray along with me:

Loving and gracious God,

Recognizing that Christ has no body now but ours. No hands, no feet on earth but ours. Bless our church family as we share our time, talent and treasure so that we can be the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. We can be the feet with which He walks to do good. We can be the hands through which He blesses all the world. We can be the hands, We can be the feet, We can be the eyes, We can be His body.

As Christ's body on earth we pray,

Amen

The past few weeks we got in Stewardship shape by learning about the programs and activities that we are being asked to support with our pledge commitments. And I am unapologetically encouraging each one of us to be as generous as we can be with our time and money to support this work. But today is race day and so I want to use St Paul's words in 2nd Timothy 4:7 from the Good News translation as the basis for a pre-race pep talk as we get ready to run our Westminster Stewardship Marathon.

"I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. Of course, Paul wasn't literally talking about physically running a race, but that doesn't mean I can't use Paul's metaphor of doing his best in the race and running the full distance as a way of talking about what stewardship means to me. And since the image that I see when I read this verse is that of St Paul running a marathon, I think that it is only appropriate that I use my own experience of having trained for and run a marathon to talk about stewardship using the metaphor of running a stewardship marathon. Both types of marathons begin with setting a goal that will take considerable time and effort to achieve. To run a marathon, you need to be prepared to spend months or even a year or more building up the endurance required to complete the 26.2 mile course. Running the full distance in a Stewardship Marathon requires us to be prepared to spend a lifetime achieving our goal. Both require taking personal responsibility. Support and encouragement from family and friends certainly helps when training for a marathon as does support and encouragement from our church family as we run our stewardship marathon, but ultimately each one of us must individually do the work. No one else can run the miles it takes to train for a marathon and no one else can make the financial choices and write the checks to fulfil our stewardship commitment. At this point you might be asking yourself what happened to the encouraging pep talk I promised, because it might sound like I am trying to talk you out of running the race. But that isn't the case. I am just pointing out that no one runs either type of marathon by accident. It is a choice we make because we believe it is worth all the required time and effort, and we believe that we have the ability to succeed. I hope that even those of you that would never consider running a marathon would agree that being in the best shape of your life makes the time and effort worthwhile. Even more so when you include the sense of accomplishment and confidence one gains from completing a difficult and challenging task. If I were to ask you who believes that Stewardship is worthwhile, I am confident that the response would be overwhelmingly favorable. That's because, in addition to the personal sense of accomplishment and wellbeing we gain from sharing our gifts, we also get to experience the joy of helping others and the knowledge that we are responding to God's call to serve. It is the second part, the believing we can achieve our goal, that can become more complicated for many of us and may even cause some of us to choose to remain on the sidelines. I think that is because for many of the things we do in life, whether it be in our leisure time or at work, success is often defined as being better than someone else. It becomes a competition where there are winners and losers, which can cause us to feel that what we do is not as good as the work someone else is doing. But both running a marathon and Stewardship are different. They are so uniquely personal that success cannot be measured by comparing ourselves to anyone else, which means that success really is defined as just doing our best. And doing our best is different for everyone that chooses to run the race. Everyone running a marathon has taken a different path to get to race day. Your age and physical fitness when you began training, were you single or did you have a family with three kids under 5, did you have a job with a regular schedule or one that required lots of overtime or travel. Did you have any unexpected health issues? Knowing all the time and effort required and the obstacles that were overcome guarantees that everyone completing the race, regardless of their time or where they finished, feels like a winner, because all that matters is that they did their best. The same is true when we run a Stewardship marathon. Having kids or kids starting college, going through periods of unemployment,

changing careers, having health issues, getting promoted, and something as basic as how much we earn each year makes running a Stewardship marathon a very personal journey; one where simply doing our best under the circumstances we are in is all that is required. And don't just take my word for it. In 2nd Corinthians 8:12, Paul makes this very clear when he writes "God will accept your gift on the basis of what you have to give, not on what you don't have." And then think about who Jesus singled out for praise and recognition in Luke 21:1-4. It wasn't the rich rulers or the Bill Gates of Jesus time who were the ones that were giving the most. Jesus chose to single out and praise the poor widow who put in two small copper coins, knowing that her smallest of all the gifts required the greatest sacrifice. Whether you have been running a stewardship marathon for many years or are considering just getting started, I want to encourage each one of us to run this year's race knowing that what we will be doing is worthwhile and that doing our best is all that is asked.

Now that I have convinced everyone to run the race, I want to use my experience of having trained for a marathon to share some things that I think can help us run the full distance.

Make it a Priority. Training for a marathon requires that you spend a lot of time running. Making that time a top priority in your schedule is essential to putting in the miles that are required to complete the race. Similarly, in Proverb 3:9 we are asked to make our Stewardship commitment a priority by making an offering of the first fruits from all our crops. Making a pledge commitment for the coming year is one way in which we can show that we are prepared to give of our first fruits.

You need to stay disciplined during marathon training so that you will continue to get up an hour or two earlier each morning and that you will run when it is raining, or the temperature is in the 30's. Similarly, we need to stay disciplined during our stewardship marathon by not allowing other distractions or temptations interfere with meeting the stewardship commitments we make.

Take Incremental Steps. Everyone that begins training for a marathon starts running at a pace and distance they are comfortable with. Some begin with runs of less than a mile, others with 2-3 mile runs and some may start with runs of 5 or more miles. But regardless of where you start, gradually increasing the miles you run is required to build up the endurance needed to run the full distance on race day. Similarly, everyone running a Stewardship marathon starts giving at a level they are comfortable with. But the same incremental approach can be used to gradually build up our ability to be more generous in our stewardship. Consider making it a goal to incrementally increase giving each year.

Make the incremental steps challenging but realistic: As is often said in distance running, "No pain, no gain" which simply means that you need to push yourself mentally and physically as you are gradually increasing the miles you run. In other words, the increments need to be challenging. At the same time, you need to be realistic in what you can accomplish. Pushing too hard can lead to discouragement or injury that could slow you down or even stop you from reaching your marathon goal. We can use the same approach when running our Stewardship marathon by making challenging increases to our giving that may mean foregoing some other purchases (after all no pain, no gain). But as with marathon training, we need to make sure that the challenging commitments are realistic. It is one thing to give up going out to dinner once a week to increase our commitment. It is quite another if the challenging commitment means skipping a meal every day. Making a commitment that can't be met can lead to discouragement and frustration that could cause us to lose focus on achieving our long-term stewardship goals.

Be Flexible: When training for a marathon or when running a stewardship marathon, we need to give ourselves permission to make adjustments as needed for changing circumstances such as injury or illness, a career change or unemployment, having to move, or a change in family status like the birth of a child or having to care for a loved one. When these circumstances allow, we can adjust our commitments as required to get back on track.

Do it joyfully: Now some of you might question whether joyfully and running should be included in the same sentence, but it is true. The first time you set a personal best in terms of miles run will bring a smile to your face and if you have ever seen pictures of runners after the finish of a marathon there is nothing but smiles and hugs. There is even a book titled "The Joy of Running". And God makes it clear that He wants us to give joyfully. Romans 12:8 and 2nd Cor: 9:7 both tell us to give cheerfully and gladly. So we should remember to smile each time we give, knowing that we are pleasing God and helping others

Finally, expect that running the full distance will be life changing. All the training and effort that goes into running a marathon has a long-term impact on your overall health and conditioning and increases the likelihood that you will want to stay physically active for as long as possible. Running the full distance in a Stewardship marathon is also life changing. It will change our priorities – Matt. 6:21 "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." It will change our view of what is important in life as the following quote makes clear "Real security is found and true richness of life experienced-not in guarding what we have but in sharing what we can"-end quote. And it can be liberating when we experience the transformation from "never having enough" to the recognition that God has provided all I need. It's race day so let's all lace up our sneakers and then go do our best and run the full distance.