

## Finishing Strong: Use the Peloton

November 7, 2021

Dr. Tom Pace

*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*  
Hebrews 10:19-25 (NRSV)

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,<sup>1</sup> and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.*

Hebrews 12:1-3

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up, open our eyes that we might see. Open our ears that we might hear whatever word you have for us in these words. Open our hearts, God, that we might feel. Then O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

The year was 1971, and the pop composer and performer were sitting in his New York City apartment looking out over the East River. He and his partner formed a singing Duo, and they had become quite successful. They had worked hard through the tough times, traveled a lot and all they wanted was to find a bit of success. Then it happened. They were blowin' and goin'. But you know that what happens with success is exhaustion, and he was exhausted. The world was in

turmoil, Vietnam was happening, the Civil Rights movement was happening and there was so much conflict around. And what he discovered was that all those dreams of success he had – dreams that he thought would make him happy – in fact just left him empty. He was struggling.

He put on his favorite album. I don't know if you have comfort music, but I have comfort music I listen to. And so, he put on his favorite record, and it was a gospel album by the Swan Silver Tones. This was a five-person Gospel quintet – his favorite song, “Mary, Don't You Weep.” He listened to them sing the chorus over and over, and then the lead singer began to, as they say, “scat.” Which meant he began to speak, sort of jumping around on top of the chorus that was going on behind with different words. He was saying different words, and finally, the lead singer said, “I'll be your bridge over deep water, if you just trust in my name.”

That took ahold of Paul Simon's heart, and he went and got out his pad and paper and wrote “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” He gave it to Art Garfunkel to sing because he had such a perfect voice. By the way, it became his number one hit, nominated for six Grammys. The first three words grab your heart. “When you're weary...”

I think I've talked to more weary people over the last 18 months – my goodness! Just weary –just tired of it. Just saying, “Come on, man.” “When you're weary....”

What do you do when you're weary? How do you persevere?

Over the last four weeks we've been talking about perseverance, and we've been using athletic images. Paul uses that in 2 Timothy. He says, “I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith.” In Hebrews, the writer says, “Let us run with perseverance the race set before us.” So, it's full of athletic images.

Today I want to return to one we used two weeks ago, and it has to do with cycling. Bicycle racing. Here's why I think it's so pertinent. Cycling is an interesting sport since it's an interesting combination between an individual sport and a team sport. All of us have had a similar experience. When you're driving along a country road in the middle of the summer, and it's out in the boonies. You come across a cyclist. He or she is on a bike, wearing cycling shorts that keep their thighs from chafing the whole time. They always like to wear those colored jerseys, the brightly colored jerseys. And they're out there in the heat and on a hill cycling along. It's lonely and grueling, and in your car, you're watching them ride. If you think to yourself, if you're like me, “Why are they doing that? That doesn't look like fun. What is the point of this? Why are they out there doing this grueling training?” It looks so lonely out there.

But then, in cycle racing when they actually race, it's a team sport. They're in teams of six or so and they take turns leading, they're all working to get one lead rider across the finish line. And all the riders ride tighter in something called the "Peloton." It's a French word that means "Small Ball." And if you've ever watched a cycle race from a blimp or whatever, you see this amorphous kind of blob that rides along the road. It kind of takes different shapes as it rides and it's interesting to watch. They're pedaling at 35 mph six inches from each other just hoping they don't crash and someone in front of them doesn't crash. It's really an amazing thing. It's a team event.

I think the Christian faith is like this. On the one hand, it's an individual walk. The old spiritual says, "Jesus walked the lonesome valley; he had to walk it by himself, nobody else could walk it for him." We walk our faith walk by ourselves. And often, I'll tell you – does anyone else have the same doubts I have? Does anyone sometimes say their prayers and wonder if anyone is out there listening? Does anyone else have that time when their faith feels dry and other times when they feel like they're riding on the winds of the Holy Spirit and that nothing could stop them, no matter what? You think to yourself, "I have to do this on my own – this is me and Jesus, just the two of us."

That's not, though, what the Scripture teaches us about the Christian faith. No, Paul calls us "A body" – a single body, one body together. We are the Body of Christ. And the word "church" is a collective noun. The word for church is translated EKKLESIA, which literally means "a gathering or a movement." There is a word for religious institutions in Greek, and it's not the same word. This is a collective noun. It's like a swarm of bees, or a flock of birds, or a peloton of riders, or a church of Christ-followers. We are one unit together.

Here's the context for our Scripture for today. When Paul began planting churches around, he told them that Christ was to return. And that Christ would return and be victorious and would be this triumphant Christ. We have a crucified Christ, the risen and resurrected Christ, but Christ would come again and would lead to that great victory that had already been set into motion that the Kingdom of God would be fulfilled. And they were waiting. We don't know who wrote Hebrews, it's been attributed to Paul by the earliest sources, but the letter itself does not mention Paul's name. We don't know exactly who wrote it. But it's written in probably the mid to late 60s.

Paul began to write Thessalonians, for example, around 40 or 41, so 20 years have passed. They've been waiting for the Day of the Lord; it could come at any time. They thought, "Maybe it will come today – or tomorrow – maybe next week...." And then the weeks gave way to months, then to years and to decades.

A really great preacher named Tom Long, a professor of homiletics says, "One can stand on one's tiptoes only so long."

So, people began to wonder, "Is this real?" They began to fall away, to return to their legalistic Judaism. So that's what leads the author of Hebrews to say things like, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful." Or "Let us run with perseverance the race set before us."

Let's be a part of the peloton.

This is interesting. We were talking about this in our worship team meeting. Most of the people thought I was talking about that stationary bicycle called the Peloton. I think that's kind of funny. There's a whole sermon series about stationary bicycles. You pedal and pedal and pedal, but you really don't go anywhere! I don't know if your faith is like that where you're working really hard, but you don't feel like you're making any progress. That's a whole different sermon series – we'll deal with that another time!

How do we persevere? I want to lift up three things briefly here in this Scripture. The first is that you have to learn to draft. Using the peloton as an image, you have to learn to draft.

Here's what I've learned, and I think it's amazing. The physicists have done lots of work since there's lots of money now involved in bicycle racing. They've used wind tunnels and all that sort of thing. If you are in the group – in the middle of the peloton – the wind drag is five to 10 percent of what it would be if you were on your own. Not five or ten percent less, actually five to 10 percent. So, you may be pedaling with the effort of going 5 to 10 kilometers an hour when you're going 55 kilometers an hour. You're being swept away; you're being dragged along, being pulled, being drafted along as you go.

When we become part of the community, we are to be pulled along. We have to learn to draft. That's why the author of Hebrews says, "Not neglecting to meet together." In other words, don't try to go riding on your own. "...as is the habit of some. But encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching." Encouraging one another, pulling one another along.

A guy goes into a bar, and he sits down at the bar, and he starts to drink his beer. There are not a lot of people around as he's sitting there. He hears this voice that says, "You look marvelous! You look just great!" The man is puzzled and looks around. There was no one around and the bartender was looking the other way. He thought, "Maybe I'm going crazy." So, he started to drink his beer again, and then he heard the voice again. It says, "Have you lost weight? You look so great!" And the guy thinks, "That's great to hear, but who's saying that?"

A few minutes later, he hears the voice again, and this time, it says, "You need to talk to the bartender because everything you say is just so smart. You're just so smart!" The guy is really puzzled, thinking, "This is great, but where's that coming from?"

He calls the bartender over and asks, "Are you hearing that voice?" And the bartender said, "I don't hear it, but it's coming from the nuts." The guy said, "What do you mean – the nuts!" The bartender said, "Well, it's from the nuts – they're complimentary!"

I love that joke! The nuts are complimentary!

Look, this is what the church is – it's a bowl of complimentary nuts. We have brought a bunch of nuts here together and put them in one room. So, turn to your neighbor and say, "You look marvelous today! You just look great! You are so smart – stay at it, don't quit!" Encourage one another; pull one another along, it's makes such a difference. We have to learn to draft.

Someone sent me this quote earlier in the year. Lewis Thomas was a physician, biologist, and essayist. He wrote all sorts of things about ecosystems and how things work together. And how that works in the world. Here's what he writes – and this really spoke to me: "[Human beings are] the most social of all social animals – more independent, more attached to each other, more inseparable in our behavior than bees...[However] we do not often feel our conjoined intelligence. The circuitry seems to be there, even if the current is not always on." (Lewis Thomas, Biologist, and physician). We were built to be connected to one another, but sometimes we turn it off and decide to ride on our own. It gets hard out there on your own.

Frankly, I don't know how people get through without the church, without a community of people to pull them along. To borrow faith when their faith is fading.

The second thing is that we need to find a pacer. So, here's what happens in bike racing. You have the captain who's supposed to win the race – that's the idea, that he's the best racer. They know exactly what speed that person needs to ride in each leg of the race. They're got it figured out since they're done a race plan. To keep that rider on that pace, they take turns pacing.

So, they'd get immediately in front of the rider they're trying to help win, and they set the pace. When that rider who has been continuing to push the whole time begins to get weary and fall back, they say, "You're sticking right with me. Come on, you have to stay with me. I'm going to push you to be at the pace you need to be at."

We all need a pacer. Verse 24 says it this way, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Not neglecting to meet together as some are in the habit of doing." I love that term – "To provoke." The New International Version of the Bible says, "Spur!" What do they say? The role of the church is to comfort the disturbed and to disturb the comfortable." To challenge us. Because we are prone to the path of the least resistance, we are prone to comfort. And it takes others around us to challenge us, to push us forward. That's why we do Scripture Shared. That's this program where you pick a partner or as a group, and you say, "We're going to read the Scripture every day. Then we'll meet once a week and talk about it." Because here's the deal. I know that if there's some accountability, if I'm going to have to talk to someone once a week about a Scripture, then I'm going to read it. Here's full disclosure – if not, I probably won't. I have to have that accountability. I have that to move me forward. Otherwise, I'm just going to take the path of least resistance. That's why we have small groups – to do life together so we can keep moving forward.

And remember that a pacer is someone who has gone in front of us to lead the way. This day, I look at this list of names and see people who challenged me, who set a pace for me. Bill Denham. I think of Bill, and I think that here's a man who connected with and loved on everyone. Not just some, but everyone. You got a birthday call. I said, "There's no way you're going to do that. Don't try it." And he said, "No, I'm going to try it." Because he's going to love on everyone, that just challenged me so much to my path of least resistance.

Bob Bennett is on this list. Those of you who are long-timers here at St. Luke's remember Bob setting a bar of excellence for music that we would strive to reach. People who've gone before. Rob Landes, he worked with you to play the organ. Yes? I know he was a mentor. He set a standard for us that we would reach for. That we would continue to strive for.

Merrill O'Neal who stood out here in the Commons as the greeter for decades. He knew all the regulars since he was there all the time. So, if you were a visitor and you walked in, and you looked around and didn't look like you knew where you were, then he was on you like a duck on a June bug. He was taking you to a Sunday school class, making sure you found a place to be

involved. And for me, I tended to think, “Let them decide what they want to do.” Not for Merrill. I’m challenged by that.

Judge Tom Reavley. His name is there. He was a justice on the Fifth Circuit of the Federal Appeals Court. He was in his 90s and still hearing cases. He’d come and sit in my office and want to talk philosophy and theology, and his head was always digging deeper. He was always thinking of things. Here’s full disclosure. He paid for every book that I quote from. He said, “You just send me the bill, and I’ll buy all your books.” But here’s the kicker. He wanted a list. He wanted to know what I was reading. He wanted to be sure I wasn’t reading garbage but was reading stuff that mattered. He’d say, “You need to read this...” And they’d be like deep theological, philosophical books. I’d think, “Okay, I’ll try.” I just hope I’m so intellectually engaged and not get lazy in my thinking.

I think of Paul Renner, who’s on that list. Paul was at Holly Hall, and he cared and loved on everyone. And I’d preach over there as a part of a system where different pastors from different churches would speak in the chapel. When I preached, Paul would be sitting with some elderly person with his arm around them in that place. He loved and cared for them. He fixed anything that was broken for anybody. There weren’t many times I didn’t see him pushing someone in a wheelchair somewhere. He had the heart of compassion that challenged me.

These are people who have gone before us. They are our pacers, and we don’t have the luxury of quitting. There are too many people who have gone and set a pace for us and worked too hard for the Kingdom that we don’t pick up the torch and keep it going forward. We need to find pacers who will lead us.

Now here’s the last thing. Be a *domestique*. I did a lot of very deep research on this, and this is what I found on Wikipedia. If it’s on the Internet, it must be true. In cycling, each team has a leader or captain, generally reckoned as the team’s best rider. The captains have the most media exposure and the best chance of winning the race. I talked to you about that. The rest of the team members are called domestiques. Or secondary riders, who shield the captain from opponents and deliver food and drinks to him.

The French word *domestique* literally means “domestic servant.” These are elite cyclists who have won many races on their own. And their job is to bring the lead rider food and drinks, seriously! To decide to be about serving others changes everything.

What a difference it makes if you quit thinking about how you will ever make it through to think about how you can help him or her make it through.

One of the names on the list is Faith Eichler. She was a member of the choir. She had a fight with cancer, and when we planned her service the people who came were some of – not the whole group – some of a group of ladies... she was not married or had children. This group of ladies had been part of a family, and they were her domestiques. They took her to chemotherapy; they cared for her, they supported her. She did it for them, too, over the years. It was mutual. But I looked, and I thought, “This is how it’s supposed to work. To actually serve someone. To lift them up. To find a way to help them.”

And when that becomes our mental picture, perseverance gets easier. Because all of a sudden, it’s not about us anymore. It’s about what we can do to sacrifice for someone else. What an amazing sport! When you choose to give up your chance of winning so someone else can. That’s powerful.

So, we’ve got to persevere, but we don’t do that on our own. We do that with people around us. With the church. With people who challenge us, and who serve us and who we do for them.

It’s important to remember that when Paul Simon heard that line from the Swan Silver Tones, it wasn’t about helping one another. It was about Jesus being that bridge over deep water. “If you’ll just trust in my name.” “Hold fast to the confession of hope without wavering because he who has promised is faithful. He will be with us. He will walk us.” The truth is all our friends will walk us to the edge of the River Jordan, but only Jesus can walk us across. He’ll walk with us every step of the way if we’ll just trust in his name. And persevere.

So, we fight the good fight. We finish the race. We keep the faith.

*Gracious God, we thank you for the gift of the church for one another. We pray that you would show us how to join that peloton to get in the midst of it. To not pull ourselves away, off on our own, but to be a part of that community that can carry us forward in love and encouragement and challenge and service. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*