

THE RACE CONTINUES

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Jeremiah 29:11-13
Hebrews 12:1-3

August 2, 2026

On July 6, 2014, I preached my very first sermon in this pulpit as your newly appointed pastor. The title of that sermon was, "The Race Continues." I'm sure those of you who were here on that day over twelve years ago were all thinking that today's sermon title sounded very familiar. Well, you are right – great memory! In that first sermon, I shared with you a story about my short-lived track running days in High School, but today's message is much shorter, so I'm not going to rehash that story. However, as I began my ministry among you with that image of faith as a race, I now end my ministry with that same great image. ***"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..." (Hebrews 12:1-2).***

For twelve years, we have run side by side the race of faith as a United Methodist Church of Chagrin Falls team. There were times of struggle when we huffed and puffed over hilly, rocky roads. Sometimes, there was the uncertainty of twisting roads, sharp curves and seemingly steep drop-offs that filled us with a sense of dread and fear. During those times, sometimes I was the one lending a hand and cheering you on. But at other times, you were the ones doing that for me.

Yes, there were difficult times, but there were so many other times when we felt inspired, strong and confident. At those times, doubt and fear were pushed aside as we kept our eyes on Jesus and were led by the Holy Spirit. We worked together, worshiped together, studied God's Word together, served others together, and because of our togetherness as a team, as the Body of Christ, God's blessing of love and grace abounded.

Yes, there were frustrations, disappointments and even the hardship of a worldwide pandemic over these years we've been together. In my sermon last Sunday, I shared with you some of the struggles we faced together. At the time, those struggles were tense and even heartbreaking. And yet, as we faced those challenges together, connection was established, faith was strengthened, blessing was experienced and God was honored as the ministry of Jesus Christ was accomplished. Your connection with one another and with God has grown and deepened and eliminated divisions. What I have seen you become is a faith community that is committed to being the living, loving Body of Christ for one another and for this community.

Worshiping God, growing in our knowledge of and love for God, connecting and caring for one another, working together to connect with and help others these are the main objectives of our church's mission statement and in more ways than I can mention this morning we have been fulfilling this mission together. And on a more personal note, as I look at all of you, I realize that I have been with many of you in your homes or at a hospital or a funeral home. I

have rejoiced with you and grieved with you. I have worked and laughed with you. I have studied God's Word and prayed with you. There has been such a God blessed richness of experiences over these past 12 years, and I will remember and cherish for my lifetime this race of faith that we ran together.

Today, even as we acknowledge that our side-by-side racing is coming to an end, we also acknowledge that the race continues. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to run **"with perseverance" (Hebrews 12:1)**. In other words, we don't stop. It's true that some of us may not be doing a lot of physical running these days – our pace may be more like a walk, perhaps even a slow shuffle some days. But until we are called to take our place among the past runners who are the saints in heaven, Jesus followers keep at it. Neither our age nor our specific location eliminates us from being on team Jesus. And even when we are no longer running together, we know that the motivating factors of loving God and loving others will unite us now and for all eternity.

In our Old Testament lesson from the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord says to us, **"For surely I know the plans I have for you... plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11)**. Our life-long faith journey comes with God's promise of a future with hope. This means that whatever lies ahead, it's not something to be feared and avoided, but is instead an opportunity to experience a new beginning that is blessed by God. It's true that the security and familiarity of the past is hard to leave behind, especially when compared with the uncertainty of the future. But biblically, God is a forward moving God who calls people of faith to join him in a hope-filled future. God is not nearly so concerned with what use to be as with what will be if we have the faith and trust to continue running the race.

Change can certainly be difficult and sad, but we also know that faithfully following Jesus leads to the joy of resurrection life. There are no guarantees that the months ahead will be as any of us hope or imagine, but by stepping ahead with faith, we have the guarantee that God will be with us. Because of God's presence your new beginning as a church with a new pastor and my new beginning as a retired pastor are filled with hope-filled promise of God's blessing. Part of this future hope comes to us as we remember those who ran the race ahead of us. Hebrews tells us that **"we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1)**. These witnesses who ran the race before us continue to inspire us through our memories of their faithful living, and our knowledge of their heavenly presence continues to encourage us with hope.

So, as I go and face the excitement but also uncertainty of retirement's new beginning, there certainly will be times when I look back and remember with gratitude "the great cloud of witnesses" who ran ahead of me as well as beside me for a while. I will cherish the impact and memories of witnesses from this Chagrin Falls community of faith, as well as the impact and memories of witnesses from other churches I have served over the past 40 years. I will remember those with whom I have worship and prayed, studied, fellowshiped, and served others in the name of Jesus Christ. I will remember with love and

gratitude those who challenged, encouraged, and loved me. I will never forget you and the time we spent running side-by-side.

Today, in our remembering and cherishing of the past and the blessings we have shared, I also encourage you to renew your commitment to keep on running for team Jesus. As people of faith, you and I must always be willing to step ahead with conviction because the race is one that continues and the future is one of hope. Thanks be to God for the faith and hope that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen!

On my very first Sunday as your pastor, we shared together in the sacramental blessing of Holy Communion. Today on my last Sunday, we now share that same blessing. All who choose to follow Jesus, whether you are a member of this church or not, are invited to eat and drink, to remember and to be thankful for Jesus' past saving acts and continued living presence that unite us now and for all eternity. Let us prepare ourselves as we enter into a time of confession; please pray with me...

