

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR SEPTEMBER 29 & 30, 2024

²⁴ Do you not know that when runners compete in the stadium, they all run, but only one receives the prize? Run like that—to win. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable victor’s wreath, but we do it for an imperishable one. ²⁶ That is why there is nothing aimless about the way I run. There is no pummeling of the air in the way I box. ²⁷ Instead I hit my body hard and make it my slave so that, after preaching to others, I myself will not be rejected.

(1 Corinthians 9:24-27 EHV)

About sixty years ago, we began to orient our lives around one of the most effective antidotes to independent thinking and exercise of all time: the television. You didn’t have to think real hard or focus too much when you were watching “Leave It to Beaver.” Not many shows today require too much thinking on our part. But back then you could still get a little bit of exercise: you had to get up out of your chair, walk all the way to the TV set and change the channel by hand.

But then came the invention of the ... remote control. Now mankind could change channels from the comfort of our La-Z-Boy. Just how devoted are we to comfort and passivity in front of the big screen TV? Walk into the average American home, hide the remote control, and watch what happens. Life without the remote control is an unbearable burden for the average American family.

Television and other media that make us mere passive observers are “potential” killers, that is, killers of potential – of what could be done, should be done, but doesn’t get done. You won’t find too many televisions in an army boot camp. Recruits there are too busy being pushed into reaching their potential, into being all they can be. That slogan “Be All You Can Be,” served as the US Army’s catchphrase for 20 years. But the Apostle Paul lived that slogan it long before the 1980’s, when the Army first put it to use. The Scripture before us urges us to **BE ALL YOU CAN BE.**

You realize, don’t you, that our potential has a definite dark side. To be all you and I can be means that you and I are the worst sinners we know, respectively. We know our own sins best, but God knows them better. We know many. God knows all. Every single one. The secret sins and the public sins, the pride/greed/gossip/selfishness, the cutting words, the cursing words, the hateful thoughts, the impatience/judging/lack of compassion. In this context, to be all you can be is an awful, damning thing – a universal condition.

But Paul knew the other side of this, because he had come to know the Triune God. Not just any God – the one true God, the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the God of endless mercy and grace. Like no other god anywhere, ever. This Lord Jesus tracked Paul down, announced to him, “Paul, I’m the one you’re persecuting, the one you’re fighting against. I’m your Savior.”

His, and ours. Christ could have complacently grabbed the remote control and camped out on heaven’s comfy couch – the ultimate couch potato but he didn’t. He’s all action. He came, wrapped himself in humanity. He lived perfectly. Died innocently. Rose to life. Ascended, and now rules all things – all to erase our unpayable guilt of being all we can be naturally/sinfully. He did and did and gave and gave everything, even to the point of giving faith through Word and Sacraments, claiming us as his own. He’s a God of action, a Savior on a mission, running to win – for us.

Paul lived at a time and in a place where athletic competition was huge, much like today. The Greeks didn’t have the four major sports, hundreds of minor ones, and ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNClassic, and so many other media venues to capture it all. But each major city had at least one sports stadium where races were held. Athens

had the original Olympic Games and the city of Corinth had its own Isthmian games, held every other year, second only to the Olympic games in importance.

Paul compares the Christian life to a race, an intense competition, where we do our very best, strive to live up to our potential under God, to be all we can be. And this includes sharing the Gospel with others. That's the context in which Paul wrote the words before us. Listen to what he says just before: ¹⁹ ***In fact, although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all so that I might gain many more.*** ²⁰ ***To the Jews, I became like a Jew so that I might gain Jews. To those who are under the law, I became like a person under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those who are under the law.*** ²¹ ***To those who are without the law, I became like a person without the law (though I am not without God's law but am within the law of Christ) so that I might gain those who are without the law.*** ²² ***To the weak, I became weak so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people so that I may save at least some.*** ²³ ***And I do everything for the sake of the gospel so that I may share in it along with others.*** (1 Cor 9:19-23). All this he does, whatever it takes, to get the gospel of forgiveness in Christ to as many people as possible in as many ways as possible as often as possible.

How will we do this? How shall we live our lives for the sake of the gospel, for the purpose of getting this message to others? Not by sitting on the couch, remote control in hand: ***“Do you not know that when runners compete in the stadium, they all run, but only one receives the prize? Run like that—to win.”*** (v. 24) We're in a race, folks, every one of us. We're not on the sidelines, lounging in the Lazyboy of life – at least, we're not supposed to be. Paul doesn't say, “Run however you feel like it. Jog. Walk. Take a stroll on the Bearskin, and easy hike through the woods. No, he says, “Run to win!”

Run to win what? What's the prize? Paul never speaks of the prize as something we earn. He pictures this as something the child of God is running toward and has already been won by virtue of Jesus' perfect life and death. It's heaven, ultimately. Php 3:14 – ***“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”*** (NIV) It's about living the life of faith/running the race of life focused on Jesus – not distracted but purposeful, not flighty but focused. Eyes fixed on Jesus as we race for the finish line, all the while striving toward our potential, striving to be all we can be, especially in the area of taking the Word to our world.

This is not to be taken lightly. ***“Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable victor's wreath, but we do it for an imperishable one.”*** (v. 25) College and professional athletes undergo intense training to be all they can be. For some it's about money. For some it's about championships. For some, it's about pride. But it's all temporary, lasting about as long as the green wreaths given to first century winners. The race we're in, though, the race of life to share the faith as we go is for a crown/reward that lasts – heaven.

There's a tremendous difference between training and trying. Trying too often ends in failure. Try a couple times – too hard – then done. Training takes consistent effort and discipline, especially time in the Word. If this is the only time you're in the Word this week – you're not really training. You're setting yourself up to fail. With God's help, be all you can be. When you fail, and we do – more times daily than we could possibly keep track – repent and get back at it, back in the race – training, growing, living for the sake of the Gospel, living to take the Word to your world.

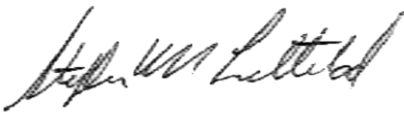
The following story shows the importance of consistency, of constantly striving for your potential, to be all you can be. A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy city street. As he approached intersection, the light turned yellow – he did the right thing and stopped, even though he probably could have made it by punching the accelerator just a bit. The tailgating woman was furious and honked horn and screamed in frustration at missing chance to get through the light – even as she dropped her cell phone and makeup. She was still in mid-rant when she heard a tap on window, looked up into the face of very a serious looking police officer. He ordered her out of car with her hands up, took her to police station where she was searched, photographed and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, she was escorted back to booking desk where arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. “I'm so sorry for this mistake. See I

pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off at the guy in front of you, cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the WWJD bumper sticker on the bumper, the choose life license plate holder. The follow me to Sunday school sticker and the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on your trunk. Naturally I assumed someone had stolen your car.” A case of mistaken identity. I resemble that remark. Perhaps you do, too.

People are just waiting for you and me to be exposed as hypocrites. Don't let down your guard, keep your focus, keep training not just trying. Be all you can be. All God has made you to be. It takes discipline. ***“That is why there is nothing aimless about the way I run. There is no pummeling of the air in the way I box. Instead I hit my body hard and make it my slave so that, after preaching to others, I myself will not be rejected.”*** (vv. 26,27) Paul was fanatical about this, focused: ***“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”*** (Acts 20:24 NIV)

His task is our task. It may not be your fulltime job to do this, but it is a lifelong calling. This offers us an eternal perspective with a sense of urgency. Every time there's an earthquake or hurricane, there's a sense of urgency. Every time we hear of a sudden death by accident or a fast-acting cancer, there is urgency. Every time there's a terrorist attack – like on 9/11, we watched as dozens of tiny figures moved up and down the rubble, frantically searching for survivors, even loved ones, caught in the disaster.

Such search and rescue operations are always a race against time, and the rescuers are determined not to give up. But eventually, search and rescue gives way to mere recovery of the dead. Our Lord Jesus has us on an active search and rescue mission. This isn't about finding life, but giving it. Run to win, keep on training, stay focused, keep your eyes on the prize, be all you can be, and Go! Go with urgency. Go with joy. Go with God.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Luchterhand". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Pastor Stephen Luchterhand
Minocqua, WI