

Victory of the Lamb – November 24, 2019 - Welcome to Victory

Pursuing Excellence – 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 – Pastor Bill Limmer

When I was about 10 years old, I came up with this crazy idea that it would be a really cool thing to run a marathon someday. And that thought would come up every so often and simply get shelved because, after all, running (to me) wasn't that much fun. About 15 years ago, a member of the congregation at which I was serving happened to be an avid runner and a Boston Marathon participant. You know where I am going here don't you? And so my friend helped me pick out a marathon training program.

After months of training, it was the morning of my first marathon. We left in plenty of time to get there on a normal day but come to find out there is such a thing as marathon traffic. Cars were backed up all over the place. I ended up cutting across a field and sprinting to the starting line with like two minutes to spare on the hot and humid Wisconsin day. Who knew that hot and humid were not a great combination for a marathon? Certainly not me. The gun went off and the 26.2 mile race began. At mile one, the course took us across a bridge. As I am amazed at the beauty of the water, thinking this is so cool, one my contacts fell out of place. Awesome, I only need to run another 25.2 miles with one eye. It was a sign of things to come.

At the half-way point of this marathon we went through a tunnel that went under the highway and I came out of that tunnel so stoked. I couldn't believe I was already half-way. I was ahead of pace and this was going to be a piece of cake. About a mile later, in runner's terms, I hit the wall. Every step weighed like 50 extra pounds. It got hotter. I passed the friend who had gotten me into this mess as she wilted in the heat. I think somewhere around mile 18 I kind of stopped running, but I didn't stop. I took another step, and then another step, instead of quitting I took an extra step, and then another. Before long I was back running. Eight miles later I completed my first marathon by just taking one step after another.

Here is something to think about as we have a lot of things we can pursue: 1 Timothy 4:8 **For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.** And speaking of spiritual discipline and spiritual pursuit the follow of Christ Paul also says, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 **Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.**

So, what are you pursuing right now? "Your life is always moving in the direction of your strongest thoughts." What does your checkbook say you are pursuing? What does your calendar say you are pursuing? Are you pursuing financial security, comfort, making the kids happy, the perfect holiday season?

Today we are continuing our "Welcome to Victory" series where we are reviewing not only mission of "reaching today's people with Christ's victory, but also our core values. Today the core value that we are going to look at is "pursuing excellence." Dedication, commitment, our best.

Do you realize that God is the God excellence and, as such, He is the God of "another step". He could have made creation in black and white, but he added a little color didn't he? God has mad artistic skills. Psalm 19:1 **The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.** He could have made a small world but he went a little further. Science helps us measure things out in light years

and how many light years it is across. And this is just our galaxy. He did all that because he wanted a beautiful world for Adam and Eve and for all of us to enjoy. And then our first parents blew it by eating from the one tree in the whole world they were not to eat from. Unreal. They had one job – don't eat from this tree. And God's response? He took another step. It first came in the form of a promise: (Genesis 3:15) **And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."**

And then another step came in the form of Jesus leaving heaven to come to earth, taking humanity into his divine nature. Jesus walked through the valleys, the mountains, the deserts, demonstrating kindness not just in words but in acts of service from feeding thousands, to healing to meeting people where they were at.

And then he took another step up onto the cross so that he could so personally identify with us by taking each and every one of our sins. (2 Corinthians 5:21) **God made him who had no sin to be sin^{ful} for us.** And with this step he took another step away from God as he suffered the punishment of hell that we deserve. He died all alone – sinful.

A couple of godly men took his lifeless body off the cross and walked him to the grave. And he stayed there for three days. And then he took another step out of the grave to live. A step of victory that crushed sin, death, and Satan and freed us from our sins. He took this step so that he could be with you every step of your life. The most frequent promise in all of Scripture is God promising in one way or another, "I will be with you." Here is one of the many examples: (Joshua 1:9) **Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."** And Jesus said, "I will be with you always."

Since Paul received God's best and it motivated him to pursue excellence. So he give his best by taking another step. And for Paul that looks like this: (1 Corinthians 9) **Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.**

What he is saying is because of Jesus took a step toward me, I can imitate him and take a step toward reaching people where they are at and not expecting people to meet me where I am at with my customs, traditions, likes and dislikes. Paul met with people in the Deer District of Athens and shared the love of Jesus with the "unknown God" with them. Paul found himself in prison and shared the love of Jesus with guards who were chained up to him. He was concerned about the well-being of people and set up donations for taking care of the poor. Paul gave his best to Jesus. He wasn't perfect, but he imitated his teacher Jesus. He said, "For me, to live is Christ." Following Christ is pursuing excellence.

Like Paul, since Jesus took another step and is not only with us but for us, his love moves us to take another step to pursue excellence. I remember the first time Jacky and I visited Victory. Pastor Ben Kuerth met us out in the parking lot and took us inside the ministry center. The first thing that really stuck out to me on the mid-week morning was the Victory café. And I thought to myself, this is a church

of people who believe in “another step.” I mean any number of churches have coffee, some have donuts, but not too many have a full breakfast and one that is free. It is another step.

Here is some of what’s that look like for Sunday morning. By the time you and I come to worship Cindy Bergner has traveled the highways and byways of Milwaukee county in search of the best deals throughout the week. She is often here three or more times during the week before Sunday. Before you and I get here the music team has put in hours and hours of practice. Before you and I get here Nancy has spent hours often late into the night putting together our worship screens to make sure the colors, the words, and the mood all fit together.

Do you know we evaluate what happens here on Sunday morning during our weekly staff meeting? We are pursuing excellence in His name. As you know, whether this is your first time here or you are a long-time member we are anything but perfect. But pursuing excellence isn’t about being perfect. Perfectionism pierces. Excellence encourages. We pursue excellence because by God’s grace we believe God deserves our very best. We pursue excellence because we don’t want to get in the way of God working in your life.

What does pursuing excellence mean for you and me in our day-to-day lives? Pursuing excellence as we see God give us his best means not giving God our left overs of our time, abilities and money but doing our best, going another step, with what we have to God’s glory to grow and improve And this is done without the spirit of competition or seeking to excel simply to be better than others. Excellence includes doing common, everyday things, but in very uncommon ways – going another step, regardless of whether people are watching. (1 Corinthians 10:31) **So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.**

God is the grounds of all excellence. So, when we are pursuing excellence we are really pursuing God. When we pursue God, we will find out two things: **The more we pursue Jesus, the more we will become like Him.** Not only in our hearts but in our community. In “follow the leader” then the children all line up behind the leader. The leader then moves around and all the children have to mimic the leader's actions. Any players who fail to follow or do what the leader does are out of the game.

Our “leader” (Jesus) gave us some pretty clear examples and instructions. Like, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”** (Luke 9:23) **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”** (Matthew 22:37) But externally. **“Love your enemies.”** (Matthew 5:44) And the more we become like Jesus the more we will go out into the community with kindness and service just like he did.

Remember, Christianity is a movement. Being a follower of Jesus happens not just when you are sitting in a chair but when you take a step into the community. Your neighbors and co-workers will learn what you believe not by what you say, but by what you do. And so, it is incumbent that we have a lifestyle of “There we go” pursuing others with kindness and service of Jesus. Following in his footsteps by feeding the poor (food banks/volunteering at a shelter), taking care of the sick (hospital visits, raising money), standing up for the marginalized (rectifying systemic failures).

And the second things we will find out (and this is really cool) **the more we pursue Jesus, the more we will see that Jesus has been pursuing us all along** with his unconditional love

Training for and running a marathon is a lifestyle change. You do things that most people don't want to do. Pursuing God is a lifestyle change that many, not even some Christians, want to do. It is a lifestyle that will lead you and me to look like Jesus in our community and find out God has been pursuing us with all of who He is all along. (Psalm 23:6) **Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.** You see, the story of the Bible isn't primarily about the desire of people to be with God; it's about the desire of God to be with people, namely you