

SERMON  
Day of Pentecost  
May 23, 2010

Acts 2:1-21  
Psalm 104:24-34, 35b  
Romans 8:14-17  
John 14:8-17 [25-27]

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Derek Redmond was a young British runner who skyrocketed to fame by shattering his country's 400-meter record at the age of 19. But then an Achilles tendon injury forced him to withdraw from the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea. Over the next several years, he endured five separate surgeries that attempted to correct the problem.

When the Summer Olympics arrived in Barcelona in 1992, Derek Redmond was determined to win a medal. On the day of the semifinal races for the 400-meter race, 65,000 fans streamed into the stadium.

High in the stands was Derek's father, Jim, a faithful witness to every one of his son's world competitions. According to ESPN, Jim was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Have you hugged your foot today?"

The race began. Derek broke through the pack to seize the lead. As they headed down the backstretch, Derek seemed to be a shoo-in to win this heat and qualify for the Olympic finals. But suddenly Derek heard a pop. It was his right hamstring. He pulled up lame, looking as if he had been shot.

With his leg quivering, Derek began to hop on the other leg. He got slower and slower and finally fell to the track. Medical personnel ran toward him as he sprawled on the ground, holding his right hamstring.

At the same moment, there was a stir at the top of the stands. Jim Redmond, seeing his son in trouble, was desperately working his way down toward the track, sidestepping some people and bumping into others.

He had no Olympic credentials. He was not supposed to be on the track. But all he could think about was getting to his son – to help him up.

On the track, Derek realized that his dream of an Olympic medal was gone. He was alone. The other runners streaked across the finish line. And there he was, all by himself – a lonely figure on the track.

Tears poured down Derek's face. And all he could think was, "I don't want to take a DNF." "DNF" is runner's jargon for Did-Not-Finish. Derek could not stand the thought of having DNF written beside his name at the Olympics.

So when the medical crew arrived with a stretcher, Derek told them, "I am not getting on that stretcher. I'm going to finish my race." And so, he lifted himself to his feet, ever so slowly and carefully, and he started hopping down the track.

Gradually, the crowd realized that Derek was not dropping out of the race. He was not limping off the track in defeat, but was actually continuing on one leg, in a fiercely determined effort to make it to the finish line. One painful step at a time, each one a little slower and more agonizing than the one before.

But Derek limped onward, and the crowd began to cheer for him. The fans rose to their feet and their cries grew louder and louder, building into a thunderous roar.

At that moment, Jim Redmond reached the bottom of the stands. He vaulted over the railing, dodged a security guard, and ran to his son – with two security people running after him. "That's my son out there," he yelled back at his pursuers, "and I'm going to help him."

Jim reached his son at the final curve, about 120 meters from the finish line. He wrapped his arm around Derek's waist. "I'm here, son," Jim said gently, hugging his boy. "We'll finish together." Derek put his arms around his father's shoulders and sobbed.

Together, arm in arm, father and son struggled toward the finish line with 65,000 people cheering, clapping, and crying. And then, just a few steps from the end, with the crowd in an absolute frenzy, Jim released the grip he had on his son, so that Derek could cross the finish line by himself.

"I'm the proudest father alive," Jim Redmond told the press afterward, with tears in his eyes. "I'm prouder of him than I would have been if he had won the gold medal. It took a lot of guts for him to do what he did." Together, they had kept a promise that they had made – to finish the race, no matter what.

Now you may wonder what this story has to do with the day of Pentecost. After all, this is the day that we celebrate the "birthday" of the Church. You just heard the story in our first reading.

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were gathered together in one place. And as we read, "Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

WOW! That must have been some sight. Many sermons will focus on this event this morning. As a matter of fact, there has even been a significant Christian Denomination that has formed around this single event. They call themselves, "The Pentecostal Church".

Indeed, we can find evidence of Pentecostalism throughout all of Christianity. It emphasizes a direct and sometimes supernatural experience with God. It is taught that this can only happen through the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”.

And once this “baptism of the Holy Spirit” occurs in a person’s life, they now have the “power” to proclaim the message of Jesus to the world. Thus, we hear phrases like; “suddenly from heaven,” “sound like the rush of a violent wind,” and “divided tongues, as of fire.”

But this morning, I would like to step back a little bit. For in our Gospel story that we just heard, Jesus told his disciples what was to come. Remember, this took place before the Pentecost event.

Here, Jesus says to his disciples; “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.”

Now what is an Advocate? The word is translated different in various translations of the Bible. It is translated as “Helper”, “Counselor”, “Comforter”, and here in the New Revised Standard Version, “Advocate”.

Now let’s go back to the story I told you at the beginning. We heard how Derek Redmond’s father jumped out of the bleachers and ran on the track to help his son make it to the finish line. Perhaps we can see those same characteristics in the Holy Spirit that lives in all Christians – the Advocate that Jesus was talking about.

This is God’s Spirit who comes alongside of us in our journey, the one who encourages, befriends, nurtures, counsels, comforts, and indeed advocates on our behalf.

In the story, Derek felt that he was finished. He was running on empty. He was experiencing a loss of hope. He needed an “advocate”.

How about you? Do any of you feel that you are running on empty these days? Are you facing hardships that you feel you cannot overcome? Perhaps it is a struggling relationship? Maybe it is dealing with an illness or chronic pain? Perhaps you are battling an addiction?

Maybe it is a job that is becoming more and more stressful as the economy flounders? Perhaps you are dealing with the struggles of parenting or with caring for aging parents? Maybe you just plain feel all alone.

On Friday of this past week, a middle aged man came into the church office crying, wanting to talk with the pastor. I was just finishing up with another appointment that I had, so I asked our secretary to tell the man that I would be with him shortly.

When I walked out of the office, I found that he was here in the nave sitting in the front pew holding his head between his hands. I introduced myself and proceeded to listen to him tell me his life story.

He had lost his job 8 months ago and still has not found employment. His wife told him that she didn't love him anymore, so reluctantly he moved out of the house and is living with a friend and his family, sleeping on a couch in their living room.

He has struggled with depression his whole life and now is about to lose his health insurance at the end of May, so he will have no place to go for mental health care. As he sat there sobbing, he told me that all he could think of lately is ending the pain.

He told me that it was like he was being held by his feet upside down with his head under water. He was gasping for breath, trying to hang on to some kind of hope. He thought that perhaps God was punishing him for some reason.

He was trying to get the persistent suicidal thoughts out of his mind, thinking of what his three children might think of him if he actually carried through with his plans.

For some reason, he walked into this place as a kind of last resort. Perhaps God would hear his cries if he came to the dwelling place of God, he thought. Indeed that is why it is called a Sanctuary.

As I listened to his testimony, I couldn't help but think of the words of Jesus from our Gospel reading this morning. "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

I would like to close with a story that perhaps gives us yet another clue to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Several surveyors were sent to a remote mountain region to design a new map of the terrain. Every day they would go up and over the rugged hills before returning to their camp in the evening.

Usually, every night they were joined by an old shepherd who enjoyed the companionship while sitting around their campfire. They would swap stories and tell of their daily adventures up on the mountain. The old shepherd insisted that he would accompany the surveyors the next day so that they wouldn't get lost.

Feeling fairly sure of themselves after so many successful trips, the surveyors asked why he felt he needed to go along. The shepherd quietly insisted. "I must go with you for I know the mountains like the back of my hand. If I don't go with you, you will get lost."

The surveyors grew aggravated by his insistence. They said; "We now have a map of the entire area. We don't need you to come with us. We can do it ourselves." The shepherd replied; "But there is no fog on your map."

Even so, the surveyors did not take the shepherd's advice. Early the next morning, they started up the mountain by themselves. And sure enough, soon a thick fog encircled them, and they got lost.

They wandered all around that mountain until they became exhausted. Suddenly, out of the fog, the old shepherd appeared beside them and led them home through the fog.

The Spirit that Jesus promised is in each and every one of us. And in this Spirit, we have a helper, a counselor, a guide, a comforter, and advocate, a friend, a God who will lead us home. For we may be limping. We may be wounded. But we do not have to take a DNF, a Did Not Finish, in life.

Because when we are a new creation in Christ Jesus, we are not left behind. We are part of a community – a community called the Church, where we are accepted and loved no matter what. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.