

Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church
Epiphany 3
January 21, 2018
The Grace Relay Race
Sermon by Pastor Jon Stern

— Acts 13:1-6; 14:26-27

My friends, you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation; In His grace God choose us – of all people- to declare His amazing grace to all people.

What's it called when a team of 12, united by a single bracelet, runs for 200 miles? Have you heard of: "the Ragnar Relay Race?!" It's a rather new sport's gig. It began 15 yrs ago in Utah and has grown in popularity. Now 20 states host it. Among a 12 member team, each runner runs no less than 3 legs of the 200 miles; the distance varies from 3-14 miles depending on the runner's speed and endurance. The first runner wears a slap bracelet – which is their baton. When he or she finishes their leg of the race; they slap the bracelet onto the next, and on it goes until it reaches the 12th runner. The race is a two day and one night event. The team which finishes with the best time is the winner. That's the long and short of a Ragnar Relay Race.

Now whether or not you enjoy running, that's not what brings us here this morning. What brings us here is a bracelet of sorts. This bracelet was given us by the God of free and faithful grace. This bracelet qualifies us to run; it makes us instant winners and marks us as His runners. We didn't solicit or seek this bracelet. It's a gift; undeserved and unearned. We don't have bragging rights; but we wear it proudly. And since it was freely given us, we can freely offer it to others. What bracelet am I talking about? Your Baptism! Your baptism indicates that God is your dear Father and you are His dear runner. The waters of baptism on our heads; the cross of Christ on our hearts indicate that we are the recipients of His forgiving and amazing grace.

So, my fellow runners, our race isn't about who gets thru life the quickest and/or who ends life with the most toys. Our race is all about taking the message of God's grace in Christ and sharing it with an undeserving world. As Paul and Barnabas once ran, now it's our turn to run **The Grace Relay Race**. We begin, as did they 1) With hearts changed by grace; we run, as did they 2) With heads empowered by grace, and we finish, as did they 3) With hands united by grace. While most of us will never run a Ragnar Relay Race, we are all participants in this race. So, on your mark, get set, let's listen and learn.

On the first leg of their race, Paul and Barnabas traveled over 500 miles on land, not to mention their nautical miles, as they made a round trip from Antioch in the east to Antioch in the north. Their mission: to share God's grace with Jews and Gentiles alike. Their first stop – the local synagogue! Here they proclaimed: Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah. To Jewish eyes and ears they connected the over 300 dots; everything written in the OT about the Messiah is fulfilled to a tee in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Look no further. *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind whereby we are saved.* To look to self, society, sports, or anywhere else is futile and fatal. To the Jews Paul and Barnabas proclaimed: *believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved!*

The next leg of their race took them to non-Jews or Gentiles. To many a Jew, there was nothing lower than a Gentile. The word, Gentile, connotes someone born on the wrong side of the tracks, someone unfit and unworthy to share in Israel's privileges. Well, they were ½ right – neither

Gentile nor Jew, neither you nor me, no sinner of any stripe or sort is worthy of God's love; no one is born on the right side of the tracks. No one can claim God loves me because of a relative or because I've got good genes. God loves sinners because of who He is – not because of who we are. Grace lives in His heart and is revealed only through the message of Jesus' crib, cross and empty crypt. That's why Paul and Barnabas could proclaim to all Gentiles: *Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.* Now it's our turn, our time, to run. Before we begin, though, we need to peek here (heart).

God tells us something about our hearts, which isn't pretty or pleasant. But we need to listen closely and carefully. At one time our hearts were bleeding black, they were spiritually dead; filled to the brim and overflowing with lousy attitudes, evil lusts and screwed up goals; at one time there wasn't a stitch of light, life or love – anywhere to be found. We were spiritually blind. If a heart could be changed, it would have to be an outside source. To drive out sin, darkness and unbelief would take a bulldozer the size of the Grand Canyon. To change a heart from selfish to selfless, to melt stubbornness and replace it with willingness, would take a miracle. Now peek into your heart! If you believe that Jesus is the Christ, you are a walking talking miracle of God's grace. How could He love you? I don't know! That He loves you, you now know! As Paul and Barnabas once ran, so now it's our turn to run. We begin **the Grace Relay Race**, as did they, 1) with hearts changed by grace.

A quick read of Acts, shows the Holy Spirit adding believers to the church through their grace message. On Pentecost 3,000 were baptized and added to the church; a few weeks later, 2,000 males, plus women and children, came to faith. Wow! Yet, when Paul & Barnabas brought the grace message to the island of Cyprus; Luke doesn't record any new believers. Were there any? We don't know. But the grace message compelled Paul & Barnabas to keep going. So on to the mainland they sailed. In one place, the whole town shows up to hear their message and "many believed." But where the Holy Spirit builds Christ's Church, Satan builds his chapel. In Antioch to the north Satan rallied his troops and turned the people vs. the messengers of God's grace. Did P n B give up? No! Was it easy? No! Paul was pelted with stones and left for dead. Did they say, what's the use? No! Did they change their message? Never! Their grace message empowered them to continue their race. As Paul & Barnabas once ran, now it's our turn to run.. We run the Grace Relay Race, as did they, 2) with heads empowered by grace. Here's why I mention this.

In these two chapters, Paul proclaims and explains grace no less than 12 times; in his other letters Paul proclaims and explains grace over 100 times. Why is this important? Because today many consider the message of God's grace to be "pie in the sky." Nice talk, but it doesn't work in our modern era; it doesn't work with millennials. With human means and mentality, gadgets and gimmicks we can fill our pews and classrooms; we can meet our budgets; fun activities and how-to stuff are far more appealing. And that's true. But none of it grows Christ's church. Through His grace message, through His grace means, the Holy Spirit grows and empowers people to live, love and learn. His grace message still brings Jews & Gentiles to faith; His grace message still enables the Christian to say NO to Satan's tricks and treats. His grace message still enables us to live self-controlled lives in an out of control society. To forsake this grace message is like exchanging a prime rib dinner for a bowl of doggy dung. (Phil 3:8) As Paul and Barnabas ran, so now it's our turn. We run **the Grace Relay Race**, as did they, 2) with heads empowered by grace.

Unlike the Ragnar Relay Race, no one runs alone. Jesus, the God-man, runs right with us. Plus an added bonus. When the Holy Spirit poured His grace on us, he brought us into a family of grace runners. Like Paul we *consider our lives worth nothing to us if only we may finish the race and complete the task the Lord has given us – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.* Acts 20: 24. That's why our teammates – young, old and in-between, males and females, professionals and

blue color workers, pray, plan and work together for the glory of God and for the good of His kingdom. Perhaps I can illustrate our teamwork with my hands.

Praying hands: Together we pray for one another, for our pastors, teachers and missionaries. We pray for God's kingdom of grace to grow in our hearts and through our witness to reach more and more hearts all around the world with the message of His forgiving grace.

Uplifted hands: Together we praise God from whom all blessings flow. With uplifted hands we gather here on Sundays and throughout the week our hands give credit to whom credit belongs - the God who has given us His all and the God who gives us our all.

Inviting hands: Together we invite others to join our race; we reach out to runners -family members and friends, who have quit running. We invite them to come back, so that together we can grow in the grace and knowledge of God's word.

Thankful hands: hands that dig deep into pockets and purses to support God's grace work here, so that His grace message can be heralded here, there and everywhere.

Encouraging hands to spur one another on through the lonely times, the ups and downs of our race. Hands to encourage the Isaacs, the Jacobs, the Ruths, the Saras & the Samanthas in congregations to pursue the preaching and teaching ministry so that the next generation can learn the wonders of God's grace. As Paul & Barnabas ran, now it's our turn. We finish **the Grace Relay Race**, as did they, 3) with hands united by grace.

Finally, how long will our race last? Only the Lord knows. But His promise, *My grace is sufficient for you*, cheers us towards the finish line. For then & there *is laid up for you a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give you,, but not only to you, but to all who love His appearing.* II Tim. 4:7 So, are you ready? It's our time. It's our turn. With hearts changed by grace, heads empowered by grace and hands united by grace, on your mark, get set, go! And to God be the glory! Amen.