

Press On!

A sermon based on Philippians 3:14.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's a big day for you, Annika. Today, you get to bare your soul...let people know what's in here (your heart). That's a big deal, and you might be feeling a little apprehensive, so let me break the ice a little, a brief "get to know Annika," if you will. Those of you who know Annika, know she's a young lady of many talents and interests...playing the piano, drawing, horses, and, most recently, the Civil Air Patrol cadet program, which gives training and education in areas of leadership, aerospace, fitness, character. A couple of weeks ago her squad even tied for 3rd, I believe, in a national competition.

And her favorite part, if I'm remembering correctly, is the PT – the physical training, right? Oh yeah, no, that's your least favorite part, isn't it, especially the running.

Who here likes to run? Truly, genuinely likes to run, where you do three to five miles, you finish up, and say to yourself, "That was fun!"? God bless you then!

I do it...doesn't mean I love it. I used to say the only kind of running I wanted to do was when there was a ball involved. Nowadays, my philosophy for running mimics that of my supervising pastor for my vicar year at the Seminary, who said, "I run so I can eat." Maybe that's you, too.

So, of course, it's only fitting that the confirmation verse I've chosen for you, Annika, and that we have before us this morning, would involve running...and even more specifically, a race. Hear again Paul's words, "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

I like to call today both the 'end of the beginning' and the 'beginning of the end.' Do you understand? For the student, the day of Confirmation is the end of the beginning. They've gone through instructed training and education for the past 3 years with me (even longer at home and in Sunday School). And today it's done. Annika, there is no more formal training for you. I know, I'm sad too.

But you're not done. Today is also the beginning of the end. Your membership here is beginning. You are choosing, by your own public confession, to join our family here at Light of the World. But more than that, today, it's time for you to live, to put into practice everything you've learned over these past years and to really live as a child of Christ. Today is like we're finally taking off the training wheels, giving you that one, last, little push, and then wiping a tear away as you go zooming down the road on your own.

In a sense, that's what the apostle Paul is describing here in our verse. He's imaging this moment, our life, as the beginning of the end...the home stretch of the race, if you will. And what lies ahead? The goal...the finish line.

Do you know what that is? Annika, do you know what the goal is? Communion, right? For so many, the goal of Catechism is so I can finally take the Lord's Supper. That's not it. Here are the goals for Confirmation...1) learn the main teachings of the Bible, and 2) learn what it means to be a follower of

Christ and a member of our congregation. And speaking on Annika's behalf, I can assure you that she's met those goals. She's ready to be confirmed.

But you're not done yet. The list of goals continues...

- know God, especially his forgiving and endless love in Christ;
- respond to that love in faith and grow in Christian maturity;
- see yourself as a redeemed child of God and an individual member of the Church;
- express your joy in worship of God and in loving service to others;
- value all of God's creative work in his world and the Church;
- witness openly to Christ as the Savior of all people;
- participate actively in God's mission to the Church and the world; and
- live in Christian hope with the blessed assurance of eternal life in heaven through Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Have you reached the finish line on that? Have any of you? That's why this is the beginning of the end. The home stretch of the race. Reaching any of those goals in perfection can't be done on this side of heaven.

Right? The Christian can never say, "I'm done; I've got it made." The Christian's life is the constant struggle of the new self against the old self and its sinful desires. It's the up and down battle to be the child God made us when he gave us the gift of saving faith. God is never finished in the life of the believer until he/she is taken to heaven. Annika, you are right where the rest of us are in this life's race.

So Paul says we "press on." It's actually the second time he uses that phrase in a just a few verses, "***I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me,***" and now, "***I press on toward the goal to win the prize.***" We "press on," literally, we run with haste, we strain and strive with intensity of effort in this life to live the way Jesus wants us to...to get the prize, eternal glory.

How's your race?

It's hard, isn't it? Paul tells us we "***[forget] what is behind and [strain] toward what is ahead.***" Right, that's one of the first rules of running. Don't look back, as there's a greater potential for getting tripped up, falling down, falling behind.

It does no good to look back constantly at past sins and failures, continuing to grieve over them as though they haven't been completely forgiven in the blood of Christ. That only leads to despair.

But don't we? It's easy for us to tell others to forgive and forget, but it's so much harder for me to do that...to forget what I've done, the person I've hurt, the relationship I've ruined, the lies I've spoken, the regrets I have. Not only does it gnaw at me, but it has me looking back. It slows me down.

Or, there's overconfidence. I saw a clip the other day of this high school athlete running a relay at a track meet. He was so far ahead, he stopped for about 4 seconds, turned to an opposing team standing on the inside of the track, and started taunting them.

In this race, it doesn't benefit us to pat ourselves on the back for past accomplishments. "Oh, I've been confirmed. I know everything the Bible teaches. Regular worship, Bible study, devotions, I don't need it anymore." "Oh, I put my time in serving the church; I can sit on the sidelines now and let someone else step up and do the work." "I know what God's Word says. I'm strong enough in my faith that I can put myself in that potentially sinful situation and not give in to temptation." But doesn't that kind of thinking lead to sinful pride and spiritual laziness, though?

Or maybe, the struggle in your race is motivation. There's this race in Green Bay, Wisconsin, called the Bellin Run. Probably my second favorite race to run, next to the Midnight Sun Run. There're well over 10,000 people running the race, and almost every inch along that course is filled with spectators cheering you on. But the final mile, it's this series of twists and turns, and, even having run that race 4 or 5 times, I still would never know what was the last turn. So, numerous times, I've thought the home stretch was right around the bend, so I sped up, only to find another curve up ahead. And you know what happens? You lose steam because you've spend all of your energy for that final push that doesn't come.

What's the point? Do you ever find yourself asking that question in this race? I try so hard, spend so much energy living the way God wants me to, and it's not getting me anywhere. Life doesn't get easier; temptations don't go away. I watch what I say, help out whenever I can, am careful about what I'm allowing my eyes to see, but then I see unbelievers coasting along in this life, doing what they want, and they're enjoying it, while me, I'm worn out. What's the point?

Friends, success in athletic competition depends not only on ability and conditioning but also on an athlete's mental state. Concentration is the key. Overconfidence or a lack of mental alertness or mental toughness or even motivation can cost an athlete dearly.

The Christian who does not concentrate on living the kind of life to which God calls him may, like the overconfident athlete, be eliminated from the race and in the end lose the blessings God has in store for him.

We don't want that. Annika, we don't want that for you. We want the prize. Remember what it is again?

In Ancient Greece, athletic competitions were popular, but you know what athletes were competing for? Often a laurel wreath and maybe a small cash prize. It doesn't sound that great – a wreath made out of branches – but in that culture, it was a symbol of victory and triumph. The downfall, though, was when the victor became lazy, complacent, spending all their time basking in the memories of their former glories...giving way to the phrase "resting on one's laurels."

Eternal life. That's the prize we're competing for...running this race for. At times, it seems so far off. It seems so unattainable. And yet it's yours...because God has called you heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Let's unpack that. God has set before every Christian the prize of eternal life and the perfect glory of heaven, won through Christ's perfect life of righteousness, paid for with his blood on the cross and guaranteed by his empty tomb. And it's ours because God has called us heavenward...because God has called us to saving faith in Christ...not because we've strived so hard or have run so far or have been good enough Christians. No, the prize of heaven is already ours as we're resting on Christ's laurels – his work, his victory – and we get the crown of eternal life.

It's ours, yet, as you know, we haven't yet arrived at the full, physical possession of the perfection of eternal life. And that's why we, along with Paul, can say we're on the home stretch...how this is beginning of the end.

We are believers because Christ has redeemed us with his blood and called us by the gospel to be his own. That call of the Savior includes the promise of eternal joy. But it also includes the call for us to serve our Savior with our lives...to run the race, ***"forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."***

And now, what you're really looking for, "how can I do that?" Here are a few tips...

Most importantly, remember your motivation. Christ has reached out in grace and taken hold of you. That's it. That's the motivation. Jesus loves you. Jesus lived for you, died for you, rose for you. And that's worth everything, giving our everything, our never-wavering concentration and all-out effort toward the blessed goal to which Christ has promised this life of faith will lead.

Conditioning and replenishing are key. The saying goes, "7 days without Jesus (and especially his Word) makes one weak." Only God's Word can condition our faith, and only God's Word can continue to replenish and refresh and re-energize our faith along the course of life. So that means use the means of grace – the gospel in Word and Sacrament. Regularly read and hear God's Word, and continue to come to the Lord's Supper when it's offered...so you can have the strength to keep running.

Stay focused on the goal. During your high school years, you'll be tempted to do some stupid, sinful things. I know, I was once there. And temptations don't stop once you make it over that hurdle. I know, I'm there right now. Every temptation is Satan's attempt to trip you up, slow you down, or even get you to veer off the path of righteousness. And there are times when you'll fall. But run to the cross, be reminded of and refreshed by Christ's forgiveness, and then set your blinders so Jesus is all you see.

And then, run. Press on. The road is not easy. The race is hard. It's a race you have to run alone, right? Now, you're the adult. You're the one who gets to be serious about your own faith in Jesus. But you're not really alone. Yes, there's Jesus, but also look around at your support system. All of you. We're individual runners, running our own race, running the same race. When you're struggling or straggling behind, others are here to pick you up and encourage you. We're here for each other. Listen to that again and think about it. We're here for each other.

The beginning of the end. ***"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*** Ready? Set. Go with Jesus. Run and rest in his laurels. And we'll see each other at the finish line...with our crowns of eternal life. Amen.