

Rev Rita Message Oct 31 2021

The year was 1968. Mexico City was hosting the summer Olympics. The last runner to finish the marathon was John Stephen Akhwari A thirty-year-old farmer from Tanzania.

While competing, Akhwari cramped up due to the high altitude of the city. He had not trained at such an altitude back in his country. At the 19-kilometer point during the 42 km race, there was jockeying for position between some runners and he was hit. He fell badly wounding his knee and dislocating that joint plus his shoulder hit hard against the pavement. However, he continued running, finishing last among the 57 competitors who completed the race. 75 had started.

The winner of the marathon, Mamo Wolde of Ethiopia, finished in 2:20:26. By the time Akhwari finished, there were only a few thousand people left in the stadium and the sun had set. It took him 3:35:27. As he finally crossed the finish line a cheer came from the small crowd. When interviewed later and asked why he continued running, he said, "My country did not send me 5,000 miles to start the race; they sent me 5,000 miles to finish the race."

This morning's scripture reading is from the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. Paul is writing a letter to a group of Christians who are tired of running the race called faith. This small church is worn out from the threat of persecution, imprisonment, and even execution because they are followers of Jesus. At the beginning of Hebrews, he tries to encourage them by looking to the past and reminding them of those who had gone before them such as Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses and their commitment to God. And then he tries to inspire them by saying that all those who have finished this faith race in the past are like a huge throng of witnesses. They've finished, and now they're like the crowd watching them as they run the same race. With this great gallery of witnesses cheering them on, this little faith community can persevere and can continue to remain faithful.

Since the earliest days of Christendom, the faithful have gathered to give thanks for the life and ministry of the saints – women and men whose witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ has been a blessing in every generation. All Saints' Day on November 1st is a particular moment in the church year when we recall the lives of those who have completed the race called life. Their life stories remind us of who we are, what we believe, and what we can become. Their good examples remind us that God reaches out to us with grace and love and care. Their perseverance and commitment to their faith can help to give us courage and strengthen us to do God's will and lead the way today as they did in the past.

One of the saints in my life is my great grandmother Anna who I never met. She was an immigrant of German Russian descent. And like so many, endured many hardships

creating a new life on the prairies. I am told that she was a devout Roman Catholic. With little or no money, and often bartering goods and services to get by, she still managed to give a weekly offering to her beloved church by knitting. People would give her the wool and pay her a few pennies to make socks or mittens or hats. When I face tough situations, I think of how her faith gave her the strength to do what had to be done.

I often think of St. Cranch.... Now if you look in a book of saints you will not find that name. Some people would remember her as Miss Cranch... the grade 3 teacher at Imperial School in Regina. I am told that Miss Cranch had declared long before I was one of her students that every child that came in her classroom would be a good reader before the end of the year. She spent recess time and lunch hours tutoring. And for those already avid bookworms like me, she encouraged my love of the written word by introducing me to many more authors than I would have discovered on my own. She is my reminder that each person has potential and possibility and every person needs support and help to become all that they are meant to be.

I have no doubt that each of you have saints who was there for you when you needed encouragement, help and support.

The race of faith is not, so to speak, a walk in the park. There will be times when we feel like giving up, when we have had enough, when we can't go on. When those times come, remember the saints of your life. May their example help you to run the race that God has set before you.

And so, each year, on All Saints, we remember the countless saints of history who have blazed a trail of courage through time. We remember the tender touch of loved ones, the healing words of comforters, and the remarkable acts of fearless ones. We remember the gentle strength of family who have gone before us, the loyalty of friends, the kindness of strangers, and the support of mentors. We remember in every time and place the saints of God the ordinary and extraordinary followers of Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.