

Runner's High

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I've been a runner for about thirty years. It doesn't look like it to see me, but trust me it has been my pattern to go out most mornings, usually before the sun comes up, and put in a few miles. I am a runner because it is for me the cheapest and most convenient form of exercise. Probably not the best thing I can do for my body. But for the cost of a new pair of shoes every six months or so – I can exercise pretty much anytime, anyplace. It has been said that running is the easiest form of exercise both to start and to quit. I most certainly understand this. When the morning temperature is 85 degrees with a matching degree of humidity – that air conditioned bedroom seems very appealing. Up north when the temperatures were below 10 degrees and patches of black ice were scattered about, a nice warm bedroom was a hard thing to resist.

I've never been a racer though I once trained for a marathon. And it was when I was training for this marathon (which I never ended up running because of an injury) that I experienced something that I wasn't sure really existed (kind of like the green flash at sunset). I experienced something called runner's high. In all my years of running it's only happened to me once and it was on a long 18 mile training run, running down a back country road, when all of a sudden there came this rush of euphoria. I felt this giddy sense of joy. Biochemically, endorphins had been released in my system – and everything felt just so good. It didn't last long – just a couple minutes, but it was a sensation like I've never had before. Some of you have experienced this. It happens not just with running, but with any intense and sustained exercise. When you discipline yourself to push your body

into a deeper and more intense rhythm you can come to a point of experiencing this great joy, this great pleasure.

Now I can remember back to the time thirty years ago when I decided to start running. I had put on a few pounds, didn't feel so good about by myself. I had some old sneakers in the closet and some gym trunks – so what the heck. You can imagine that the first time out was not joy. Within the first mile I was barely catching my breath. The second time out was worse because of how much I hurt from the first time out. But by God's grace I went out the third time, the fourth time and it became after a while a habit, a rhythm.

I've never run into anyone during my thirty years of running who has thought that running was a bad idea. Good for you, they say.

Likewise, I've never run into anyone over thirty years of being a pastor who has thought that the Ten Commandments were a bad idea. Everybody seems to be in favor of the Ten Commandments. Church people, especially, like the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments for most people make them think that there is some kind of ultimate statute – some sort of supreme moral order. Some paragon of virtue. Poll numbers for the Ten Commandments run pretty high. But the poll numbers drop pretty quickly when folks are asked if they can recite, repeat or remember the Ten Commandments. Most can remember a couple. Some can remember some. And few, very few, can remember them all. We're glad to know they're out there – but in terms of putting on the shorts and sneakers – well, that's another thing. In terms of knowing what they are and embracing them as a pattern of life.

Now the reason for this may be, that we think we have the Ten Commandments covered. Ten basic commands and I'm doing pretty well with them. Don't use the Lord's name in vain. Check. Haven't committed adultery. Check. Haven't murdered anyone. Check. Go to church on Sunday. Check. I send my mother and father cards on their birthdays. Check. Check. Check. Check. Kind of like that form you fill out with a new doctor – check the boxes of all the things you have and don't

have. We filled out that Ten Commandments form a long time ago ... and we think we're checked out.

And of course when we do this we have missed the whole point. Because what we have missed along the way is that the Ten Commandments, along with a lot of what we are called and commanded to do in the Bible – is an invitation into a deep and sustaining exercise -- the outcome of which is joy. The deep and sustaining exercise -- the outcome of which is joy. Jesus said, If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love and my joy will be in you - and your joy will be complete. Somewhere in the midst of the Ten Commandments there is a Runner's High.

Let's think of it another way - when I was a kid and the youngest of four boys there was a time when I would watch my brothers ride their bikes and I would marvel at this exercise of theirs – because it just didn't seem possible that I would ever be able to do this. I had a bike that came with training wheels and I rode it around and it was kind of like riding a bike, but it wasn't. And then came the day when dad said the wheels have got to come off – and they did. And my older brothers were eager to teach me how to ride a bike. I first thought it was because they loved me, but then I realized that what they loved was watching me crash into trees and bushes. And so those first 100 times of wobbling down the sidewalk and through the parking lot and falling and skinning my knees and planting my face into tree bark – were terribly frightening. But ahead of all this I knew there was the joy of riding a bike. There was the joy of hopping on and pushing off and not giving anymore thought of falling over. The joy of finding your equilibrium, your balance - your sustained rhythm. This is why we learn to ride a bike.

The Gospels are filled, aren't they, with this conversation Jesus has with the religious leaders about bike riding – about this deeper question of what lies at the depth of the law. Whether it was with the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, the Rich Young Ruler – there was this running conversation about what was the point of the Ten Commandments. Was it a check list? A list of do's or don'ts. Or was it the means to joy? When the rich man approached Jesus and wanted to know about eternal life – and checked off the list of commandments he had followed – what Jesus could

not see was the joy. Oh, he says, you still don't have the joy. You're still trudging along, half-resentful of what you have to do, half-worried you're going to fall off – and you don't have that rhythm, that balance, that equilibrium. You're more worried about obeying the law and not focused on living the law. You haven't gotten to the high yet. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love - and my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete.

There's joy down there, Jesus says. It's one thing to say you haven't murdered anyone recently – it's another thing when your life has been filled with so much grace you no longer feel compelled to say, "You fool," to next guy who slips up or disagrees with you.

It's one thing to say you haven't committed adultery – it's another thing when you realize that the beauty of your spouse is deeper than what the eyes can see.

It's one thing to say you love your neighbor, but it's another thing to be filled with such unexplainable thanksgiving such that your cup runneth over even to your enemy.

It's one thing to say I remember the Sabbath, it's another thing to turn off the violence of a football game or resist the lure of a shopping spree and instead mark out a day to bask in the glory of the Lord.

You see, there's joy in them thar laws! And the commandments are an invitation to take out the sneakers and shorts – to hop on the bike – and let's get going.

"Joy," C.S. Lewis said, "is the business of heaven." But you know somewhere along the way in this maddening life – we forget about that, don't we? On this World Communion Sunday when we imagine that the world joins us at this table – and takes the same bread and cup – it would do us well to pause and ask, "What's the point?" What's the point of this meal? What's the point of that font? What's the point of this book? What's the point of the creed we just recited? What's the point of the hymns we sing and the prayers we pray? It's to get us to the joy! The cheap end of man - our fathers

said long ago - is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. And joy comes in being in the rhythm of God, the balance of God, the depth of God, the sustained awareness of God.

I have come, Jesus says, that you might have life and have it abundantly.

One of the great poets of last century, Denise Levertov, in her poem *Moments of Joy*, imagines a scholar who has moved away from his family to the next street in order that he can think more deeply about the world and his work. The children feel deeply his short distance from them. But at night the father returns to sit with his children while they are sleeping. Levertov concludes the poem and says,

But at time a son or daughter,

Wakes in the dark and finds him sitting

At the foot of the bed,

In the old rocker; sleepless

In his old coat, gazing

Into invisible distance, but clearly there to protect

As he had always done

The child springs up and flings

Arms about him, presses

A cheek to his temple, taking him by surprise

And exclaims 'Abba' – the old intimate name

From the days of infancy.

And the old scholar, the father

Is deeply glad to be found,

That's how it is, Lord, sometimes

You seek, and I find.

You seek, and I find.

For this is where the joy begins. When by grace we awaken from the maddening world and discover in commandment ... in meal ... in the waters ... in the creed ... in the hymns and in the prayers – there is this seeking God who yearns to be found. That my joy may be in you – and that your joy will be complete.