

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who has gone ahead, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Back in my younger years I used to run - a lot. I mean I would get up at 5:00 am and head out for the trails rain, shine, or snow. On most days I would skip lunch and run during my lunch hour as well. I guess I averaged about 8 – 10 miles a day for about five or six days each week. I would even run when we were on vacation. Most hotels have running paths mapped out if you ask. I was never very fast. I ran for the exercise and because the trainers at Officer Training School told me if I ran at least 5 miles a day I could eat pretty much anything I wanted and never have to worry about gaining weight. Boy were they wrong! Anyway, I actually entered in several 5 K and some 10 K races. I remember starting out in those races we were all pretty evenly spaced out. For a short while I would always try to stay up with the really fast runners. It was never very long before I would start to lag behind and before the first quarter mile the ‘elite’ pack would be out of sight and I’d settle in with a new slower pack of runners. Before too long they would also out pace me and I would be dropped from their pack. I never liked being dropped from the pack, but there wasn’t much I could do about it except accept my fate and join up with the next slower pack. The faster packs never even knew they were leaving me behind, they just strove on to finish as fast as they

could. Trying to keep up with the fast runners made me a faster runner I suppose, but I still didn't like felling left behind.

In some Christian circles, the term "left behind" is reserved to describe the location of those people who are not righteous enough to be taken into heaven during the second coming of Jesus. We could say, perhaps, that they've been outdistanced or out run by the faithful crowd and "dropped" from the fastest running pack of Christians. Being "Left Behind" as these Christian groups describe it, is not Biblical in any way shape or form.

Let me tell you about another time when I was left behind... In the Air Force you have to run just a mile and a half every year within a certain time limit in order to pass your physical fitness test. When I first started running I couldn't come close to the needed time to pass. If it wasn't for the kindness of some of the fastest runners in my squadron I might have never made my time. The fastest runner in my squadron would come back after he had finished his timed run in order to run alongside of us slow pokes. He knew the pace we had to set in order to make the time limit the Air Force set for us and would run at that speed and encourage us to keep up with him. He told us to trust him and run at his pace and we would pass. Eventually I was able to maintain that speed and even run faster than that pace. By the time of my final Physical Fitness Test to pass Officer Training School I finished well under the time allowed. My friend never left me

behind for very long. He did have to run ahead to finish his test, but he always came back to set the pace, to teach, and to encourage us slower runners. By the way, because of his help, everyone in my squadron passed the run test...

I think that's what Jesus is telling his disciples is going to happen in today's Gospel. Jesus must go ahead to complete the work of our salvation, but we are not going to be left behind on our own. This coming Thursday, May 30<sup>th</sup> is the day of Ascension. Although the context of our Gospel is the final week of Jesus' human life, the scene in today's reading is the Last Supper, where Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is soon to come. He talks about what loving him means going forward, and then adds, "I have said these things while I am still with you." Just a few verses later Jesus says, "I am going away..." It's no coincidence this Gospel lesson falls on the Sunday before the Ascension. Jesus is preparing his Church for life in his absence. As we read these verses just before the Ascension, we know Jesus has been resurrected, shown himself to many people to be alive and has gone back to be with our Heavenly Father. We, as His Body on earth, must carry on in his name. Jesus has never left us alone, mind you. From the beginning He has sent the Advocate, otherwise known as The Holy Spirit, to help us, to teach us, and to remind us of everything Jesus said. That same Holy Spirit is alive in His Church today. That same Holy Spirit still teaches us and encourages us, and reminds us of the Words of Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, in

just two weeks we'll celebrate the day that Holy Spirit came into the Church with a mighty rush of wind and with fire. We call that the Day of Pentecost. It's the Holy Spirit that calls us, gathers us, and enlightens us with the Words of God and the will of God. Martin Luther said without the Holy Spirit we can't even say Jesus is Lord, much less be His Body here on earth. It is the Holy Spirit that brings us to trust in Jesus as the Savior who paid the price of our sin with his own blood. Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit we are not left behind as orphans. We are not left to wallow in our self-destructive ways. Instead, we're made right by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. That's the other job of the Holy Spirit. First the Spirit brings us to faith and then the Holy Spirit keeps us in that faith by continually making us righteous. God's work...

In this text, Jesus tells his followers he's leaving a heavenly encourager behind with them. Granted, Jesus doesn't use that term. Some translations are "Comforter." Nevertheless, encouragement is part of the Spirit's work. The Spirit will do the work of encouragement by, as Jesus put it, "teaching you everything, and reminding you of all that I have said to you." No metaphor is ever perfect, but Jesus did outdistance us and finish the race ahead of us. Like my friend all those years ago in Officer Training School, Jesus' Holy Spirit came back to help us finish our race and stay on the path with Jesus. As that Holy Spirit calls and gathers us together, sometimes we get to be the ones who come back to set the

pace for the others. One of the coolest things about being part of the church is there are others to encourage us when we fall behind and sometimes we get to be the one to encourage others who are falling back. It's in integral part of our ministry to others to speak the word of encouragement when they need it.

Jesus tells the disciples, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we" -- that is, the Father and the Son -- "will come to them and make our home with them." At the beginning of chapter 14, Jesus tells the disciples he is leaving "to prepare a place for them", but here, He's saying something more. Not only does Jesus prepare a place for us in God's mansion, but he also makes a place for God in us. The Kingdom of Heaven isn't so much about what happens after we die, after we finish the race, as it is about how we run the race every day of our lives. To help us run that race, Jesus and the Father come and live right here inside each and every one of us. Jesus lives inside you and me, but also surrounds us with each other and includes us in His Body the Church. He's got us covered both inside and out!

May the peace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ dwell in you richly! May His Holy Spirit encourage you, by reminding you of everything Jesus has said and taught. May His Holy Spirit give you strength to run your race knowing you are not and will never be left behind because you are the dwelling place of God.

Amen.