Handing off the baton

When I was growing up, I was and probably still am very competitive. I played baseball, tag, basketball, football, dodgeball, and whatever I could to stay out of trouble. I just love competing, there is just something about it that gets me all jazzed up. Even till this day, when I play sports, card games, and board games, I still get an adrenaline rush. One of my favorite activities was the relay race.

For the most part I was bigger than most of the kids who would compete, and so everyone who was participating on the other team would underestimate my abilities and how fast I was. I was not the fastest person, but I could hold my own. Now our relay races were not like the ones on television because we didn’t have a track and a lot of open space, but what we did have was excitement and two fences.

We all lined up at one end of the school yard and there were anywhere from 3 to 5 legs of the race depending on how many people were participating.

Someone stood in front yelling on your mark, get set, go. And the first person would take off zooming out toward the fence as fast as they could and I can still see the person in front of me running toward me almost as if in slow motion, one step after another gaining ground with every passing second. I would be standing at the ready, almost as if behind an invisible wall waiting for my teammate to hand me the pencil which was our baton, and would make that wall come down and let me loose. As they got closer and closer to me, my heart would get pumping and beat faster and faster, I would hold out my hand and grab the pencil and take off to do my part.

And what I want to share with you as we celebrate this Ascension Sunday is that the work and ministry of God has been like a relay race. This is a two-legged race for us. The relay race is one that is not about who can run the fastest time, it’s about joining the mission of God and living out the Gospel.

Dr Howard John Wesley defines the Gospel as “God’s gracious loving and enabling invitation for humanity, through Jesus to participate in Gods redemptive transformation of our fallen reality into God’s vision of the fulfillment of the kingdom of God evidenced in reconciled relationships.

The Gospel is all about reconciliation. God reconciles us to himself, and in so doing, reconciles us to each other. And this reconciliation comes through love, grace and mercy. This is not just something that God does alone. Yes God took upon himself to begin the race when the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but then through Jesus God has decided to hand the baton to the church to continue Jesus earthly mission to bring sight to the blind and set the captives free. This is one of the reasons the ascension must happen and the Spirit must descend. As Jesus ascends and hands us the baton, it is the Spirit that leads us during out race to discern Gods will, so that we can take the baton, the Gospel, to where God is killing us to join him. This is why we must wait on God’s time. The Spirit could have come right away, but it didn’t. The disciples waited for God to let them loose upon the world. And when The Spirit came they immediately continued Christ’s mission.

The church has taken the baton and ran with the Holy Spirit since the sermon by Peter at Pentecost, and it has taken this seriously. It might not always do it well, it might not always do this equitably, but the church has grabbed the baton that Jesus has extended it and run with it.

Some examples of the church taking the baton are:

Founding the first hospitals. Though some ancient cultures had medical practices, often mixed with superstition, it was primarily for the royalty and wealthy. Free healthcare for the poor traces its roots to Christianity.

In the 4th century, under the ministry of St. Jerome, a wealthy Christian widow named St. Fabiola gave money to build a hospital for the poor in Rome and cared for the sick herself.

Around the same time, St. Basil distributed food to the poor of Caesarea, then built a poorhouse, hospice, and hospital.

In 325 AD, the Council of Nicea directed that every city having a cathedral should also have a hospital, as people traveling on pilgrimages would often arrive ill. The church was at the forefront of caring for sojourners.

The period between 500 and 700, often referred to as the "Dark Ages," could also be designated the "Age of the Monk". Monasteries were models of productivity and economic resourcefulness teaching their local communities animal husbandry, cheese making, wine making and various other skills. They were havens for the poor, hospitals, hospices for the dying, and schools. For centuries, nearly all secular leaders were trained by monks simply because, accepting private tutors, it was the only education available.

The historian Geoffrey Blainey, likened the Church in its activities during the Middle Ages to an early version of a welfare state: "It conducted hospitals for the old and orphanages for the young; hospices for the sick of all ages; places for the lepers; and inns where pilgrims could buy a cheap bed and meal". It supplied food to the population during famine and distributed food to the poor.

Age after age the church has tried to answer the call of taking the baton from Christ and joining God in Gods mission of reconciling the world to himself, and us to each other. IT has taken many shapes and sizes. And Now it is time for this age to take hold of the baton and to run with God. It is our turn to make Gods kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

For those who may have not grabbed the baton from Christ or may not have grabbed it as you would have liked, I want to encourage you and tell you that the time has come. God has called you specifically to fill a role in the world. God has equipped you through the Holy Spirit for a purpose. It doesn’t matter how much Bible you know, it doesn’t matter if you have been a cradle Lutheran. It doesn’t matter if you have been a Christian your whole life.

It doesn’t matter how many bible studies you go to. It matters if you have the capacity to love, and I know for certain that God has given us all the capacity to love. To love with a love that knows no bounds, one that tears down walls that divide us, a love that gets people out of the shackles that society places on them, a love that sees to the core of a person, and sees them as a beloved child of God with infinite worth.

If you are someone who has taken the baton, but, maybe seem to be getting worn out. I want to thank you for your service, but the race is not over. There is always something that we can do. We might not be able to do what we used to, but we can always contribute.

The service and witness committee is up and running and we are working to understand the community and its needs so that we can share the area in which God has called us to take the baton and run to.

We may not create a hospital, we may not create a university, but what we CAN do is create a place of belonging, an atmosphere of welcome, and a heart to love our neighbor.

Friends, what does grabbing your baton look like? What does Cross and Crown grabbing its baton look like? Pray about this and let me know your thoughts. I am so glad that God gives us this opportunity, let us make the most of it.