“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith…”

This passage from Hebrews couldn’t be timelier as we are in the midst of the 2016 Summer Olympics. It has been incredible watching all of the gifted athletes who have come this far after years and years of mastering their own particular skills. I don’t know about you but I have been known to watch the events for hours especially the competitions in the pool and track and field, secretly wishing for their same quickness, determination, and stamina or at least the stamina I used to have.

I found myself reminiscing this week about the things I used to be able to do back in the day. During my college years and a few years beyond those, I could go for hours with dance classes and rehearsals. Stamina I had during my days as a dancer and dancing is not easy.

Well, I certainly don’t walk or dance like I used to. Being in ‘Hairspray’ this summer was quite the revelation and a true test of stamina. And to be honest, there was a time or two that I almost quit but I was determined. Thank God for Tylenol!!!! Yes, tests of endurance are a bit different these days. They often are as we get older. Our schedules are complex as we try to juggle life and school and work and family life and everything else in between. Even our church calendar causes us to flex our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual muscles at times such as Holy Week and at Christmas.

When we consider this “race of faith” that we are called to in today’s Letter to the Hebrews and look at the examples of those heroes named, I wonder if we are tempted to throw in the towel. How does our faith measure up? How do our gifts compare to those spiritual Hall of Famers? How can we possibly keep up with the
likes of Gideon or Sampson or David or Moses or Esther or any of the other prophets?

Maybe it isn’t important to figure out how we can measure up to them. We can be, however, inspired by the text because it calls us and the church to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us”, to fight the good fight of the gospel. Hearing their stories reminds us that there have been countless others who have run the race of faith and won. Each had to deal with real life just like you and me.

Abraham was a wealthy nomad who had livestock and land and yet God asked him to uproot his family and all that he had and go not having a clue of where he was going.

Moses was minding his own business and his father-in-law’s flock when he was called to lead his people from under the tyranny of Pharaoh and into the Promised Land. For forty years he led them even though he himself never crossed over.

David tended to his father’s flock as a youth and grew in the knowledge of the Lord and in strength, strength enough to slay the giant Goliath and to become one of the greatest kings that Israel would ever know, sinner that he was.

Rahab was a harlot, a prostitute, who hid spies sent to Jericho. She was a protector of the Hebrew people who dared to risk her life and the lives of her family.

Daniel, Samuel, Sampson, and all of those whose names are written or at least alluded to, had their own strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures much like ourselves. What they had in common was their faith in God. The Right Reverend Andy Dole says that “The whole history of the people of Israel is a story of faithful people responding to faith in the creator God.”

There are others that we ourselves have heard of or know, who ran and continue to run the race with faith filled endurance. People like Harriet Tubman, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela, Susan B. Anthony, Rosa Parks, Ida B. Wells, Cesar Chavez, Malala Yousafzai, and countless others. People who kept the faith when reality seemed to present itself otherwise. People who ran their race with faith knowing that God would provide for themselves and others through difficult and trying times.

And into this cloud of witnesses, we find ourselves being called.
‘Hairspray’ closed last Sunday at the Civic Center. And one of the most powerful moments of the show filled with song and dance and laughter came in the second act, the scene when Motormouth Maybelle and friends got serious about their reality living in segregated Baltimore in 1962. Motormouth and Tracey and their families and friends had attempted to change the situation in which they lived so that blacks and whites could come together if only to dance. “Integration,” Tracey said, “was the new frontier.” Instead, they had been arrested and felt defeated, as if nothing would ever change. But Motormouth would have none of their pity party. Things would change with God’s help even if it were only change in oneself. And so she sang,

There’s a road we must travel
There’s a promise we must make
But the riches will be plenty
Worth the risk and the chances that we take

There’s a dream in the future
There’s a struggle we have yet to win
Use that pride in our hearts to lift us to tomorrow
‘Cause just to sit still would be a sin

I know it, I know it, I know where I’m going
Lord knows where I’ve been
Oh, when we win, I’ll give thanks to my God
‘Cause I know where I’ve been

And that is our lives, sisters and brothers; to stay on the road we must travel, the course of this life, to stay in the race with faith and endurance like the fine-tuned athlete, knowing that God is faithful and on our side.

It is said that “life is a long distance run.” Do we have faith enough and strength enough to the end or do we want to give up and give in? Our text calls us to be focused on a solitary goal: a life of obedient faith. The kind of faith that separated those listed in the Hall of Faith from all the rest.

This is a challenge that belongs to all of us. As followers of Christ we are called to finish this race. To finish this race with faith in our God. We know there will be hurdles—a diagnosis we may face, the loss of a job or loved ones and other
situations that we would rather not face. There will be struggles, disappoints, and temptations but that great cloud of witnesses beckons us on, telling us, ‘Keep on keeping on, dear ones. Keep on keeping on! Keep the faith. Hold on to it. You know where you’ve been and God’s got you in the palm of his hand just like those who have gone before you; just like those around you; just like who will come after you. Don’t let anything distract you from finishing this race. Don’t let nobody or no thing turn you around!’

Saints, what are we racing towards? What is our goal as Christians that behooves us to stay on track and run this race? It is none other than Jesus Christ, the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith”! And in him we have victory!

Amen!