

Living Stones
I Peter 2:2-10
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church
April 20, 2008

Rev. Melanie Lee Carey

Each Sunday in our church we read a short paragraph in our bulletin entitled the call to ministry. The call to ministry reminds us of that we are all called to ministry. One of the ministries we are called to is the ministry of encouragement—that is speaking words of hope, healing and help to others.

Earlier this morning we practiced this ministry by speaking words of appreciation and thanks to those in our congregation who have given their time and effort to teach in our Sunday School.

This ministry of encouragement is so important for as an old saying puts it “Our duty is not to see through one another, but to see one another through.”

The importance of being there for each other and for our community must not be minimized nor overlooked. For it makes all the difference in what we can accomplish when we are supported and encouraged by others.

The Bislett Stadium in Oslo, Norway, is a case in point. The Bislett Stadium is a place where *62 track-and-field records have been broken over the years*. Now were not talking about one broken record. Or two.

Or 10. Or even 20. But a full 62 records. No other track can boast of such a record for record-breaking achievements.

According to an article in *Runner's World Magazine* (November 2003), the British runner Sebastian Coe set several records at Bislett, including a series of stunning miles. Another fine British miler, Steve Cram, who shattered Coe's record for the mile, said, "If you can't run well at Bislett, you can't run well anywhere."

So what's the secret of Bislett?

In a word, it's the crowd. The track is narrow, with only six lanes, and the grandstand is so steep that the fans are practically on top of you. "The sound of 21,000 screaming fans rakes your reflexes," writes Kenny Moore, "forcing you to keep your rhythm, the crowd's rhythm, for one more stretch, one more turn. The frenzied fans keep you going." That's why 62 records have been broken at Bislett. We run faster in front of great crowds because we are inspired by community — we run not only for ourselves but for the team, the family, the congregation, the tribe, the party, the nation. "Our deepest nature," concludes Moore, "is that we are at our most majestic when we do for others." ⁱ This is the ministry of encouragement.

The apostle Peter knew all about this ministry of encouragement although, unlike his colleague, Paul, never used the race-track, race-running metaphor. Instead, Peter uses a *construction* metaphor to the

Christians who were scattered across five provinces in Asia Minor: "like living stones, Peter writes, "let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Peter's point here is that there's nothing individualistic about the Christian faith. It's not an isolated, one-on-one relationship with Jesus Christ. It is instead about community and the inspiration that comes from the crowd. It's critical to the health of the ChristBody, as well as to our mission in the world, to see ourselves as a community that empowers and enables each other thereby allowing us to set all sorts of records. That is, enabling us to do much more than we had ever dreamed possible.

This is not to say, however, that the church is merely a gathering of frenzied fans. No, as living stones, Peter says, we are cemented to the cornerstone that is "chosen and precious," and that corner stone is Jesus. But with Jesus as our corner stone, we are each to allow ourselves to be built into a spiritual house and we do that by encouraging each other and our community to be all we can be as the body of Christ. The crowd is crucial.

Sometimes we are the runners in the race of life and then we are in need of encouragement from the crowd. And other times we are the fans in the stands and our job is to cheer , help assist and empower, those who are on some particular track, some particular course-- those who are facing some particular challenge, obstacle, trial or test. As members of the gathered community our ministry of encouragement is to yell, scream cheer and urge our sisters and brothers onward.

We got an e-mail this week from one of the parents of the Northville Youth Choir thanking us for encouraging her son after their performance last week. This mom thanked those of you who spoke kind words to her son and the other youth. This mom thanked those of you who provided good food at social hour and welcomed the youth to our church. The ministry of encouragement is so very important. It takes but a moment to say a kind word, to offer hospitality, to welcome someone with a smile, a handshake or a hug or to say thank you. We are at our most majestic when we work for the good of the body.

Writer and Chicago area pastor Henry Brinton describes how he made it through the 2004 Chicago Marathon. " The weather is cool and clear, he writes...perfect for running. The early morning sun reflects off the Sears Tower and other skyscrapers, and a huge crowd of marathoners

— 40,000 in all — converge on a park next to Lake Michigan.

Brinton, middle-aged but fit, wades into the crowd, and waits for the starting gun to go off. His warm-up garment is a T-shirt from an organization called “25:40” which provides assistance to the children of Africa who have been orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. 25:40 is a reference to the passage in Matthew in which Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The gun goes off, and Brinton moves slowly forward, breaking into a run at the starting line. The course is lined with frenzied fans, screaming encouragement to everyone in the race, and musical groups appear every few blocks, playing everything from hip-hop to salsa to “The Star Spangled Banner”. The enthusiasm of fans along the route is contagious —.

As the miles drop behind him, Brinton says he thought of the many pledges that church members had made to 25:40 in connection with his run. Their pledges of a dollar a mile, two dollars a mile, five dollars a mile all kept him going, because he knew that his steps would be translated into lifesaving assistance for the children of Africa. Sure, he’s working hard as he runs across the city, but not nearly as hard as the people who are fighting AIDS in Africa every single day.

By mile 16, he's starting to feel some leg pain. By mile 20, real fatigue was setting in, and this is where images of the children in Africa really began to help him. Whenever he feels like giving up, he thinks of their perseverance. Whenever he's about to quit, he thinks of what they have to endure. In the end, he runs across the finish line at mile 26.2 ... thinking of the children.

No world records were broken by this middle-aged runner. In fact, he came in number 10,851 out of 33,125 finishers. His time of 4:01:00 was almost two hours after the top male finisher! But still, it's a significant effort, what the apostle Peter might consider one of the "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (2:5). This plodding pastor, supported by his congregation and a Chicago crowd, succeeded in raising \$5,000 to help a struggling group of orphans in Africa. Together, they knew that whenever we help one of the least of our brothers and sisters, we are really helping Jesus, and they discovered that we are at our most majestic when we work for the good of the body — when we do for others instead of ourselves.

Brinton achieved what he did because he did not run alone — instead, he was part of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (2:9). He made it through the race because so many were encouraging him and cheering him on. There's an understanding

in the marathon world that you only have to run 20 miles in a practice run in order to run 26.2 miles in the marathon itself. While that may come as a surprise to you, the fact of the matter is that the extra 6.2 miles are given to the runner as a gift of the crowd. The cheers, music and support of the spectators are enough to push the marathoners beyond any distance they have ever run before. ⁱⁱ

The ministry of encouragement is such an important part of our life here and our life out there in the world. As Christians, our baptism calls us to ministry and part of our ministry is to encourage each other and our community. This week as you go about your life's work think about these two questions:

How often have you been lifted up and carried through by the love, care and encouragement of others from this community of faith?

And what can you do today to be a source of encouragement to the people around you, especially those who are running tough races.

As living stones in the body of Christ, we are called to encourage one another, to be encouraged by others when we are in need, and to reach out and offer encouragement to our community, our nation and our world. Amen.

ⁱ Moore, Kenny. "Oslo's magic track," *Runner's World*, November 2003.

ⁱⁱ [Homileticsonline.com/The Bislett Effect](http://Homileticsonline.com/The-Bislett-Effect)