

FAITHFUL TRUE

The World's Toughest Race

By Dr. Greg Miller

Over the last several months of the pandemic, I have found myself using TV to temporarily escape the change and chaos of this new reality. Recently, I discovered a show that was enjoyable and encouraging – The World's Toughest Race. The premise of the race is that 66 international teams comprising of 4 members gathered in Fiji to challenge themselves to 11 days of intense adventure racing. Sailing, mountain biking, paddle boarding, swimming, rock climbing, and hiking were all part of the experience. As I watched the show, I marveled at the various ways these women and men would push themselves to finish the race.

Watching the race was exciting, and what made the show meaningful were the stories the participants would share about why they were competing and what their hope was for the race. Each team had a unique story and purpose for being in the competition. One participant was racing as he was grieving his father's suicide. Another man was racing with his father who had early stages of Alzheimer's. Two sisters from India were competing to encourage the girls and young women from their country. A few of the teams were comprised with family members: a father with his two daughters, and another team with a father and his son.

As I watched the show, I often found parallels to journey of recovery. And from this experience I was reminded of a few foundational principles.

We cannot do the journey of recovery alone. We need others who can encourage and challenge us – and through their voices we are invited and challenged to become the men and women God created us to be. It is on this journey that we stop relying on old strategies and false solutions of coping and avoidance. At one point in The World's Toughest Race, several teams joined up for a particularly difficult segment, referring to themselves as a caravan. In this experience, several of the team navigators got together to confirm that they were indeed going in the right direction. One of the women commented that it was so reassuring to hear the other navigators validate her perception and the direction they were going. We need wise voices in our lives to validate that we are moving in the right direction. One of my favorite images of the church is the Caravan of Faith. Together, in community, we are on this journey moving towards the hope and promise of what God makes possible.

There must be a high level of commitment and determination. Perseverance is essential. Throughout the race, the teams are significantly challenged by the various stages of the race. Often, they would mention how important it is to stay invested, especially when they were discouraged. It is our nature to want to retreat when the journey becomes difficult, and yet it is at that moment that we must reinvest and recommit to the race itself. When

we are discouraged, we must continue the race of recovery, and hope is one of the things that can keep us invested. Our hope is found in the realization that we are not alone in our pain and that because of God's love and grace there is a redemptive way forward. Hope can be discovered on days when we are struggling when we acknowledge how painful our reality is in the moment and can begin to believe that our days might get better.

Short cuts are rarely helpful. On several occasions various teams would try to create a short cut and rarely did that go well. The wisdom of recovery reminds us that "half measures availed us nothing." It makes sense that we are all looking for the bargain transformation. Transformation for half the effort and time. We can be like the rich young ruler who turns away from redemption because the cost seems too great. Let us recognize that the journey and the process are not the enemy. The journey, though difficult, is the gift. The beauty of God is that the Divine Purpose can use all aspects of our journey and experiences to shape and form us. Many of the racers commented that it was the race itself that resulted in their greatest transformation - not crossing the finish line.

Pain is inevitable. As I watched the race, I was made aware that if we are going to engage the race there will be pain. It is inevitable and a part of the experience. Many of the racers experienced significant injury, and at times it ended their ability to participate in the race. I am not a big fan of pain. I recently had a tooth pulled and was reminded of that truth. I do not believe there is value in pain for pain's sake. What I do believe is that old pain must be felt to experience new healing. We must be willing to face the pain we have been avoiding to be healed. I am often reminded "Blessed are they that mourn for they will be comforted." At times many of us want the comfort without the mourning.

There must be a strong motivation. One of the questions the racers would often ask is "Why am I putting myself through this?" I can own at times I was asking the same question as I watch what the participants endured. The same is true for recovery. When the journey is difficult, we must remind ourselves that our motivation is eternal, relational, and practical. Ultimately, we want to be free; we want to live in truth; we want to experience true intimacy with those we love; and we want to become the men and women God created us to be. Desire is a powerful motivator.

And without a greater vision we perish. Many of the racers identified what sustained them was the image of crossing the finish line. In scripture we read of the same image. The hope that comes from the eternal vision that there will come a day when we will fully realize what God has intended all along. We will be present with our true selves and the Eternal God. I believe that is the vision that sustains us on the world's most difficult race.

At the end of the series, one of the participants from the winning team was reflecting on his experience. He commented for the person who rarely gets off the couch that running in a 5K would be his/her "world's toughest race." And then he extended the challenge and invitation: "Find your world's toughest race." For me, of all the things I have done, running the race of recovery/transformation and becoming the man that God created me to be has been my world's toughest race. Let us all together stay the course set before us.