

On Marathon Guidance, and Discipleship Guidance

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When I stepped to the line for my very first marathon — Chicago, 1979 — I found myself next to a red-haired young man. We talked briefly, and I learned that he was from Crown Point, IN, and that this was not his first (marathon) rodeo. I told him that it was *my* initial effort, though, and I asked him if he had any advice for the rookie. I've never forgotten his response: "Start slow, then slow down."

I can't say that I followed the first half of it. Unintentionally, I went out too fast, but it was hard not to. Granted, there were only 5,000 runners then compared to the 50,000+ that lined up with me for the Chicago Marathon a few weeks ago, but even with the smaller field, the hoopla on race day is off the charts. So, yeah. Too fast, too soon. But I had no issue with the second half of the Crown Point guy's advice. I slowed down. Plenty. And also unintentionally, btw.

The Chicago race a few weeks ago was my 32nd marathon, and I trained all summer with about ten runners in the Chicago Area Runners Association. Two of them were preparing for their first race. I've met many first-timers, and I tell each one that — based on their seriousness — I can either talk them into it, or talk them out of it. I *always* encourage the first-time CARA marathoners, though, because I figure if they are out there at 6:00 AM every Saturday to train, they're serious.

Both of the first-timers asked me the same *advice* question coming into race day, and I told them what Crown Point told me. I told them as well to stay off their feet as much as they could on Saturday. And I told them one more thing. I told them to look around during the race to appreciate what they are participating in. A frequently quoted stat holds that less than 1% of the population has run a marathon, so I told them to be thankful, and to just enjoy the moment.

Ask ten veteran marathoners for their first-timer advice and you'll probably get ten different answers. In fact, I just went online looking for advice for rookies and I found "7 top tips for running your first marathon," "10 tips I wish I had known before my first marathon," "20 tips for first-time marathoner runners." But possibly, too much guidance is just too much guidance, you know? Sometimes, less is more, and I keep going back to the first marathon guidance I ever received.

And speaking of possibly too much guidance, look at Moses in today's first reading. "Fear the LORD, your God," he tells the Israelites, "and keep, throughout the days of your lives, all his statutes and commandments which I enjoin on you..." OK. But I've read that there are 613 commandments in the old Jewish law, so even plus-or-minus a few, yikes, that's a lot to plow through! But now look at what Jesus says in today's Gospel when a scribe asks him which one is the greatest. "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength,*" Jesus answers. And then he says, "The second is this: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" Hmm... First, "Start slow, then slow down," and now, "...Love God...and love your neighbor..." At least in first-time marathons and in discipleship, I'd say that less — *for absolute sure* — is more.