

Back in Stride

Jennie Meredith

"The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes."

—Psalm 19:8b

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." —John 13:34

Last year I trained for the L.A. marathon on my own. For months, I drove down to Long Beach and ran along the bike path to the sound of waves and snippets of conversation. I breathed the salty air and took in the stories around me: a child wearing skates and pushing her mom in a wheelchair, a man playing his trumpet to the waves, a dog trying to bite a hole in a fence to get out. In those moments, God taught me. He showed me what coming to the end of myself felt like. He taught me gratefulness. He reminded me how comparison destroys us. He opened my eyes to how his strength is truly made perfect in my weakness.

I learned so much last year I started to sound like one of those people who compare everything in life to golf or chocolate. The marathon had that kind of impact on me; it seemed to be the ultimate parable for the journey of life.

But even in all my new-found insight, something was missing. It should have been obvious every week as I plodded through those miles. Or maybe I should have noticed when I crossed the finish line and walked back to the car by myself. But I felt fine wrapped in my Mylar blanket sipping a hot soy latte. I smiled at the world around me and after finally finding my car (an entirely different story there), I drove home. Alone.

I was the kid who was in two youth groups in high school. Two. And my friends and I led a Bible study that met before classes at our Christian high school. It was a little more difficult to be involved in college but once I found my niche, I jumped in. After college,

I signed up to reach out to students on a college campus for a year and then moved to Colorado to work at this organization's headquarters. I'm not saying this to list all my credentials or to show what a super Christian I was. I'm saying all this because that was where I came from, and in many ways, my loner running was a reflection of my life after I moved to Los Angeles.

Community was just too much work. I needed a break from the 'church-thing'. I figured going to the beach on Sunday morning was much better than going to a church where I didn't know anyone. It was safer. I could read my Bible and watch the waves and think about creation. But as the months went by, my heart started to change.

God has this thing with calling his children back home, and he loves us so much he won't stop until we're back in stride with him. I was so dissatisfied with my life during that time. Running became my way to get away from everything, to clear my head. It wasn't until I started training for this year's marathon that I realized that what I really needed was to get out of my head.

By that time, God had brought me to Mosaic and had revealed to me just how self-centered my life had become, (gulp!) The things I had struggled with so much in the last few years seemed to fall away as I started to be a part of this community. I was challenged. I was encouraged. And my heart was moved to action. Interestingly, around the same time, I came across a group that was training for the next L.A. marathon. I signed up, and the last six months of training have been amazing.

We ran through the warm fall and cold winter mornings. (It really was cold early in the morning, I promise!) We shared our war stories as our mileage steadily increased week after week. We encouraged each other and learned to

laugh at the hills stretching before us. And as the weeks progressed, I realized I had not only developed physically and mentally, but spiritually as well. The truth in the verse, "a cord of three strands is not quickly broken" (Ecc. 4:12) was being lived out every Saturday morning. I couldn't believe how much easier it was to run a 21-miler with a group! And I still can't believe I ran one of those alone last year! What was I thinking?!

God created us for community. I knew this in my heart, but for a long time I wasn't obeying it. He calls us to love each other, to serve each other, and to live our lives together. It can be easy to live independently—just showing up here and there but never really getting to know people, but God knows that at our cores, we need each other. He doesn't give us commandments to torture us; he gives them to nurture us. The words—"As I have loved you, so you must love one another"—lived out in our lives give us hope and health and wholeness.

This year is going to be different. I need to get to the starting line early in order to meet my teammates. And I'm hearing that around mile 18, as we all head into the toughest part of the race, there are going to be some people there handing out water to us Mosaic-style.

I can't wait. *



Jennie has not always been a runner. A roommate convinced her to run a race a few years ago and after nearly

collapsing at the finish line, she was hooked. She attends Mosaic Inland. This article was written while she was training for the 2007 LA Marathon on March 4th.