

Being from North Carolina, I got hooked on college basketball a long, long time ago. But my favorite athlete is not David Thompson of NC State; not Michael Jordan of North Carolina; not Christian Laettner of Duke; not Tim Duncan of Wake Forest; not even Stephen Curry of Davidson. My favorite athlete is... a horse!

During junior high, I read a variety of books by William Farley about racehorses. But only one of the books was about a real horse, the great thoroughbred chestnut stallion Man O' War.

Man O' War is often regarded as the greatest racehorse that ever lived. He won twenty races, aptly losing only once to a horse named "Upset" by half-a-length. Man O' War carried fifteen pounds more weight, which is often the reason cited for his loss. In spite of the extra pounds, this horse known by the nickname of Big Red later got his revenge over Upset, winning by two lengths. But he's not my favorite.

As a child, I also enjoyed drawing horses. Part of that had to do with a girl who was a much better artist than I was. Up until the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, she could outrun all the boys when we raced back to our classroom after lunch. Wildcat Kaki, as we called her, could both draw and run.

Perhaps if I had seen Man O' War run, I would have regarded him as the greatest racehorse of all time. I can imagine that. Man O' War's owner elected not to run in the Derby, thinking it was too long a race for a fresh three year old colt to enter.

But having seen Secretariat run, in spite of the fact that he had five losses, I still believe him to be the best, hands down. Secretariat won the Triple Crown in 1973, the first horse to do so in twenty-five years. He was the first of four Triple Crown winners I've seen, and he won the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Belmont Stakes all in record times. Forty-four years later, Secretariat's record for all three races of the Triple Crown still stands to this day.

I was a cabin counselor at Lutheridge when that race took place. The Saturday after our staff meeting on June 9<sup>th</sup>, I drove with two friends to Knoxville, one who was a student at UT, for the 24-hour weekend. While we were in Knoxville, we watched Secretariat complete the Triple Crown, winning the Belmont Stakes by a phenomenal thirty-one lengths.

Many factors went into that race. The first and foremost was related to who owned the horses: a coin toss determined that before the foals were born. In 1969, two of the stable's mares were pregnant. The agreement was that the winner of the flip of a coin got to pick the first foal. As it turned out, Penny, the daughter of the owner of the mares, lost the coin toss - but the resulting winner made a bad choice, and Penny ended up with the future Secretariat.

I love the scene in the 2010 Disney movie *Secretariat*, four years later after Secretariat and Penny have won both the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness. This comes a day before the final race of the Triple Crown, the Belmont Stakes. As Penny talks to her horse, she says, "I realized something. I've already won. I made it here. I didn't quit. I've run my race. Now you run yours." That is what I believe this Day of Pentecost is about. It's about running our race as followers of Jesus. Jesus has run his race victoriously; now it's time for us to run ours.

This was not an easy thing for a so-called "housewife" to do in that day and time. But Penny believed in the gift her dad had given her. He trusted her to handle the horse's future.

A lot of work had gone into that. The trainer Lucius had warned that they had two options to pursue after completing the first two races: they could play it safe and conservative, or choose a harder, more dangerous course, perhaps ruining the horse. Lucius had missed a Triple Crown winner seven times already. Would he and Penny have the mental toughness to accept the challenge? Penny replied, "Red is not afraid." Secretariat, like Man O' War, also was a big chestnut stallion known as "Big Red."

So how do we take on that challenge? That's the tricky part - how do we run our race as faithful followers of Jesus?

In the movie, one of Penny's daughters participates in protest marches. It seems the world has turned a corner again in that regard. Marches for women, for Black Lives Matter, for poor people, and for science have returned with a renewed passion in the past forty-plus years. But actually, the causes of justice for the poor, the dispossessed, and the disenfranchised go back to the days of the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus' greeting, "Peace be with you," speaks volumes. In this post-resurrection appearance, the disciples are afraid. While John attributes their fear to the Jews, this doesn't add up.

After all, it took much more than other Jews, but the might of the Roman Empire to get Jesus crucified. And yet into this maelstrom of fear, Jesus speaks words of

peace: “‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

In the Church, this is known as the power of the keys, symbolic of unlocking or of locking. Jesus assures us that we have this power through the gift of the Spirit. “It is that authority which Christ gave to his church to forgive the sins of those who repent and to declare to those who do not repent that their sins are not forgiven.”<sup>1</sup> It receives its name upon Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

During the 2010 film, shortly after Penny’s father’s death, both her brother and her husband question the wisdom of trying to hang on to the horse farm and making a go of it. Her brother says, “Our father was a great man. But we can’t bring him back.” Penny answers, “This isn’t about going back. This is about life being ahead of you, and you run at it. Because you never know how far you can go unless you run.” Penny’s brother answers: “That’s great. But if you stumble and fall, you don’t just make us fools, you make us beggars.” A lot is riding on the balance of Penny’s decision, which the terms of the will indicate is her responsibility to make.

Later, Penny responds: “I will not live the rest of my life in regret. We are going to see that horse run. And win! And we’re going to live rejoicing. Everyday.” Eddie the trainer answers, “Amen.” That’s Pentecost, too - the willingness to stake a bet, however long the odds and uncertain the outcome, and see it through to completion.

Earlier in the film, as Eddie is washing Secretariat down outside, he is listening to a popular gospel song by the Edwin Hawkins Singers on the radio, “Oh Happy Day”:

Oh, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away  
Oh, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away  
He taught me how to watch, fight, and pray  
Watch, fight, and pray, and live rejoicing, every day.

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1 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), p. 29.

2 Matthew 16:19.

That's the same realization Peter had. Even though he had denied Jesus, Peter's sins, too, were washed away. The gospel message is that whatever we have done or have failed to do, Christ has washed our sins away. That's what makes our baptism so precious and why we remember it today. We are free to make courageous choices, even when we make the wrong ones. In spite of the outcome, we, too, are going to live our lives rejoicing, everyday. Oh, happy day!

Secretariat's trainer Lucius was reflective as he approached the night before the race. Sharing with Penny, he confessed: "I've trained horses my whole life. I still don't have the slightest idea what they know and what they don't know. Four years ago, I would have said that a racehorse didn't care who his owner was; but then, he's not a racehorse - he's Secretariat. I think tomorrow, he'll be wearing wings."

A couple of years earlier, Penny had introduced her sick father to Secretariat before the horse had even received his name or run a race. Penny said to him, "This is the Bold Ruler colt, Daddy. They call him Big Red." Christopher Chenery stood up. Slowly and deliberately, he stroked the horse's head. Then he said, "Let him run his race, Darling."

Near the end of the film, as Secretariat comes around the final bend of the Belmont Stakes, his lead of twenty-plus lengths is continuing to grow. Words about the might and mystery of a horse from the book of Job follow:

He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing.  
He does not shy away from the sword...  
He cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.<sup>3</sup>

And then the words of the gospel choir ascend once again:

Oh, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away  
Oh, happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away  
He taught me how to watch, fight, and pray  
Watch, fight, and pray and live rejoicing, every day.

And so we enter a new season. On this the sixth, final, and longest season of the church year, we rejoice every day in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Today we say with Penny's father, "Let him run his race, Darling." As Lucius said, "...tomorrow, he'll be wearing wings." So may we all - so may we all!

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<sup>3</sup> Job 39:22, 24b.