

Zeno and the gospel paradox: Called to goodness

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In the 1900 Olympic games, Frank Jarvis won the gold medal in the 100 meter dash with a time of 11 seconds. He was a full second faster than the gold medal time of the previous Olympics.

That's never going to happen again.

These days records are broken by mere hundredths of a second. The reason is obvious; we are reaching the limits of human ability. Even in an imaginary future with genetically engineered sprinters, a person cannot run a hundred meters much faster than we do now.

But we humans love breaking records, so we get around the thorny problem of our limitations by continually inventing more precise timekeeping instruments. Stopwatches of the future may allow records to be broken by thousandths of a second, which is meaningless in terms of real human experience.

We like the idea that humans are getting better, stronger and faster. We are on a journey, and this is a journey we hope will never end. We are like children shuffling off to clean our rooms. We don't want to arrive, so we take very small steps.

It may have been the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno who first toyed with the idea of the never-ending journey. In his famous paradox, Zeno argued that a person can never leave one place and arrive at another. His proof is simple and elegant. If a person leaves point A and wishes to arrive at point B, he must first travel to a point halfway between A and B, a point we shall call C. But before he can arrive at C, he must travel to a point halfway between A and C. You see where this is going: the distance between two points can always be divided in half, so a person can never leave point A and arrive at point B. There are just too many steps along the way.

Were Zeno's ethereal idea true, it would be bad news for those in the travel industry. Fortunately, the paradox exists only on paper. In real life people walk from one point to another all the time and with relative ease. On paper you can divide the distance between two points an infinite number of times; in real life, you can divide the distance between points only until you reach the length of your own foot. After that you simply put one foot in front of the other and proceed to point B with a smile on your face.

The gospel presents us with the opposite paradox: it bids us to take a journey of becoming like Christ, a journey that truly has no end. We are called, for example, to find a creative place of balance between justice and mercy. But we want more than we deserve, and we would punish others more than they deserve. We are called to love others as we love ourselves. But many of us do not even love ourselves sufficiently. We are called to risk our lives for peace. But we have known only war both within ourselves and with our neighbors.

We have heard of saints and rumors of saints, but the flesh-and-blood saints we know fall short of the ideal. Only in the pages of the Bible do we meet the poor in spirit, the peacemakers, those who turn the other cheek and those who love neighbors as themselves. These mystical human qualities exist on paper, like Zeno's points, but in real life they are rare and sporadic.

The paradox of the gospel is difficult to work out. Christ tells us that we are to be the salt of the earth and children of the light, but we will never truly be those things. We are, at best, noble savages, with our feet mired in the dust and the clay out of which we were created.

Yet many of us take this Christian journey. We read the words of Jesus, pray, seek and serve. We put one foot in front of the other. We walk driven by obedience and inspired by the deep laughs of the redeemed, of those who have learned to strive for the impossible and live at peace with the reality of our humanity.

In a backward and upside down way, there is hope in what might seem hopeless. There is hope in knowing that Jesus has dreams for us. There is hope in knowing that someone thinks we can be good and should be good, and calls each of us to goodness.

This is not a worldly hope. It is a hope in the kingdom of heaven, which is a place or state of being that we cannot quite imagine. It is a hope for things impossible, for

what we feel ought to be true. It is a hope that comes from the heart of God and calls out to the best in us.

Christians need not worry about how far we will go or where we will end up if we follow Christ. It is enough to follow his command: "Rise up and walk."