

Introduction

On June 22, 2024 Rev Előd Szőcs was installed as the new Unitarian minister in Magyarszovat.

The minister and congregation met not at the starting line of a marathon, but on a journey that had already begun. In the community's centuries-old church, the sermon and the welcoming words from others pointed in one direction: that this ministry is not a short-term race.

The minister focused on three voices: his own, which is trying to live up to its calling; the bell's, which reminds the community daily of the power of faith; and the word of scripture engraved in the pulpit's stone slab, which has encouraged generations to speak boldly when the voice of the soul calls for it.

Bishop István Kovács reinforced this with words of the Apostle Paul: that ministerial vocation is not a sprint, but a long-distance run requiring perseverance, just like the perseverance experienced by the Magyarszovat community over centuries.

As a marathon runner, Előd Szőcs learned what it means to persevere, and now he leads a congregation that has itself survived the trials of time.

After the symbolic handover of the church key, the Bible, the chalice, and the seal, greetings and words of encouragement arrived one after another from the former homeroom teacher, former minister, and former classmates. Representatives of other denominations in the town reminded the young minister of the main goal: to establish a connection between man and God.

The women's choir sang and a handmade cloak was given, indicating that the congregation had long prepared for this event. The celebration concluded with a folkdance performance at the cultural center.

Not For The One Who Runs

A June 22, 2024 sermon by Rev Előd Szőcs, for his installation as pastor in Magyarszovat

Translated by Robert Kokenyesi

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

I have memories of my body soaring effortlessly. I hear the wind whistling past my ears, and the world before my eyes blur. My arm swings with power, and with my legs following the pace, I literally slice through the air. I love the feeling when my body creates an effort, and the constant strain simultaneously burns and numbs. Then it ends, and a warm satisfaction spreads throughout my cells. I am a child, and I don't even know what fatigue is, what it means to wake up listlessly, with heavy limbs. Even if I torture my little body, after surrendering to a restful sleep at night, by the next day, there is no trace of the fatigue. Then it all starts over again, discovering another slice of the world each day, facing new challenges. Moments of the old gym classes flash before me, I smell the scent of the walls repainted during the summer vacation and the mixture of sweat from those before us, and I see the pictures hanging on the wall from the previous regime. The thin stick figure man, whose legs are set in motion for running, throwing a ball, swinging a racket, lifting weights. The sentence above it: citius, altius, fortius. I have barely gotten acquainted with the world of letters, and this scribble meant nothing to me, but inside I felt that I know what it's about.

Let's do this, stronger, now higher, then faster. Hold on tight, you can make it, even if you have to grit your teeth. Right now, it's good, I can handle it, I know – I often thank myself, patting my shoulder in my imagination. My body is as light as foam, the wind often lifts me up, and reality struggles to pull me back

down to earth. Standing on it with both feet is easy when everything is strong and stable. Yet, one often feels that life is a treadmill that wears one down both physically and mentally. Our lives are full of conflicts, irreconcilable contradictions, not only with the world but also with ourselves, and a bit of ancient wisdom would come in handy.

The Apostle Paul is one of the best conflict managers in the New Testament stories. That he intentionally sought out difficult situations may not be true, but throughout his work, he went through numerous life situations where immense physical and spiritual strength was required. During his missionary journeys, he often had to run for his life, endured numerous lifethreatening situations, and had to bear countless insults, yet he continued his work, driven by a kind of otherworldly force that inspired his spirit and ignited his soul.

There are places where I am a regular guest, I have learned when I can go, and if nothing special happens, I might even be able to predict the scene that awaits me. I listen, pay attention, and when asked, I pray for them, and a little for myself too, that at this age, faith works in me like this as well. I was a thoughtful child, and if I had to sit idly, my thoughts would wander far away; in movement, there was freedom, and as the world spun faster around me, these questions melted away from me.

Now I sit still more and more, while learning faith and struggle from those who are experienced and steadfast, who have been tested by life. Who shepherds whom, who helps make everyday life more bearable, I no longer know. We strengthen each other, we build each other up.

The gaze still carries something of the past, that strict purity. The doubts that overwhelm me in idleness, the uncertain thoughts that collapse from one moment to the next, are lifted by a sigh from the soul of a burdened life: "This is what the Good Father has given to us, this is what we must endure, but whoever gives the cross also gives the strength to bear it." Some run, some walk briskly, some with a cane, some with a bent back – but all with His help.

The example of the Apostle Paul stemmed from the everyday life of the Corinthian congregation. The Isthmian Games, although may not rank as par 3 with the Olympics, still defined the lives of the people living in the area. The use of symbols and metaphors from sport could have evoked vivid memories in them. The first step is to find a common language, that channel thru which we can speak to everyone, and our words strike the same chord in everyone – this is also Paul's intention, as the Corinthian congregation was characterized by strife. I have become all things to all people, that I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, so that I may also share in it—seeking to resolve situations and problems through understanding and love, rather than along the lines of the question "who is right." Paul sets himself as an example, becoming like someone who'd positions himself opposite him. If we want to assert ourselves with our own strength, it is impossible to achieve a ultimate result.

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible (1 Corinthians 9:19)

—not by proclaiming my own truth, but by seeking to understand God's truth through the teachings of Jesus, always focusing on the other in an irreconcilable contradiction. Paul sends the message to pay attention to yourself, because you cannot win by force, only by setting an example. He did not tailor the message, but himself to the audience. Using an example from sports, he demonstrated that one must reckon with the ego, with hubris. I don't want to beat the air well, because every desire without self-restraint is false air boxing. The final blow must not be dealt to the enemy, but to my own truth, to conquer myself so that I may become an example for others.

The trial brings with it the question of suffering, which increases with the passage of time. All our lives will be tested, mine and yours too. I don't look forward to it, but I know. In the morning, I open my eyes. I am no longer surprised by the new day; my consciousness pleasantly reclaims the familiar spaces. The still life in my room and the returning memories fill the empty spots stuck in the dream. A deep breath, my hands intertwined on my chest, and I thank you. Then, after the words of gratitude, I offer the hours ahead of me, the ones assigned for that day. The great conflict of my life is resolved every morning. Not for me,

not for myself, not for the execution of my own will 4 – but for you, my God. Not forever, not permanently, but every day, struggling. It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or running, but on God's mercy