

Run Forrest Run

Let me just start by saying that Forrest Gump is one of my favorite movies. Oh I know it's not on the lists of the film critics favorites, but truth be told I don't always understand some of those movies—I'm still not quite sure I fully understand Citizen Kane.

Here's the thing about Forrest Gump—you have to suspend your sense of disbelief, just a little bit. You have to allow yourself to go along for the ride. I used to hate watching World War II movies with my brother Bill. He is a real student of the war—he read books and made plastic models of ships and planes and vehicles. And we'd be watching a movie, and right in the middle of a big battle scene, all of a sudden Bill would say, in a disgusted voice, "that's not an Allied tank. That's a Panzer. They just painted it." Or, "they didn't even have that plane then. It wasn't manufactured until 1945."

The same thing is true with Forrest Gump. You have to let some details go. You have to suspend your criticism for a while. Believe it or not, he didn't really meet President Kennedy. When you are a child, that's not so hard. I can remember being mesmerized by cartoons, and really caught up in the characters. Some people even cry when they're watching the animated movie "Up." Not me. Other people.

Forrest was so uncritical that he was vulnerable. He was too easily taken in. He believed people, and he was surprised when he found that they were dishonest or disloyal. After all, he had been taught to be honest and loyal. And he was. Some people could see that. There was a way in which even the most cynical, like Lt. Dan, could see the good in Forrest.

I know most of you have seen the movie, but let me just back up and say that it is about a man who has some extraordinary talents, and some significant limitations. Like many of us. Extraordinary and Limited. And I think that's part of what appeals to me. For as incredible as the movie is, there is something about it that we can all relate to.

All of us have struggled somewhere in our childhood. As human beings, we have to struggle some, because everything is new. Even the best parents can't prepare us for every little thing that will occur. We sure aren't prepared when evil shows up, or when life feels unfair. So when the bullies begin to throw rocks at him, we root for Forrest as his leg braces fall off and he runs like the wind. I sure wished for something miraculous like that in the second grade when Jackie

Robertson hit me with his pencil box. He would beat me up on the way home from school. But eventually, that stopped. I found out that my Dad talked to his Dad. It was no miracle, but it felt pretty amazing to me.

I think there is something beautiful about the simplicity of Forrest's outlook on life. He wasn't trying to get ahead. I wish things were that simple. In today's gospel lesson, the disciples ask, "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" They were already competing, trying to figure out what it would take to be the best. Jesus brings a child into the group and says you have to become like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. In particular, he says the humble are the greatest. So what does that mean? People make a big deal of Forrest's accomplishments, but he often brushes these things off. His favorite thing about being invited to the White House was that there were free Dr. Peppers.

Being humble requires a recognition that it isn't all about you. Sure you can run a four minute mile, but who gave you that speed? And yes, it was you who wrote that best seller, but who gave you the inspiration? How did you get that mind of yours?

When we succeed in our chosen fields, it can be hard to be humble. I've been involved with a number of organizations that raise money for various causes, and you can learn a lot about people when they talk about giving. I've heard people say, "I've earned everything I've ever had, and I can spend it any way I want." I wonder if they ever think about where their talent came from. Or how blessed they were to be born and grow up where they did.

I just returned from the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. These athletes have all survived terrible injuries sustained in the service, and they have had to make a decision—keep living, or give up. One man told me that he was thankful for his injury, because it was only after his life changed drastically that he began to really live. These Veterans have to work so hard to do what you and I take for granted, but they are grateful.

Near the beginning of the movie, Forrest is telling a stranger on a park bench about his first bus ride to school. We see Forrest as a boy with braces on his legs as he clomps down the aisle with difficulty, looking for a place to sit as the bus starts up and he is jerked one way and then the other. "Seat's taken," says one kid and then another. Another boy intentionally puts his books on an empty seat. Other children just look away, determined not to give him any help.

He struggles to keep his balance, beginning to get more desperate, looking for any empty space. Another boy puts his arm across a seat and says, "Can't sit here." Forrest turns around and starts back toward the front of the bus. As he is telling the story, he says, "You know it's funny what a young man recollects. 'Cause I don't remember being born, I don't recall what I got for my first Christmas and I don't know when I went on my first outdoor picnic, but I do remember the first time I heard the sweetest voice in the whole wide world ..."

It was young Jenny, who said, "You can sit here if you want." And Forrest fell in love. Jenny had her problems. She is looking for her own conception of love, looking for the experience that is going to give her life meaning, looking for fulfillment. But she tries to find it without discriminating between experiences – anything different is a new possibility.

"Can I have a ride?" she asks a passing truck driver after Forrest "rescues" her from the strip club. "Where are you going?" he asks. "I don't care," Jenny says. So she tries drugs and sex and different partners, moves from bad relationship to bad relationship, and ignores the one person who really cares for her.

It is late in the film when Jenny finally comes back to Forrest, and he is telling her about a quiet night in Vietnam. He describes a place where the mountains and the sky merged together, and you couldn't tell where one ended and the other began. Jenny says, "I wish I had been there with you." And Forrest looks at her and says, "You were." He never gave up on her. He never gave up on his love. That feels like unconditional love to me. Rejections don't matter. Time doesn't matter. Distance doesn't matter. The love is constant.

There is something else about Forrest that we can learn from. He is a kind and gentle person. But there is another attribute that we often see in children. He knows right from wrong. And he acts on his understanding. Children will often say, "That's not fair!" And most of the time, they're right. Something is happening that isn't exactly fair. It's not fair that one sibling gets candy and the others don't. It's also not fair that in the world, some people have much more than others. It's not fair that people in some countries die from lack of medicine or food. It's not fair that immigrant children are held in poor conditions at the border, or that not every protected group has the same civil rights. But as grown-ups, we sometimes move quickly away from the value of fairness and into the realm of ethics – we attempt to look at all of the contributing factors and determine the best of several imperfect outcomes.

Fairness becomes something to aspire to, not something to move toward. Forrest is more like a child. He sees someone being mistreated, and he acts. He doesn't analyze a situation before he does something. He just responds.

So when Lieutenant Dan is gravely injured in battle, Forrest is clear about what the right thing to do is, and he does it. Dan is resentful because he feels he is robbed of his destiny to die as a war hero, and he rails against Forrest and against God. He drinks, he takes drugs, and he curses his situation. But none of this changes Forrest's attitude or his behavior. He continues to show his care and friendship to Lieutenant Dan. Years later, we see Dan's struggle come to a peak during a terrible storm at sea, and he challenges God from the top of the mast. When the storm has passed, and Dan has made his peace, he finally says to Forrest, "I never thanked you for saving my life."

Jesus says, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Some folks think that is too simple. Does that mean that we are not to weigh the difficult issues that we face? Does it mean that we should ignore the complexities of life? Don't we have to be more sophisticated in this modern world?

I think some people are underestimating children. After all, while Forrest found himself in a bunch of amazingly fortunate situations, he also experienced his share of loss and pain, and so do a lot of kids. He lost his mother, his best friend Bubba, and he is rejected over and over by the love of his life. People constantly remind him of his intellectual limitations, and when he learns that he is a father, he is in awe and thrilled, but then almost immediately concerned that his son might be delayed, too. He has to deal with the realities of life. But Forrest doesn't allow those realities to change his character, or his faith.

I've often thought about the run that Forrest made in the movie, and why he did it. In the film, he was searching -- searching for Jenny, and searching for his own path through life without her. We have to do that run too. I don't think any of us will run literally cross-country, but we have to take the time to search out our own paths through this life.

Some of you may know that Forrest's run in the movie was inspired by a man named Louis Michael Figueroa, who ran across the country in 1982 to raise money for the American Cancer Society in honor of a 10-year-old cancer patient named Bobby. He did it in 60 days. Fourteen years later, he did it again after his brother Jimmy had been diagnosed with AIDS. (Ian Harvey,

Forrest Gump's Iconic Run Across the Country was Inspired by a Real Life Hero, The Vintage News, Oct. 5, 2018)

You may not be a runner, but all of us have unique gifts and abilities, and we have all been children at one time or another, some of us frequently. Let's decide the right things to do, and then act. If we do those things, we might just bring the kingdom of heaven right down here to earth.

“And that’s all I have to say about that.” Amen.