

"Working Out"

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 6
8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, February 12, 2012
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

With the Olympics in London less than six months away, it seems a bit uncanny that Paul's words and metaphors to the Corinthian Christians about competitive sporting events should be read as our second lesson today. Paul, of course, is not drawing his imagery from the Olympics, although they were being held in the Greco-Roman world during his lifetime. Rather, his reference comes from the Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympics, but which were held every two years and had been held in Corinth in both 49 and 51 A.D., the period during which Paul is believed to have been there. So, Paul's audience would have been very familiar with the imagery he evokes.

"Do you not know," he writes, "that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it." It takes discipline and training to win the race, that's what Paul says about the Christian life of faith as well. It requires effort and dedication and practice, just like an athlete.

In fact, religious writers and leaders have often spelled out, over the ages, what the disciplines of faith are all about. The classic "spiritual disciplines" come in three forms. There are the "inward" disciplines, those that are private and personal, what we call pieties, and they include meditation, prayer, fasting, and study that help us connect with God and keep an eye on the barometer of our souls. There are "outward" disciplines of simplicity, solitude, submission and, most of all, service, all of which put us in a proper attitude toward others and toward the things of life around us. Then there are the "corporate" disciplines through which we learn to be the Body of Christ. We experience them in confession, worship, spiritual guidance and celebration.

Of course, these all sound great when listed in this simple form. But anyone who practices any of them knows how difficult they are to accomplish. In fact, no one ever "accomplishes" them. They are processes; exercises that require commitment. Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 9 is all about that. Exercise is tough. Staying in shape takes a great deal of daily discipline.

But before we play with his metaphor any farther, we need to be clear about what this ultimately means. There is a theological issue at stake here that, if understood incorrectly, could erase much of Paul's other writings and theology. Through his imagery today Paul is not advocating a form of works-righteousness whereby we all earn our salvation through hard work. His teachings elsewhere on justification and grace stand as the hallmarks of his theology and are not superseded today with this little sports bit of his. You can't read Romans and not come away with his keystone theology – we are saved, that is justified, put right with God, by grace through faith. Every Lutheran repeats that rubric everyday to him or herself. It is the foundation of our theology of grace and salvation.

No, this snippet today from Paul comes from a larger letter of which the subject is unity. Of all of the churches Paul founded and nourished, the one in Corinth, by far, was the most difficult, made so by the sheer diversity of its members. At a time when the rich and the poor were separated even more pronouncedly than they are now; at a time when Jewish Christians, who thought they had first dibs on anything in this new church, were told to share food and wine with Gentile Christians; at a time when the aristocratic nobility with pampered lives were now to rub shoulders in house churches with lowly peasants and shepherds and tentmakers; this new teaching on unity sounded a challenging call.

And it is in that larger context that his words today need to be heard. When Paul writes, "Run in such a way that you may win it," we need to understand that he is writing in the plural imperative voice and tense. He is enjoining this community of disparate and often conflicted cultures to "all run in such a way that they all may win the prize." He is talking about the church living and working together so that in its example of unity and compassion, they may all find hope and comfort. This is not about salvation; but it is about the church living out its calling to be of one voice and heart in the name of Christ. The prize is the unity they can come to know in Christ.

Which leads to the question, what might we accomplish as individuals and congregations if we invested an athlete's effort in the daily exercises of our faith?

Well, for one thing, this type of training, this type of discipline, requires our bodies as well as our minds. In the church, however, we are often better at mind games than we are at body life.

Let me tell you about one such young man. I was the Chaplain at Susquehanna University and he was a freshman, taking a course on "Death and Dying," he told me in my office one day. He had called for an emergency appointment with me because he had this paper to write and was in desperate need of resources. When I inquired about the topic, he told me "The death of Jesus." The paper was due in two days. So, I asked him the obvious question, "Well, have you checked out the Bible?"

He paused for a second, momentarily shocked, but then his smarmy charm and confidence showed up: "You know, Sir," he went on all teeth and smile, "that's the one thing I forgot when I came to Susquehanna. I wrote my mother and she's sending it right away, but it won't get here in time for me to do the paper." I had the sense of water being treaded very rapidly as he continued: "I really miss my Bible, but until it comes do you have one I could borrow."

I told him I'd be glad to loan him one and, with tongue in cheek, gave him the thickest Bible I had on my shelf. "The death of Jesus is all in there," I said trying to stifle my amusement at the look of horror on his face as he saw the magnitude of the volume before him.

But this guy was smooth. He started doing one of these numbers with it – flipping pages. And finally he stopped and said: "Gee, I guess it's been a while. Can you help me locate the story?"

Since I was having way too much fun with this guy by now, I thought I'd continue this little game a bit further: "In the Gospels," I said, waiting for his next ploy.

"Oh, yea, the Gospels," he replied. "Sure, I knew that. But I'm not familiar with this Bible; it's not like mine at home. Would you help me find that?"

Since I had the feeling this charade could go on forever, I showed him. As he got up to leave, he thanked me for my help and, with that smile back on his face, said, "I've been meaning to come to church on Sundays but have been really busy. But I'll see you this Sunday. I'm a believer." And as he left, he mumbled for effect: "I sure hope my Bible gets here soon."

So did I. Anyone who missed his Bible as much as he said he did must have had trouble making it from September to January when he really needed it.

This true story needs little explication. Sometimes the church and church members are better at mind games than body life; we are better at the words of the faith than we are at living that faith with regular worship, scripture study, prayer and devotion in our lives. My young friend's promises and confessions were empty because he did not live the faith he claimed for himself.

Well, there is so much more we could mine from these short verses today. We could discuss the dangers of making disciplines of faith into ends in themselves – those who pray, and study, and meditate and never get off their knees to serve in any meaningful way. We could talk about how "discipline" has become such a bad word, and we could try to free it from its punishment images to the real root of its intent, which is to teach. After all, we get the word disciple from the same root word.

But let me conclude with just one other thought, one that Paul knew well and, I think, that's why he used this sports imagery so well in this context. Practicing the disciplines of faith, the inner, outer, and corporate spiritual disciplines I mentioned before, leads to the development of habits of the heart, as they are called -- the habits of faith. How many times do I hear folks apologize for not coming to church for a while saying, "We got out of the habit." Discipline, the doing of an exercise because we know it is good for us and will make us strong, applies to church-going as well as to athletic contests. One of the ways our faith grows and matures is in this corporate setting, where our opinions about faith are informed by the doctrines and teachings of the faith; where our prayers are enriched by the prayers and concerns of those around us; where food is offered at a table of forgiveness and grace so that we can be reminded of the love of God as we taste and see the goodness he offers us.

I remember talking with a family at York Hospital years and years ago. They had experienced the ultimate of losses – a husband, who was also a son, and his two children were killed two days after Christmas by a drunken driver. I sat there and listened to the faith of that family and I was moved. Their faith was the bedrock that carried them through that awful storm. That doesn't mean they didn't grieve. Painful tears were shed and cries were heard. But always toward the God they knew loved them and grieved with them. They didn't always *feel* their faith, but that didn't bother them. After all, they told me, whoever promised that Christianity was supposed to make you feel good?

Instead, they lived their faith, because God had deepened it over the years in the promises of his love, and because they had molded it well through the disciplines and exercises of the Christian faith. Strong faith, you see, and Christian character don't happen overnight. They come through training. When they do come, they don't slip away quickly, either. As Charles Reade put it more than a century ago:

Sow an act and you reap a habit.

Sow a habit and you reap a character.

Sow a character and you reap a destiny.

St. Paul would agree.

AMEN.

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