

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
February 15, 2009  
Epiphany 6  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Kings 5:1-15  
Psalm 42:1-7  
I Corinthians 9:24-27  
Mark 1:40-45

When Connie and I lived in Canada and had the privilege of serving at Melville Presbyterian church in the East end of Toronto, one of the highlights of that experience was a trip to Greece and the Greek islands. The trip was originally designed to be the church's graduation present for Connie and me, but Connie was 8 months pregnant with Davis and felt it would be prudent to stay in Canada.

Wallace Whyte, the pastor, came up with a great idea. He turned the trip into a pilgrimage so that any in the congregation who wanted to go could do so. The trip was designed to take us in the footsteps of St. Paul, to travel to the places where he started churches, and to retrace some of his missionary journeys.

One day on the trip we found ourselves in the city of Corinth. We were in the ruins of an old stadium, perhaps one of the very sites where the Isthmian games were held every two years. These games in Corinth were second only to the Olympic games in popularity and importance.

One of my jobs on the trip was to provide biblical and historical commentary on some of the places we visited. So, while we were in the ruins of this ancient stadium at Corinth, I shared with the group that when the games were held there,

one of the most popular events was the Pentathlon. The Pentathlon was a series of 5 events, the first of which was a foot race. If you aspired to participate in these games, you customarily had to swear an oath to Zeus where you promised to undergo a strict regimen of training for at least ten months. For the winner of the foot race, the prize was a pine garland wreath which sometimes had celery in it.

As I was waxing eloquent and telling the group about these things, Pastor Whyte stood up, looked at me, and said, “come on, you and I are going to race.”

He motioned for the group to join us and climb down from where we were in the stands and move to the field below. At first, I thought he was joking, but I soon learned he was serious. I thought, “what is going on here? Why does this man in his late 60’s want to go down onto an ancient track and race a person half his age?”

We all clamored down to the field below, and Pastor Whyte removed the 35 millimeter camera hanging around his neck on a large strap, and anything else he thought might hold him back. We lined up, and someone shouted, “on your mark, get set, go!”

And we were off. Pastor Whyte shot past me like he was on turbo-charge mode. All I remember seeing was this white-haired blur go by, and I realized in that moment that this man was serious. He was running all out, and he was not looking back.

I felt a little put off by this at first, because I thought, “my pastor, my mentor, my friend, wants to beat me and make me look bad.” That feeling didn’t last long, however. I knew Wallace Whyte, and he was not that kind of man. In that moment, in the ruins of an ancient stadium in Corinth, Wallace Whyte wasn’t running to beat *me* -- he was running to win the race.

That’s the kind of person he was. Everything he did, he did wholeheartedly. In every area of his life, he gave his best. Sometimes it required of him great discipline and sacrifice. But when it came to his walk with Christ, Wallace Whyte counted the cost, and paid it gladly. He lived his life *with* purpose, *on* purpose. For more than 25 years, he served the people of Melville church with grace, with humility, and at times, at great personal sacrifice.

Reading the words of the Apostle Paul this week, it was easy for my mind to wander back to that ancient stadium in Corinth, and to my experience working with Wallace Whyte. For it was easy for me to see that Wallace Whyte was simply taking to heart Paul’s advice when he says: “*You* must run in such a way that you will win.” [running to win will cost you...wind in your face...pain in your side...discipline and sacrifice]

Paul knew that discipline and sacrifice are essential parts of Christian discipleship, and his ministry among the Corinthians gave him the chance to put these virtues into practice. His passage about “becoming all things to all people”

(which we heard last week) has become well-known. Eugene Peterson translates

Paul's words about that like this:

*Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized -- whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ -- but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it! (I Cor. 9:18ff.)*

Reading Paul's words again this week convicted me. As I tried to listen carefully to Paul, it became clear that following Jesus leaves no place for halfhearted commitment. The stakes are high. A great deal is at stake. We've got to want it, and want it badly.

In fact, if athletes can discipline themselves and train for months and years to compete for a crown that fades away, what might be required of those of us who would follow Jesus, where the prize is eternal?

When Paul speaks of athletes using strict self-control here, the Greek word is *agonizomai*. From this word come our English words "agonize" and "agony." If you ask an athlete training for the Olympics or any other serious sporting event to describe the process, at some point the chances are good that the words "agony" and "agonize" will appear in the conversation. Many times, those athletes must look at themselves in the mirror and ask: "how badly do I want this?"

I get the sense from Paul that he has asked himself this question many times as well. Reading his correspondence with the Corinthians, I get the sense that Paul realizes that following Jesus is not just about rejecting sin, but also about saying no to *anything* that might hinder his spiritual progress, even if such things are legitimate in themselves. What's more, his walk with Christ requires the discipline to say no to anything in *his* life that might cause others to struggle in *their* walk with Christ.

For Paul, his walk with Christ is not a dress rehearsal. Paul is not shadow boxing, waving his fists at some imaginary opponent. This is the real deal. Real punches are being thrown, and at times the discipline and sacrifice that are required lead Paul to *agonizomai*, to agony. And why shouldn't it? Paul asks. For the prize in view here is far beyond some temporary trinket that will fade away.

Listening to Paul this week, then, was hard for me. I could almost hear him whisper in my ear and say: "Brook, how badly do you want to follow Jesus? How much do you *really* want it?

Do you want it badly enough to lay aside some things and pick up others?

Do you want it badly enough to discipline yourself to change ways of thinking or acting that may be in the way of your growth in grace?

Do you want it badly enough to sacrifice your own interests at points where what others *need* may be more important than what you *want*?"

This can be a little disheartening, because on the surface level Paul's words here all seem to be about *us* and *our* efforts and *our* resolve and *our* action. One could wonder: where is God in all of this? Where is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit?

I think Paul gives us a possible answer to these questions in his discussion that immediately follows in chapter ten. Listen to what he says:

*Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life. They all ate and drank identical food and drink, meals provided daily by God. They drank from the Rock, God's fountain for them that stayed with them wherever they were. And the Rock was Christ. But just experiencing God's wonder and grace didn't seem to mean much -- most of them were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert, and God was not pleased. (I Cor. 10:1ff.)*

This passage is a reminder to us that our discipline, our sacrifice, is merely joined to what God is already doing -- which is everything! But the reason that discipline and sacrifice are so important is that without them we run the risk of *presuming* on God's grace. When we do this, we become spiritually "out of shape," which makes us vulnerable and weak when things get difficult. We can be lulled to sleep, and think that we can "get by" as Christians by giving less than our very best.

Note Paul's words: "just experiencing God's wonder and grace didn't seem to mean much. Most were defeated by temptation during the hard times in the desert..."

Now, it would be so easy to turn this sermon into some kind of exhortation calling on you to sacrifice more, or to be more disciplined in your lives. But that would be the wrong thing to do. I don't believe any of you would be here this morning if you were not serious, and if you were not in this race to win.

In fact, some of you here this morning may have looked in the mirror before coming to church, and asked yourself: "how badly do I really want this?" You are counting the cost, and paying the price. The words "agony" and "agonize" are on your lips, and in your hearts.

Hear this Good News this morning: the sacrifice, the discipline, the effort you are expending in your walk with Christ is being used of the Spirit this morning to strengthen you, to bear you up, and to prepare you for what is yet to come. The grace of God is working through your disciplined and sacrificial efforts *now* in order to prevent mistakes and heartaches later on. You may feel the agony now, but all that means is that the Holy Spirit is at work in you, giving you strength so that you can go the distance.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, I want to ask something very special of each of you: *Keep on running. The wind may be strongly blowing in your face, but keep going. Your insides may be in agony -- keep going. Resolve in this moment that no matter what, you're in this race to win.*

And I believe that as we receive these tangible signs of bread and wine,  
we'll receive grace and help to do just that.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.