

Life In the Body, Part 2
Eph 4:25-5:2

Teams are ramping up.
Coaches are putting together their speeches.
Football, Cross Country, Cheerleading, Band

In fact, the Biblical writers were keenly aware of athletic training and competitions. They reached out to these events and pulled in metaphors right there in the very Bible to describe running the Christian race.

Before this passage:

“22 You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

“In the first liturgies of the church, baptismal candidates faced the west and renounced the forces of darkness as the sun descended. Then at sunrise they faced the East and proclaimed their allegiance to the Lord of light. They also literally stripped off their old clothing and put on new garments symbolizing being adopted into God’s family. Then were then brought into the community of faith.” –G. Porter Taylor, NT Scholar. Paul continues this analogy of stripping off the old and putting on the new self. Ephesians 4:22-24:

You will recognize this analogy from Philippians by Paul, “but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” We can visualize the Christ-follower running the race with his/her eye on Jesus Christ as the finish line.

Or what about that other analogy from scripture where the preacher in Hebrews encourages us to lay aside the weight and the sin which clings so closely and run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

And in this passage from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul is laying out for we Christ-followers, for us who are in this athletic event, how to run well, how to live well, how to be faithful to our calling. We can almost visualize Paul as an athletic coach at this point...perhaps in training camp, calling all the Christians together. “Ok gang, welcome to training camp. First I’m going to give you the bottom line. Here is what we are about: Be imitators of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The way you do this is by living in love. When you are unsure or unclear what that means, just look at the example of Jesus Christ. When we love others sacrificially, like Jesus did, this greatly pleases God. That’s the challenge before us.”

That is the bottom line – be imitators of Jesus Christ, giving ourselves away in love, just like Jesus did for us. When we do this, God is immensely pleased.

So here we are today, at the end of the 2012 Olympics, but continuing on with our training. This Ephesians passage has

much to offer us in our training. The Apostle Paul, coach Paul if you will, has already laid out the bottom line for us, but there is also more specific Coaching here.

First, this endeavor of imitating Christ requires total commitment. We cannot train for this race part time. We can't play around with it and hope to be successful to any degree. This endeavor requires us to be all in. Following Christ requires a complete life makeover.

To do this, to follow Christ, we are called to willingly lay aside our self-focused lives and become Christ-focused, walking or running in love for God and others. We are no longer civilians, but we are part of God's Cohort who eats, lives, and breathes life in Christ.

Did you pay attention to the television commercials during the Olympics? I had no idea that so many products had such close ties to the Olympic Games and were so necessary to the success of the Olympic athletes. At our house it became a fun game to watch how the producers of every product imaginable found a way to connect their product to the Olympics.

One commercial sticks out in my memory. Real Olympians are shown training and you hear their voices narrating, describing what they have given up in order to train themselves to compete at such a high level. One is shown swimming and he says, "I haven't ordered a desert in two years." Another is shown distance running and says, "You know that best selling book everyone is talking about? I haven't read it." Another says, "I haven't watched TV in 9 months." I've forgotten the

actual product being advertised, but I was struck by the commitment of these athletes. It's very clear they have to be willing to give up civilian life, so to speak, in order to become the best they can be.

Paul lays out for us the activities to practice in order to live out this commitment.

Be honest and practice integrity.

Be angry when you are angry, yet resolve disputes promptly.

When you become angry, manage yourself well – don't hurt others and resolve disagreements promptly.

("Amazon.com currently lists more than 40,000 religious titles that touch on the subject of anger." Paul V. Marshall)

Be responsible for your needs and work honestly and with integrity.

Be generous with those who have financial needs.

Be kind and caring in your conversations.

Not doing these things grieves the Holy spirit.

Summary – Put away what tears down and embrace what builds up.

These are habits to be cultivated, practiced over and over, for the health of our hearts. These are exercises we are to work at, each one of us, and as a community.

Please notice that the writer of Ephesians doesn't once mention how we feel about doing these things. He doesn't advise us to feel forgiving, or feel like being truthful, or feel tenderhearted. This is about actions to take, making those actions a part of who we are and what we do. Our habits may eventually shape our feelings. We may find we enjoy being forgiving or truthful, even as we may eventually feel we enjoy

those morning runs, or can't imagine a day without going for a walk. But the habit-forming actions come first.

By the Way: "The world didn't give me my joy, so the world can't take it away."

We can just imagine those Olympic distance runners or swimmers, rising early before daylight, hauling their bodies out of warm beds, and hitting the streets for a run or jumping in that cold water for a swim. Do any of them feel like training? No, but it's not about feeling at this point, it's about commitment.

This Week in a consultation: "The world didn't give me my joy so the world can't take it away." Rev. Bobbi White, WNC Presbytery.

Now here is the second instruction from Coach Paul. "This endeavor is a team sport – don't even try it by yourself."

Did you hear all the relational language in this passage? All the behaviors described here are about how we relate with one another in the body of Christ and with others in the wider world. "Speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." It is in the relational give and take of daily life that we live out our faith. As you and I serve God together, as we make decisions, as we serve at St Lawrence Place together, as we put together worship and as we care for this building...as we live our lives together – we learn from each other, we assist each other, we draft off each other.

We watched the 5000 meter run last night. This distance run is 12.5 laps around the track. Rarely does a runner who leads early on win the race. The same is true in the bike events. The wear and tear on the body and the mind of leading wears the front runner or rider down. These runners and riders need the pack to share the load.

So Coach Paul says, "This endeavor is a team sport, don't even try it by yourself."

And then Coach Paul gives us his last instruction before sending us out the door to practice, "When you fall down or when you fail, start again. And when your teammates fall down or fail, help them up, so they can start again." Literally Paul says it this way, "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

The challenges of this race we are running are significant and we will not always train well. Sometimes we will give into selfishness and immaturity. When we do, rather than quit or throw in the towel, Coach Paul says to start again. Receive God's forgiveness and get back out there. Grant forgiveness to each other so that you don't become a stumbling block for another teammate.

I read recently about Max Beerbohn's play "The Happy Hypocrite." Lord George Hell is a corrupt, wealthy aristocrat who falls in love with a pious girl. To disguise his debauchery, he dons a mask of a saint – in this play it is a literal mask. They marry and live together happily until a woman from his past tells his wife of George's true identity. Confronted by his

wife, George takes off his mask to discover that his face has conformed to the mask of the saint.

As we follow Christ, there will be times when we don't feel like training. Life will be dark and cold and it's early in the morning...our self-centered tendencies are so warm and appealing. But God calls us to step up out of ourselves and live this life at a higher level, not in our strength, but through the strength of our Lord and the encouragement of God's people – our teammates. "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."