

Sermon

“Increasing Our Strength of Soul”

September 15th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Romans 12:1-8

SCRIPTURES:

Romans 12:1-8

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: O God, open our hearts to your Word—a word that passes swiftly and faithfully from the ear to the heart, and then from the heart to the life; through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

Exercise is Good for the Body

Since yesterday was the annual Fuzz Run 5K here in Covington, I figured this would be a good Sunday to use running and exercise as a metaphor for digging into what God might be saying to us today ...

As we know, one of the hardest things to do, for most people, is to find time to exercise. We all know that we need to do it on a regular basis, to maintain reasonably good health and more—yet it’s so hard to carve out time in our busy schedules for going to the gym or even going for a walk (especially in this awful heat that’s still hanging on into mid-September!). But, if you’ve ever exercised before—done a little cardio, attended a fitness class, lifted some weights or done

other resistance exercises, or even trained and prepared for a local 5K—then you know how good your body feels afterward ... well, at least after the soreness has gone away! Seriously, though, as we age it becomes more and more important to find time for exercising and physical fitness because it makes us feel better and keeps us healthier longer—in other words, it restores us and transforms us and renews us and lifts us up, *and* keeps us from being couch potatoes!

Well, our spiritual selves need just as much of that sort of thing as our physical bodies. We are all children of God, and we are all created to be able to sense when we need something to make us whole when we feel less than whole. And, we are able to sense when we need something in our regular routines to restore us and transform us and renew us and lift us up, *and* keep us from being spiritual couch potatoes! Similar to how physical exercise strengthens our bodies, we must seek ways to increase our strength of soul as well—indeed, we must seek ways to feel swollen with God’s energy in our lives each and every day!

Disciples Need Strong Souls

Here’s what I mean ... through our baptism we are joined with Christ into a life of faith and discipleship. And, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to wake up each and every morning and be just that—a *disciple*. Before we are anything else, we are children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. Before we are students, teachers, doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, retirees, pastors, or whatever ... even before we are parents, children, or siblings ... we are first disciples.

In fact, you might say that no matter what we do for a living or as a student ... as living, breathing Christ-following people of faith we already have full-time jobs and our hours of operation are 24/7. Being a disciple of Christ is our first and foremost vocation no matter who we are or what we do. Now, 21st century culture has more or less reduced the idea of *vocation* to refer mainly to clergy or other religious professionals, but regardless of what we do, we all share the same vocation as disciples. And, our “make-our-money-jobs,” or being students in school, are just some of the ways God calls us and uses us as his disciples even now to touch the world out there [*gesturing outside the church walls*]. And, we must have strong souls to do good at the job of discipleship! And, *knowing* what we believe and *practicing* what we believe are ways to increase our strength of soul.

What We Believe—God Calls Us to Be God’s People

The idea that we are all *called* by God is one of the core beliefs that we all share as Christians. Indeed, God calls us and claims us and names us as his people. And, what exactly are we called to do? Well, as we’ve been discussing through the latter parts of the summer up until today, we are called to do things that take action! And, again today you’re going to hear a whole bunch of verbs because discipleship is about doing something.

- 1) First, we are called to **believe** in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- 2) Second, we are called to **follow** Jesus Christ in obedient discipleship, which is our *vocation* as Christians.
- 3) And, third, we are called to **use** the gifts and abilities God has created and blessed us with.

This is what Paul is getting at in today’s reading from Romans, when he says, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us,” and then he goes on to list how some of those gifts can be shared and used by God.

And, remember, God’s gonna use us and use our gifts, and we need strong souls to do good at the job of discipleship—in our personal lives, in our homes and with our families; in our daily jobs, occupations, and being students; and in the local community, throughout our nation, and throughout the entire world if necessary. God calls each of us to be part of God’s people, and God needs us to have strong souls!

What We Believe—God Calls Us to Respond

Another core belief we share as Christians is the certainty that we are also called to **respond** to God’s call, and that through responding to God’s call we **practice** what we believe. You see, God is not some cosmic puppeteer pulling the strings for us lifeless humans down here on earth. Instead, it is up to each of us to respond to God’s call of our own volition—as I said a few moments ago, we are talking about ideas that require us to *choose* to do something (verbs)!

- 1) First, we respond to God’s call to faith in Jesus Christ through the sacrament of Baptism, the very sign and seal of God’s grace in our lives and our covenant with Christ himself. In fact, not only is Baptism a sign of grace, but it is also God’s summons to respond to that grace.

2) Secondly, we also respond to God's call through the life AND worship in our community of faith, which for us is here at First Presbyterian Church. Actually, the *life* of this community of faith is known in many places, but most often the *worship* of this community happens here within these walls. And, this is a very beautiful sanctuary isn't it? We are truly blessed to have a house of worship such as this.

But, you know what ... church buildings and beautiful houses of worship can be both good and bad though. Sometimes they offer a sense of the sacred and promote a sense of worshipfulness. But, we must also admit that sometimes they promote a sense of being isolated from others, too. It happens in cities, towns, and communities everywhere every single Sunday morning. All too often, whether we realize it or not, our sanctuaries reduce the feeling of connection with others, and as a result people tend to keep to themselves or their own groups. Sadly, even in the middle of September, nineteen years into the 21st century, the 11:00 hour on Sunday mornings is still considered to be the most segregated time in our country (and that relates to way more than just racial differences).

So maybe that's how we often find ourselves in a bit of trouble sometimes, too. Maybe our sanctuaries help to lull us into complacency, or maybe it's just sheer habit and routine that does so. We come here each Sunday morning by 11:00am and we are usually gone not much later than noon or so. And then we repeat this schedule week in and week out. Now, trust me, I don't mean to trivialize our worship schedule, or complain about our buildings & grounds, nor do I mean to offend the many ministries of this congregation. But, I exaggerate to make a point ... that God calls us to **extend** God's love and grace *to* the world, and the world is out there [*gesturing again beyond the walls*]. We are not called to hide within our buildings and sanctuaries—instead, we are called out of them to serve the world.

And, so we practice what we believe when we respond to God's call to discipleship through our ministries that happen *in and for* the world. I love worship as much, if not more, than anyone I know. But, friends, worship is only *practice* for what we do the rest of the week! Worship, among other ministry opportunities, is where we do a whole bunch of increasing our strength of soul—

you might say it's our spiritual exercise! And, then what we do during the rest of our week is to **share** God's energy with the world around us, and **respond** to God's call to glorify God in every aspect of our daily lives—in our work and in our play, in our thoughts and in our actions, and in both our private and our public relationships.

People Start to Notice

Because here's the thing ... when someone puts forth the effort and makes the commitment to exercise their bodies on a regular basis, people start to notice. The effects of being more physically fit are pleasing to the eyes, and people can tell. Clothes start to fit looser. People begin carrying themselves with more positivity and confidence, and a new sense of vitality emanates from them.

And, I'm here to tell ya ... being more spiritually fit looks and feels a whole lot like that. And, when we, as a community of faith, put forth the effort and make the commitment to increase our strength of soul, people start to take notice. The effects of being more spiritually fit are pleasing to the eyes, and people can tell. A community of faith begins carrying itself with more positivity and confidence because we know what God is working to accomplish among us and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit, and a new sense of vitality will be our expression, and a swelling of God's energy will break forth to restore us and transform us and renew us and lift us up! And then, all that we say and do together, as disciples and children of the living God, will be "good and acceptable and perfect."

And, in closing, I want to tell you a secret ... what I just described is exactly who I believe God has once again transformed this congregation to be. Because we are carrying ourselves with more positivity and confidence these days and a new sense of vitality has become our expression. God's energy has been swelling up within us and has truly broken forth to restore us and transform us and renew us and lift us up. And, people have noticed. People can tell. 😊

So let's keep up the good work of maintaining our spiritual fitness and increasing our strength of soul. Thanks be to God. Amen!