

It Takes Exercise to Be Fit

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Hellfire, brimstone, and damnation! You heard today's readings. The sermon writes itself!

But, if that's true, then I stand before you as one most convicted by today's Gospel words. I have spoken words much like those with whom Jesus is speaking. When I first acknowledged the call to a life of Ordained ministry, I said to God "yes, but" and "yes, and yet." I said that I'd go but only after I secured my father's retirement – we were practice partners and I had agreed to be his retirement plan – and I said that I would go only after the right buyer came along for the business because I wouldn't be ready to go unless another independent small business owner bought the practice; I couldn't live with the idea that it could go to a large mega-corporation who would turn my community into a string of numbers. To be honest about what I was really saying: I looked into the Face of God and said that I didn't trust the Source of all Life to take care of people, my people, as well as I could! And so, when I hear today's Gospel words, I hear Jesus looking me dead in the eyes and saying, "you are unfit for the Kingdom of Heaven."

But hold on! Wait one minute! Run that down again; who said those words to me? Oh, right. Jesus Christ, the author of our Salvation, the one who loved us through the cross, the grave, the Resurrection, and the Ascension, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. And so where exactly is the damnation coming from? Certainly not from the speaker. No! It is we, the hearers of these words, who expect that there is an unforgivable sin, a point at which we are unfit and therefore need to be cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We expect that because that's how we treat each other, and it's what we say to ourselves, that it must be the meaning of these Gospel words. But, that's not how the God of love speaks to us; that's not how the Prince of Peace does business.

So, hear it again; but, this time, imagine Jesus with a glint in His eye, and a smirk on His face, and imagine Him as your trusted friend who finds you on the couch and who looks you dead in the eyes and says, "it's time to exercise. No more excuses. You are unfit for the Kingdom of God and you need to exercise the muscles of ministry, of community, of abundant life. So, I'm running today and want you to run with me. Come on; let's go!"

Now what, exactly, does this workout regimen entail? Are we going to have to sweat? Is it going to be intense? This workout looks exactly like what St. Paul was writing about to the Galatians. We don't earn our Salvation, Jesus has already secured that, and no amount of exercise will let us attain Heaven; no, this exercise is not about Saving ourselves from the outer darkness, Jesus has already freed us from that if only we'd come into the light. It's about doing what we are called to do because it's good for us and for everyone around us. It's not about achieving a state of fitness and then being done because we've reached the goal; it's striving every day, constantly and consistently, to draw ever closer to holiness, ever close to God, to be better than we were before. And this never ends. But, what is actually happening in these workout sessions? What does it actually look like to exercise our spiritual muscles?

Exercising joy looks like getting up every morning and saying "this is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." It looks like being caught up in every sunrise. It looks like seeing the beauty in every flower. It looks like being awe-struck at every sunset. Exercising peace and patience looks like staying in community with those whose personalities take us to the brink. It looks like acknowledging that the people who irritate us the most still have God-given gifts, gifts that the community needs, and that God loves them, too. Exercising compassion and mercy looks like mourning with the families and communities devastated by gun violence but it also looks like finding it

in ourselves to continue to love the ones who pulled the triggers and those around them who did not intervene in time. For, to hate those who so violently and publicly succumbed to fear, to hate, and to evil, is to falsely declare that some sins are unforgivable, that some cannot ever be Saved, that some must be cast into the outer darkness, and, in doing so, we condemn ourselves – but that's not God talking, that's all us.

Jesus is calling us to get up, to wake up, to be honest with ourselves that it is hard to go outside when we see the world falling apart all around us. But Jesus has made us free. Not free from consequences, not free from responsibility, but free to exercise the gifts of the Spirit. Free to choose to love God and our neighbors. And so, the season has come, the weather is just right. We must put on our running shoes, grab the helmet and the bike, jump into the pool. We are being called to exercise our spiritual muscles. We are being called to run the race with Jesus. We are being called to become fit for the Kingdom of God. Come on, y'all; let's go!

~The Rev. Dr. Derek J. Quinn, Deacon