

SIMPLICITY

2 Kings 5:1-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

It seems that St. Paul was athletic, or at least interested in athletics. On several occasions in his letters he speaks about running a race. But a boxer? I know that he can be a bit pugnacious in arguing his cause, but who knew? Though maybe it wasn't so much that *he* was an athlete as, knowing the Corinthian passion for sports, he was speaking to them in terms familiar to them. We can certainly understand this, living as we do in a culture that is feverish for sports and saturated with sports' metaphors to describe our dealings in the marketplace or on the battlefield or in political contests. He is perhaps using the *lingua franca*, the common language of the masses to get his point across. After all, he told us last week, if you recall, that he tries to be all things to all people for the sake of getting a hearing for the message of the gospel. If I were more like St. Paul, I would last week have offered a sermon full of football metaphors in honor of the Super Bowl: for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of building up the church, go team go, block that kick, rah, rah! But alas, I am not a fan. As sports go, I prefer running, or even boxing. In fact, I rather like boxing, not the brutality, but the remarkable skill and conditioning required of anyone who hopes to succeed in that sport.

More still to my liking, though, is cycling. The image that Paul is going for in writing to the Corinthians is in clear view in the training and skill of elite bicycle racers. Next July, I encourage you to watch the *Tour de France*. It is an awe-inspiring event on every level, but I bring it up now on this Sunday in the middle of February because a word is regularly used in relation to that sport and that event that is not much used in

reference to any other sport I know. The word is “suffering.” No one can ride the *Tour de France* who is not willing to suffer, even if you are the rider who comes in last. If you’re willing to suffer and are astonishingly good and have a great team, you can win glory and a substantial amount of money in the race, though I suspect that it is glory that is most important. A large paycheck notwithstanding, I doubt there would be many who would do what is required to win that race were it not for the glory of wearing the yellow jersey that identifies the victor.

When they are thoughtful, great athletes will tell you that their success in their sport is never merely a matter of physical conditioning. That conditioning is essential but it is hardly enough to allow one to prevail over others whose physical conditioning is also extraordinary. The athletes will talk about the mental toughness it takes to compete and win, and how this is necessary for one to overcome the obstacles to the goal of winning; one must have the will to win along with the skills and conditioning, and one must believe that victory is his/hers to be had. There can be no hesitation, there can be no fear, there can be no doubt. When Paul says, “I punish my body in order to enslave it,” he is expressing his will to win the prize. By “body” he means his person. He must be, he is, whole-hearted in his commitment to his goal.

Paul is not, of course, speaking about actual sport and athletics. His topic, as always, is the Christian gospel, the love of God in Christ. He is not interested in the perishable wreaths that are the trophies of victorious athletic performances. Those wreathes are not perishable simply because they will dry out and drop their leaves, but because even the triumph they represent passes away. Even when records are kept, they are inevitably surpassed. People do better what has been done well in the past. More

than this for Paul it is the significance of what is achieved that is in question. What is the achievement worth? The distinction Paul makes is between the perishable and the imperishable, or we might say, between the temporal and the eternal, or simply, between that which is passing and that which endures.

We know that Paul was a Jew, and we know that he was a Jew who was well-educated in things Jewish—he tells us this repeatedly in his letters. It is also the case that Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, which is to say, a Jew who was versed in Greek culture, as, for instance, a Russian Jew might be versed in Russian culture. As a Hellenistic Jew, Paul would have been exposed to the idea that what is good—indeed, what is perfect—is eternal, and hence, not subject to change or decay. This would not have been part of traditional Jewish thinking, which viewed God’s will for Israel in the course of Israel’s history as defining what is good. Thus, what is good for Jews is very specific, and specifically, is what is good for Israel. What is good for Greeks is what is good for everybody and always. God is thus for Greek thought the eternal One, dwelling above and outside of history. These two different views of the world come together in Paul (and in our faith) and form his understanding of God, who is eternal and imperishable and above history, but who is also concerned about the world and engaged with history. This is a hard balance to maintain, but in its Christian form it is depicted in the life of Jesus, who is at once God and human, imperishable and perishable. For Paul, the imperishable wreath is to live one’s life in God and specifically in the resurrection which awaits believers. That Paul uses the image of a prize in an athletic contest to say this indicates that he thinks of the resurrection as a reward for a life of faithfulness to Jesus, making it seem as if resurrection is something to be earned. I think this is an unfortunate metaphor

and not the best Christian thinking on the subject. What if we were to say instead that the resurrection is where the Christian life goes and that living in imitation of Jesus is already to have entered the resurrected life, whatever may happen after one's death. The Christian life is a life guided by the *imperishable* values of grace and compassion as these have come to be known in Christ Jesus, who is God's eternal Word in the flesh.

Well, that's a lot to think about. If you're still awake, permit me to close with something that is more practical.

For the Greeks, what was best was what was simplest, and when they thought about God, they thought about One who was essentially simple, and in this simplicity perfect in goodness and truth; not all confused and conflicted as we so often are. Our motives are almost always mixed. The human heart is always hungry, always striving for more and faster and bigger and different and more (Did I mention more?). Examples of our appetite for complexity are seemingly endless and evidently the source of much anxiety and hyper-activity. Take cell phones as an example—they just can't be complicated enough for people who have to have the next new thing in order to be connected constantly to everything all the time. Or think about our economic relations, which today are so complicated and large and fast that they cannot be regulated, even as we are told that all of this is necessary for the prosperity that we want. The lives of children today are intensely "programmed" with activities that are deemed necessary for their future success. I bring these things up as a contrast to the simplicity that is the ideal of life in God for our faith, a life committed to goodness and truth and love as the essential things, the needful things

In the story of Naaman the army commander in Second Kings, Elisha tells him his leprosy can be cured if he goes and bathes in the Jordan River. Naaman balks at this, and his servants ask why he resists doing something so simple. Would he not be willing to do something difficult? This story is about many things, but on this particular occasion, may I emphasize the element of simplicity in the cure of Naaman and suggest to you that simplicity is the cure for what ails us spiritually, even as simplicity is the image of God offered in our faith and the key to what is imperishable. In an age like our own, so full of complexity and distraction, simplicity is rarely simple and will require of us a discipline which, I suppose, might be compared to that exercised by a dedicated athlete. This discipleship is the life of Christian faith, the model for which has been given to us in the simple person of Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, February 12, 2012

Emanuel Lutheran Church