

SPIRITUAL SPRING TRAINING FEBRUARY 21 2010  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
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Like millions of other people around the world, Minnietta and I have been watching the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada for the past couple of weeks. How many of you have watched some of the Winter Olympics?

We always marvel at the incredible ability of athletes to race down an icy mountain path on skis at 60 miles an hour, perform snowboarding spins and turns on a half pipe course where they fly high into the air and turn flips, race other skaters around an ice rink on razor sharp ice skates, or dance and twirl on ice to beautiful music in the figure skating competition. Olympians are judged on how well they perform in all these competitions but I always marvel that they can do it at all, much less do it so well and beautifully.

The original Olympics started in Greece hundreds of years ago and Paul had watched some of the Olympic competitions when they had their races in the city of Corinth, Greece. After watching athletes race for a prize, Paul used an analogy comparing the preparation of athletes for their competition to the preparation of the followers of Jesus for the game of life.

Here is what Paul said in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth in First Corinthians 9:24-25 in the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible: *Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable garland, but we, an imperishable one.*

“They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.”

Dr. Eugene Peterson, a famous Biblical scholar, has written a paraphrase of the Bible entitled THE MESSAGE to help us understand the meaning of the scriptures in more contemporary language. Here is how he paraphrases this passage.

1 Corinthians 9:24-25 in The Message: *All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold metal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.*

Let us pray.

This past week I looked up the actual schedule for when Major League teams began spring training and when they played their first official game of the season and I made an amazing discovery. Did you know that major league baseball spring training began last Wednesday, February 17 in Florida and Arizona? Last week was also Ash Wednesday when Christians around the world began the season of Lent. Major league baseball players began their spring training practices on the same day that Christians began our spiritual spring training sessions to become more faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Not only that. The first official game for the 2010 Major League Baseball season is on Sunday afternoon, April 4. Sunday, April 4 is also Easter Sunday this year which is 20 days earlier than it will be next year.

I find this incredible and unique that this year Major League Baseball began spring training on Ash Wednesday and have their first official game of the year six weeks later on Easter Sunday, April 4.

Major League Baseball spring training is exactly the same time frame from February 17 to April 4 as our Lenten season of spiritual spring training for the followers of Jesus.

St. Paul compares the discipline and training of athletes to the discipline and training needed for followers of Jesus Christ.

I like Dr. Gene Peterson's way of paraphrasing Paul's message so we can understand it better. Peterson writes: ALL GOOD ATHLETES TRAIN HARD. THEY DO IT FOR A GOLD METAL THAT TARNISHES AND FADES. YOU'RE AFTER ONE THAT'S GOLD ETERNALLY.

ALL GOOD ATHLETES TRAIN HARD. When you watch Olympic athletes, or professional football, basketball or baseball players perform you know that they have spent hours and years training hard to become so proficient in their sport. If someone wants to be competent in a sport they have to discipline and train themselves for that sport.

In a similar way if we want to be competent and growing in our spiritual life, we have to discipline and train ourselves in spiritual disciplines.

How many of you ever participated on a sports team in high school or college? Many of you have and you know that you had a coach who made you do calisthenics, exercises, and running to get in shape for your sport.

I played football, basketball and track in high school and before each season began, our coach would run us to death. For football he would have us run up and down hills until we could hardly move.

For basketball, he would make us do sprints back and forth in the gym until our legs were like putty. For track he would make us run out in the country about three miles and then three miles back to town while he drove along in his car to make sure we didn't stop and walk along the way.

I loved playing sports but I hated all the pain involved in getting in shape to play sports. But I knew that we couldn't play a whole football or basketball game or succeed in a track meet if we didn't spend all that time in training.

Paul is right. Good athletes train hard to get their bodies in shape to succeed in any athletic endeavor.

Paul says, that in a similar way, we need to train and discipline our spiritual bodies if we want to grow spiritually and live victoriously in the midst of the challenges of life.

If someone went out for a baseball team and they had never thrown or caught a ball or hit a baseball with a bat, we would say they are not ready to play baseball successfully. They need much more practice with a baseball and bat before they can join the team.

In a similar way, if someone wants to grow spiritually, if we want to walk closer with God but they never give any time to prayer, meditation, or scripture reading we would say that they need much more practice in these disciplines before they will experience the living presence of God in their lives.

When major league baseball players go to spring training in Florida or Arizona they go back to the basics of their sport. They spend a lot of time exercising and getting their bodies in shape for the rigors of a

long baseball season. They practice the basics of baseball: hitting the ball, throwing the ball, catching the ball, and running the bases. No matter how good they are, they always go back to practice and improve on their basic skills if they want to have a successful baseball season.

In a similar way, the followers of Jesus always see the Lenten season as a time of spiritual spring training when we get back to developing and improving our basic spiritual disciplines and skills in living as faithful followers of Jesus.

During the seven Sundays of Lent and Easter, we will focus on practicing basic spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, study, journaling, spiritual direction, and fasting as a way of walking closer to the God revealed through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Today we are introducing this sermon series by giving us all an opportunity to discover our spiritual types in a workshop after worship or on Monday evening or Friday morning. It is explained on the yellow insert in your bulletin. We realize that we don't all come to God in the same way.

Some of us come to God more naturally through our head and intellect. We like to study the Bible and analyze it and read other spiritual literature and think logically our beliefs about God. Some people come to God more naturally through thinking which is what theology is: it is thinking about God. That is what we do when we take Disciple Bible Study or participate in one of the book study groups in our congregation. We are trying to find out more about God through our thinking.

Others come to God more naturally through their hearts. They come to God through their feelings and emotions. They love experiences where they feel the love of God in their hearts through the personal sharing of their life experiences with each other or stories about others or through small group experiences.

Some followers of Jesus are called mystics because they feel at one with God through deep prayer and meditation or through experiencing God's presence in a sunset or in the face of a baby. They love experiences where they feel mystically united with God in Christ.

Another group of people feel closest to God when they are involved in serving the needs of others. When they go on a work project or feed the hungry and serve the homeless or tutor a child, they experience the presence of God in loving and serving others. They see and experience the living presence of Christ through surrendering themselves in loving service to others.

We are different types of people and we most naturally come to God in different ways. One way is not superior to the other; it is just that there are different ways for us to come to God and God doesn't care how we come - only that we come to God.

This morning, Betty Brandt and the Spiritual Life Center volunteers are giving us all an opportunity to take a brief survey to help us discover our natural spiritual type - if we come to God more through our head, our heart, our mystical experiences or through serving others.

Last Tuesday, Betty Brandt and Terri Coe, conducted this survey with our staff in staff chapel and most of us discovered we are a little bit in all of the categories but it was helpful to discover which is our most natural and common way to come to God.

Betty pointed out that if we most naturally come to God through our head and thinking about God, we might practice some disciplines of the heart during Lent to expand the ways we come to God. Or if we come to God through mystical experiences of deep meditation we might expand our ways of coming to God by practicing the disciplines of serving the poor during Lent or vice versa.

We suspect that not everyone who wants to take this spiritual survey can get into the Spiritual Life Center today so you might want to come tomorrow evening Monday, Feb. 22 at 7 pm or on Friday at 10 am to participate in this spiritual survey as we begin our spiritual spring training sessions.

We also have the *HOLY HABITS* daily devotional guide available at the information desk which lists 47 different spiritual disciplines which we might practice to grow closer to God.

We also have this devotional guide prepared by the Spiritual Life Center called *CREATIVE CROSSES*. Last year during Lent people shared with us a cross they made and what it meant to them. This year we have pictures of those crosses in color and a meditation written by someone in our congregation about what that cross meant to them. These books are available for purchase in the bookstore.

The *CREATIVE CROSSES* guide is also available on our St. Luke's website and you can go on line at [www.stlukesumc.com](http://www.stlukesumc.com) to read a devotion by one of our members each day during Lent.

You see, just as athletes have to discipline themselves and practice constantly to become proficient in their sport, so followers of Jesus have to discipline themselves and observe spiritual practices constantly to become proficient in the spiritual life.

You see, the truth about life is that we are all shaped by our habits.

We are all physically shaped by our habits of eating and exercise. Whatever shape our body is in is due in large measure to our habits of what we eat and whether or not we exercise.

Our minds are shaped by the newspapers and books we read and by the television programs we watch and the radio programs we listen to.

In a similar way our spirits are shaped by our habits or lack of habits in prayer, meditation, scripture reading, worship and the other ways we find time to spend with God.

We are shaped by the habits we have developed and if we want to experience God and God's love for us then we need to examine and regularly practice spiritual habits or disciplines.

One of the great philosophers said: THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING.

If we go through life without ever examining our lives, without reflecting on who we are and what God has created us to do, then our lives may not seem worth living. Otherwise, life is just one thing after another and there doesn't seem to be much meaning in it.

Winston Churchill once said that history is just one darn thing after another (but he didn't day darn).

Sometimes our lives seem like just one thing after another without any meaning and purpose in it unless we slow down, reflect and ask what God is trying to teach us through every experience of life.

Lent is the time to step back from the rat race, to slow down from all the frantic activity of our lives and reflect on who we are and where we are going. What is the meaning of my life? It is the time to ask ourselves: have I become the kind of person God created me to be?

Several book study groups in our congregation have read the book *THE YEAR OF LIVING BIBLICALLY* with the subtitle: "One Man's humble quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible for a year."

It is written by A. J. Jacobs who is a writer for the Esquire magazine in New York City. A. J. Jacobs will be here to speak about his experience in trying to follow the Bible literally on Tuesday, March 2 at 7 pm and you can purchase tickets today in the West Passage.

We have been reading this book in my Wednesday morning book study group and have found it to be delightful and educational.

A.J. Jacobs was raised in a non-practicing Jewish home in New York where he had no religious training at all. He begins the book by describing himself as an agnostic who doesn't know if there is a god or not and it doesn't matter to his life on way or the other.

As a writer he received a book contract to practice the Bible as literally as possible for a year and then write about his experiences.

He is a genius and remembers everything he has ever read, so he spent three months reading the Bible, reading commentaries on the Bible, and making a list of every law and rule in the Old and New Testaments. He came up with a list of over 700 rules and laws; he catalogued them and hung them around the apartment where he and his wife Julie and their two-year old son live.

He discovered that he couldn't follow all of these laws literally. It is illegal to kill bulls in public places in New York city as commanded by the Hebrew Bible but A. J. was determined that he would follow as many laws literally as possible.

He did not cut his hair or beard for a year because the Bible says that men should not cut their hair or beards. He wore a long white robe because that is one of the commandments given in the Hebrew Bible. He got rid of all of his clothes made of mixed fibers because that is one of the laws given in the book of Leviticus.

He spent a lot of time visiting various Jewish and Christian groups who claim to follow the Bible literally and discovered that they may follow parts of the Bible literally but none of them follow everything literally.

A.J. followed the commandment in the Bible to pray regularly. Now there are different places in the Bible that talk about how often you should pray so A. J. decided he would follow the intent of the Bible and pray three times a day; morning, noon and night. Now, since he wasn't sure that he believed in God, prayer was a challenge for him.

However, he discovered that many of the psalms are basically prayers to God so he would stand in his apartment, raise his hands up and read and pray a psalm.

After doing this every day, he said something began to happen to him. He began to feel that maybe someone was listening to his prayers. He had the feeling that he wasn't just talking to the ceiling - that there was actually a God listening to his prayers. It was through the practice of prayer that he began to believe in the possibility that there is a God.

Then he said that we don't think our way into a new way of behaving; we behave our way into a new way of thinking.

He just practiced the spiritual discipline of prayer even when he didn't believe in God and by faithfully observing that practice, he came to experience the feeling of a God who cared for him and listened to his prayers.

The prayers he liked to pray best were prayers of thanksgiving. He loved the feeling he got when he just spent time thanking God for all of the gifts of life. He got so involved in giving prayers of thanksgiving before meals that he would thank God for each item they were going to eat, for the person who planted the seed that produced the wheat, the person who harvested the wheat, the person who made it into bread, and the little old lady at the grocery store who sold it to him. He would take so long in thanking God for everything they were going to eat, that Julie and their son were half way through the meal before he finished his prayer.

He also noticed that there were times when he prayed to God spontaneously. One day his son, Jasper, fell against a chair corner and bruised his head badly and cried out in pain. A.J. picked up his son to comfort him and noticed that a huge golf ball sized welt was appearing on his head. He rushed his son into the room where his wife Julie was to see if they should take him to the hospital, and all the time he was saying, "GOD HELP JASPER; GOD HELP JASPER."

They called the doctor and discovered that swelling like that was common for little kids and only bring him in if it didn't start to subside soon. The swelling subsided and Jasper was soon okay but A. J. was shocked that as one who wasn't sure if he believed in God at all, the only thing he said in his time of need was a prayer to God: "God help Jasper."

I have also heard that many people who say they don't believe in God will cry out, "OH GOD HELP ME," in the middle of a car crash. It is seeking God's help in a time of crisis.

It reminded me of the old saying: there are no atheists in foxholes which means that when we are in desperate need, something in us calls out to a power beyond ourselves for help; that's the only time that some people ever call out to God.

ANNE LAMONT in her book *TRAVELING MERCIES* says that she only has two basic prayers. The first is THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU and the second is HELP ME, HELP ME, HELP ME.

Next week I will be talking more about prayer but I would like to encourage every one of us to begin this week with some discipline of prayer.

You might just begin by starting every day with a Help Me prayer. Think about the things you are facing that day and ask God to help you deal with them. When I have my prayer time in the morning I look at my calendar for the day and ask God to help me be a loving, listening presence in each meeting and to help each person in our meeting.

You might end each day with a Thank You prayer where you just think back over the events and persons you have encountered during the day and thank God for being with you in good times and in challenging times.

Practice praying Help Me and Thank You prayers this week and see if it doesn't help you on your spiritual spring training experience.

I once knew a man who went through a great deal of grief in his life. His mother died when he was about 25 years old. His father died when he was around 30. Then his only brother died when my friend was about 36 years old.

One day I talked with him and asked him how he managed to cope with all of these tragic losses relatively early in his life. By the time he was 36 he had lost all of his immediate family.

He responded by telling me that when he was growing up his mother tucked him into bed each night and would thank God for giving him to her as her son. Then she would ask him to say a prayer thanking God for something in his life. He would always thank God for his mother, his father and his brother and all of the other people he had encountered that day.

He said that just grew up thanking God every night for all the people he loved and all the people he had encountered during the day.

When his mother passed away, he would feel her presence around him when he offered his nightly prayer of thanksgiving for her. Even after she died, he thanked God for giving him a mother who taught him to thank God in all circumstances.

When his father and his brother died, he continued to thank God that God had given them to him for the years they enjoyed together.

He thought for a moment and said, "If my mother didn't teach me to thank God every night in prayer for all the people who had blessed my life, I don't know how I would have handled all my losses."

You see, his mother taught him the spiritual discipline of thanking God every night for being with him during the day and that spiritual discipline, that habit, that pattern of living had sustained him through the tragic losses of all of his immediate family.

All of us will go through losses in our lives. All of us will face personal and professional challenges in our lives. The only question is whether or not we will have the spiritual habits and disciplines which will enable us to live victoriously in spite of all the challenges we will face.

On this first Sunday of Lent, I invite us all to start on a new journey of Spiritual Spring Training to strengthen our souls and our lives so that we can live victoriously regardless of the challenges which may face us.

Let us pray.

