

Early this year, our church was presented with an opportunity to be a host site for one of the classes offered by the Aging and Disability Resource Center in Marshfield. It was a good opportunity for outreach into our community and so on March 25th we had an orientation session for the class that's called "Strong Bones." And because I've gotten more interested in physical fitness over the last number of years, I decided to participate in the class myself. Part of the appeal of the class is that the exercises focus on three things: *strength, flexibility and balance*. Now when we're young, we may not think too much about these things, because we assume we have them. However, we really don't know how we are doing in these areas until we have a measure against which to test ourselves. And that's what these exercise do. They show us where we stand. But that's not all. They also give us the chance to progress forward.

This morning, our Scripture from Hebrews continues with the roll call of heroes of faith. When we heard the beginning of this roll call in last week's Scripture we may have wondered why the writer decided to include such a list in his writing. And the reason is that the writer is directing his message to an audience that's about ready to give up their Christian faith. And he's trying to convince them not to do that.

He does this, first of all, by pointing to the faithfulness of their spiritual ancestors. He says: 'Look at all these people from Abel to the Christian martyrs--**this great cloud of witnesses** that surrounds you. All of them, even though they are no longer with us, left behind a legacy of faithfulness to God and a belief in his promises. They've set an example for us. And we don't want to change that example, do we, and especially not for those who will *follow us*. In fact, our spiritual ancestors are cheering us on because they want us know that if they were able to live their lives in faithfulness to God, even in the difficult times in which *they* lived, so can *we* in the midst of our own challenges.

So it's not just about looking back at those who have already faithfully run this race, as if we were in an arm chair, watching a sports game on TV, because we're also called to add our own race to the history of salvation. We are called every day to enter the arena of life ourselves, clearly expressing our identity as people who follow our Lord Jesus. But in order to do that we need to address a few of things. For the writer tells us to: "**lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely.**" What does that mean?

In our "Strong Bones" class we are encouraged to strap weights to our legs for a couple of the exercises so that our leg muscles might get stronger. But when we are in an actual race, we wouldn't do that. And we'd we wear only the most streamlined clothing. So it is in our spiritual life journey. We want to let go of the things that make us feel heavy, like past hurts and disappointments, negative thinking, fear, anxiety and anger. Perhaps that's easier said than done. But, that's the challenge that the writer lays before us. And *secondly*, the writer tells us to be aware of our behaviors that go against God's Commandments. Sometimes those behaviors stick to us in such a way that we don't even notice them anymore. They may become like the clothes we wear each day. We put them on each morning without thinking much about them. But, if that's what we're doing, the writer says: Change your clothes! Change the wardrobe of behaviors you've been taking into your day and put on the wardrobe of a new creature in Christ.

Then...we can engage the race. And that's when we need *strength, flexibility and balance* in order to run the race with perseverance—which means to be able to keep on keeping on, to keep living forward by faith. And even if we are tempted to give up or

quit, we don't. Now the opposite of strength, flexibility and balance is weakness, rigidity and imbalance. We know that it would be difficult to move forward if those were the words that described our lives. So as people of God and followers of our Lord, we want to keep our eyes on the prize which is Jesus Christ, our Savior. He is the one who will **make us strong** when we feel weak. He is the one who will renew our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit and enable us to live boldly for the sake of his kingdom. All we need to do is ask him for the strength that he alone can give us.

And if we keep our eyes on the prize, which is our Lord Jesus, we see that he was **flexible**. In the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus became aware of the magnitude of the suffering and humiliation that lay ahead for him, he prayed to his Heavenly Father: **"if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done."** Jesus was saying: **"It's not about me, Father; it's about what you want. Your will be done."** It has been said that humility makes us flexible. And it is humility that makes it possible to be obedient to the race that is set before us—the commission to walk in the ways of the Lord all the days of our lives. Jesus lived an obedient life, and in a letter to the Philippians it tells us that God the Father highly exalted Jesus *because...* he did.

And if we keep our eyes on the prize--our Lord Jesus--we see that our Lord led a **balanced life**. He labored and he rested, he spent time with his disciples and the crowds and he spent time alone with his Heavenly Father in prayer. He was gentle and yet knew when he had to be firm. Above all, love was at the center of all he did. In order for us to run the race that has been set before us, we too, need to keep our balance. And a balanced life is a life that imitates the life of Jesus.

In a letter that the Apostle Paul sent to Timothy, a younger co-worker in the ministry, Paul wrote these words: **"...For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love and self-control."** The Lord gives us the power to keep on working for good even in the midst of what is evil and not-of-God. Our Lord gives us the ability to love God and others, even as we love our own temple that he's given us. And the Lord has given us the gift of self-control so that everything we do, or refrain from doing, is done with an eye to the welfare of our neighbors, as well as ourselves.

So then, let's engage the race that our Lord has set before us, keeping our life in balance, for there are those who are cheering us on from the past. And we've been encouraged to let go of and change the things that are not-of-God, so that we can move forward. We've also been given the most precious prize there is, Jesus, who gives us the gift of faith and confirms it in our hearts. Following the model of his life will lead us to the very heart of God. Amen.