

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
August 26, 2018
Ephesians 6:10-20

Getting in Shape

When I was in high school I ran on the track team. I wasn't one of those people who could run the miles and miles of a long distance runner. In fact, one of the things I hated most about track practice was that very first practice of the season when our coaches insisted we run the five miles up and back on the rural highway by our school to a big old barn by the side of the road. If you hadn't been running during the winter to get in shape for track practice that five miles up the hill to the barn was a killer. And, once you were done, then the real track practice actually began.

For those of us who were sprinters and never ran more than 440 yards around the oval track, running and persevering in that long distance run seemed like torture. For me, whose races were the 100 yard and 220 yard dashes running miles seemed like an eternity of suffering.

Funny thing is, now that I'm older, the slower pace of the long distance run is much more to my liking. I even ran the Marine Corps Marathon in Washington, DC when I lived and worked there. Don't ask me to sprint a hundred yards today though; I would probably collapse or pull my hamstring again as I did sprinting to first base during one of our church softball games. That was pretty humiliating!

But here's the thing, folks. If you are going to do anything well in your life you have to practice. You have to train for it. You have to get in shape to do it well. It may be in better physical shape. It may be that you have to prepare mentally to face some test, and not just those you take or took in school. In relationships, you have to practice over and over again being kind, being compassionate, being empathetic, and most of all being forgiving. Forgiving of your partner and forgiving of yourself. Heaven knows Kathy, Ji Hye, and all our choir members know that you have to practice to sound so great and inspirational every Sunday morning. The beautiful melodies and rhythms you all hear from our choir's voices and from Ji Hye's piano or organ playing come to you after hours and hours of

practice and a lifetime of learning how to present musical pieces. It truly is a labor of love.

I was lucky when I went to seminary beginning in my late forties and early fifties. I had already spent twenty-five years of learning how to serve people and speaking to them in public settings. I had learned how to write for others by writing speeches for my boss and for myself and writing “field memos” every day recapping visits I had made for my boss. Public speaking and preaching don’t come naturally for most folks. But, after speaking thousands and thousands of words long before I ever took a preaching class I had a lot of practice behind me. Ask the Eagle Scouts in our midst or in Troop 16 which we sponsor. The Scout motto of “Be Prepared” serves you well your entire life.

So, what about the very most important thing you do in your life? What about practicing your faith? How do you practice that? Paul wrote to the good people in the church of Ephesus, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” What does it really mean to “put on the whole armor of God.” Does it mean to arm yourself with lots of good schemes and insults to hurl back at those who hurt you? Does it mean to take advantage of people before they can take advantage of you? Does it mean to arm yourself with lots of money and power and connections so you can do better than all those less skilled, less privileged people, who don’t work as hard as you? Well, maybe that’s all true if you really believe this is a world where it really is “dog eat dog” and “I got mine, you get yours.”

Paul tells us to “stand against the wiles of the devil.” News flash, folks, the devil isn’t a person. The “devil” represents the systematic and selfish oppression of one people over another people or one person over and against another person. It’s not a person, it’s a strain of selfishness, abusiveness, and intentional causation of suffering inflicted by people against people. Some of this “devilish” behavior happens when one person opposes another, but it’s also built into systems and cultures that fail to share power, resources, fairness and equality among the widest variety of people and places.

If we love God, if we love Jesus, if we follow Adonai, or Allah, then we need to practice those things that are truly representative of this ineffable, mysterious, spirit faith we generally call a “higher power” or call “God.” As far as we can tell, and part of this practice is not claiming to fully know the mind of God, practicing faith means working hard every moment of every day to practice being unselfish, practice being kind, compassionate, being generous in all things, and really, really being forgiving. It means being fair to others, and giving them respect and affirmation for being born in the image of God and being a child of God. Practicing faith requires reverence, submission to the better good, being non-judgmental, and never losing hope that all things will work out well in the end for all people.

It’s hard to practice your faith in a world where more and more people do not ground their behavior in belief or faith in a transcendent power. Too many people today, although they never would admit it have bought into the Marxist dictum that religion is simply the “opiate of the masses.” They just don’t get the value of faith, of religion. Too many people practicing religion or a faith, practicing truly “being together” in love with others is thought of as just plain foolishness or superstition.

My friends, *you* give me hope. I see you practicing your faith well. You pray together in community and I would dare say, too, that many if not all of you have your own personal prayer life when you talk to God in many different ways and times during your day. You come together to help each other and people you don’t even know. And, I believe none of you do these things to gain some kind of power or privilege over other people. You do what you do unselfishly. You come to church to worship, pray, sing, learn, read and discuss matters of faith together. I believe your armor is strong. I hope you will always endeavor to keep your armor of faith strong, especially outside of this church. In those hard times, in those sad and grieving times, in those confused and chaotic times we all experience in our lives that practice of faith, and all that it means, keeps us strong and hoping rather than in despair. Keep practicing your faith, folks. It may be painful at times but it’s worth it. You will be more at peace and so will the world. Amen.

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