

“To Be on the Team, Practice”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Mark 8:27-38

By the fourth day of practice, I wondered if I had joined a basketball team or something else. Every day after school, we started with calisthenics, a word based on a Greek root that means “inflict pain.” (Just kidding) We did sit-ups, push-ups, jumping-jacks, and several other exercises.

Then it was up the stairs, down the stairs, all around the gym. Coach kept shouting, “Let’s see some extra effort,” and if the extra wasn’t enough, then he would stroll over to the game clock and proclaim, “Since you seem to be savoring this experience so much, we shall extend the amount of time we expend upon it.”

After our workout on the original Stairmaster, it was time for the aptly-named suicide sprint: Baseline to foul line to baseline to center line to baseline to opposite foul line to baseline to baseline, over and over again. Vomiting was optional, but popular.

Eventually, we worked on the fundamentals of dribbling, passing, protecting the ball, rebounding, shooting, and finally made it to our offensive plays, our full-court defensive press, our half-court zone defenses, and if we were lucky, scrimmage.

It wasn’t until the season started that we realized the method behind the madness. The game of basketball, a complex and sublime sport, rests firmly on the foundation of endurance. If you cannot endure, you will not triumph, and though our team lost more games than it won, by the fourth quarter, when other teams were flagging, we were just as fresh and as mediocre as we

had been at the start of the game. And occasionally, when we met an equally mediocre team, our endurance training led us to victory.

The Christian faith isn't about winning or losing. That's already been settled by Jesus. He appeared to lose on a cross, but then three days later, pulled out a stunning upset, literally wresting victory from the jaws of death. As disciples of Jesus, as members of his team, we share in his victory, just as surely as a benchwarmer who never plays a minute gets to climb the ladder and snip off a piece of net once the championship is won. However, to play on that team, to be followers of Jesus, means that we must practice.

For most aspiring basketball players, or players of any sport for that matter, the perfect practice involves plenty of scrimmaging with the fewest possible interruptions from correcting coaches. Yet as anyone who has pursued a competitive team sport knows, even the pros spend most of their time perfecting their shot in solitude and lifting weights and, yes, running suicide sprints – all of which can be mundane and unpleasant, though no one can afford to neglect them.

Likewise, with the Christian faith, there are exercises that enable us to endure, but they can seem monotonous. Prayer, for instance, is a fundamental practice often neglected because we feel guilty about the time taken away from our busy schedules, or we feel frustrated, because it doesn't seem to accomplish anything, and many of us are very goal driven people. Prayer also intimidates some because we feel like we don't know how to do it. Go home and watch The Fiddler on the Roof. Tevye will teach you how to pray.

Public worship is a form of prayer we are often tempted to avoid, because worship can be unsettling. Unlike our private prayer, which we can at least pretend to control, worship is an event where it is quite clear that no single person can be in control, except God. However, the biggest obstacle to consistent participation in worship may be boredom, or the fact that other

options seem more interesting. The good news is that if one type of worship bores you, there might be another kind that doesn't. But be aware that our boredom may be just that – ours.

As a student, I found physics incredibly boring, even though that subject literally explains why the world goes round. Now that I am more mature, physics fascinates me, because it holds the key to so much meaning. So, yes, I am suggesting that if worship bores you, you might have a little growing up to do.

Study of scripture, another fundamental practice of faith, can seem endless, which it is, and we don't like making those types of extensive commitments. Scripture also frustrates us because it's like trying to nail Jell-O to a wall. As soon as you think you've got a pretty good bead on things, scripture surprises you again.

Just as basketball players are eager to skip ahead to the scrimmage, we Christians are eager to move ahead to the fun stuff. We want to know peace, joy, and unconditional love, but without the habit of humility, we lack the perspective to know peace. Without the habit of awe, we lack the sense of wonder to truly experience joy. If we are unprepared to sacrifice, unconditional love will always elude us, or rather we will elude it, because without sacrifice, unconditional love seems crazy and scares us.

I think this is what Jesus meant, when he told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

Obviously, Jesus does not mean that all his followers must be crucified as he was. A more popular, yet inaccurate, way of interpreting his words is that our daily difficulties are the cross we are meant to bear. But those diseases, disrupted relationships, financial worries, and

other life problems are simply part of what it means to be human. The suffering of everyday life isn't the cross Jesus invites us to bear. The cross Jesus calls us to carry is the burden of repentance, of labor of being transformed and reoriented away from ourselves toward God and others: come what may, cost what it will.

It is hard for some to see how this could be good news, and the sad truth is, the Gospel is not good news for everyone. For sinners unwilling to repent, the Gospel is not good news. For those who are quick to violence, prone to judgment, for those who relish anger and strife, the Gospel is not good news. For the greedy, not good news; for people who want easy answers to hard questions, not good news; for those who think they can be happy without real effort and change, the Gospel is bad news, because hauling a cross is tough, and it will change you.

However, like basketball players going through the pains of pre-season conditioning, disciples of Jesus learn over time how beneficial it is to carry that cross. We learn that the discomforts of being a disciple are far outweighed by the astonishing grace we receive. The fundamental practices of prayer, worship, and study of scripture help bring us to repentance and ever greater degrees of selflessness.

We become strong in the Lord, and that's good news. We grow in wisdom, and that's good news, too. We die to our sin and rise anew to a life characterized by kindness, forgiveness, and a whole host of other virtues that lead us to peace and freedom and help bring to fruition the prayer Jesus taught us, "thy will be done, thy Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." For those who love the Lord, good news. But there will likely always be those for whom the Gospel is a dreadful thing, because the implications of the Gospel are crystal clear even to those who despise it most: God is real; you are not God; +you may not tell God how to be God. So repent,

submit, and follow, because there you will find liberty and ecstasy and blessings beyond imagining.

In each person's life, there will come a time, probably several times, when we're tired and hurting, ready to drop yet able to endure, thanks to the cross that has built our spiritual strength; thanks to a community of people who taught us how to shoulder that cross and encouraged us when it just seemed too much. In those crucial times, our endurance will see us through, until at the last, our cross we lay down, and enter into the triumph won for us by Jesus, whose grace while free was not cheap, who bids us all to carry the cross and follow. Amen.