

February 14th, 2021

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 “Crossing the Line”

Writing my annual report for 2020 was strange. How do you evaluate or even describe ministry during COVID world? I appreciated our Regional Minister’s encouraging words a couple of weeks ago when she reminded us that even though we are physically “out there” away from each other in our homes during worship, we’re really here together in this virtual space. I know it may not seem like we’ve been “doing” much activity-wise, but I assure you we are still actively engaged in ministry. It just looks and feels different because we aren’t able to be as “hands on” as we typically are.

I’ve got to say, what’s making me nervous now is what it’s going to look like when we’re finally able to return to the building for worship and activities. And this low-level anxiety doesn’t have anything to do with not wanting to see anyone in person ... I’m for sure looking forward to that. I guess I’m just nervous about what our “new normal” is going to look like. It’s anyone’s guess what kind of precautions and restrictions will still be in place when we do. Will there be enough folks who are vaccinated for us to achieve herd immunity? This past week, the CDC announced that folks who’ve had their full round of vaccinations don’t have to quarantine. Awesome! But what about these mutations that we’re seeing in the virus? Even if we achieve immunity or even find a cure, what is life going to look like? We’ve got all these masks now, and as much as I’m tired of wearing them, I’ve kind of enjoyed not catching so much as a cold during this time. Am I going to go through life with a bottle of hand-sanitizer in my pocket? Am I going to leave my little hand sanitizer pump in the cup holder of my trunk and furiously clean my hands like a raccoon every time I walk out of a store? I’m sure the nurses in our congregation will say, “We *should* be washing our hands whether we’re in a pandemic or not!” Also, am I ever going to want to eat at a buffet or feel good about going to a potluck again? Maybe I shouldn’t! But will I become a borderline obsessive-

compulsive mysophobic person like the guy on that TV show “Monk?” I don’t know!

As difficult as this pandemic has been, there’s been some good things that have happened. And I preface this fully aware of my privileged position. Over the course of this pandemic, I’ve learned to slow down. I haven’t felt overwhelmed, overloaded or overworked. I’ve lost weight. I started practicing yoga. I’ve been learning how to garden. I’ve had time to work on projects around the house because I’m not driving to Sacramento or San Ramon for Regional meetings. I’ve had time to read more. I’ve taken time to explore new ways of getting in touch with God and to recognize how the Holy Spirit works in and through me. I’ve learned to broaden my musical taste. I’ve learned to relax. I’ve learned not to treat every problem that comes my way as a life or death situation. I’ve learned how unhealthy it is to live my life like I’m one of those plate spinners you see at the circus trying to keep everything from crashing down around me. It’s been *great*. Again, I know this comes from a place of privilege and that this hasn’t been everyone’s pandemic journey ... especially those health workers and first responders, and all the other “essential workers” who’ve had to be out on the front lines of the pandemic, or the small business owners who’ve had to close shop because they don’t have enough customers to stay open. But a lot of people have been able to slow down and breathe.

In the big picture, things are looking up for ending this crisis. What concerns me is that things are going to go back to the way they were before the pandemic. Remember that video I showed last Spring called *The Great Realization?* That’s the one where the dad in the not-quite-distant future is telling his kids a story about how the pandemic taught humans all these valuable lessons. According to the story, people learned how to be more thankful and to value relationships. And these lessons led to the end of pollution, poverty, and selfishness. Humans became less interested in grasping, hoarding, and competing and more interested in learning, playing, and performing acts of kindness. The video had almost 7 million views and 4,000 comments. The last

comment as of Thursday morning at 10:00 a.m. was, “Amazing story. Oh wait ... this is reality.” See, I’m worried that all of those *good* things that have happened are just going to go “ka-put.” We’ll go back to unhealthy habits, overcommitting ourselves, polluting, hoarding, fighting amongst each other ... all the things that were present before the pandemic. Truth be told, I’m afraid that it may even be a little worse. I don’t know. I need a goal. So what does a Jesus-loving glass half empty person do to find such a goal? Well, we turn to the scriptures of course.

The scripture we have in front of us today is again from 1 Corinthians 9 but starting from where we left off last week in verse 24. Here, the Apostle Paul takes the image of athletes training for the Olympic games and says that they are putting in all this effort with the sole aim of receiving a perishable wreath. Paul’s point here is that we as Jesus’ followers should be seeking an imperishable prize, something far greater and more valuable than a bunch of flowers or even a gold medal. For followers of Jesus, our goal ... our destiny is to become like Jesus. But it’s not just about fulfilling our *individual* destinies. It’s also about fulfilling a bigger one. One where earth and heaven are reconciled to God. Or as I’ve been saying for a while, where the light of God’s reign overcomes the darkness of the Kingdoms of Earth. And I will send dozen moldy raisin cookies to anyone who leaves “Amazing story. Oh wait ... this is reality” on this YouTube video or FaceBook Live!

But let’s look at fulfilling this destiny as a goal that’s been placed in front of us ... like an imperishable prize at the end of a race. I think we all have a sense of fulfilling the destiny to which we are called. And often it may feel like a goal that we’ll never be able to satisfy, even if we’re always running towards it. That’s the way it is for elite world-class athletes who’ve never placed in the Olympics. It seems like the prize has always slipped away. And this is the sort of feeling that Paul is evoking here as he points us towards the discipline required to become like Jesus and to share his goal of reconciling the world. He uses an image of the kind of training and preparation that athletes undertake to inspire us to imitate them in our commitment to giving our all to attain

our prize ... our destiny. What's that old saying, "Imitation is the best form of flattery?" Two chapters from here, Paul encourages people to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

When we see what others want, we begin to want it too. That's hard-wired into us. Scientists have now identified neurons in our brains whose function is to drive this imitative process. But we've got to be careful here because we don't always make good choices as far as who we choose to imitate. Our responsibility as Jesus' followers is to choose who and what we will imitate wisely. And so Paul uses the idea of imitation here in this passage, but not just for the sake of a prize. If the prize is all we're after, then we'll start to be resentful of those who attain it. That leads to hostility and tribalism which is destructive. Paul is talking about positive imitation. Usually he speaks of imitating Jesus, or sometimes of imitating himself and the other apostles. But here he urges us to imitate the athletes, not so much for their desire for the prize, but in the discipline they show in working towards it. We're not just imitating the majority of the crowd who are jealous of the people who have the prize, we're imitating the minority who just want to do whatever it takes to work and train for the prize. That means no short-cuts, no cheating, no slacking when you're training. That's what becoming like Jesus requires. It means hanging in there when things become difficult and uncomfortable. It means practicing over and over and over until you get it right. Even during a pandemic. Right?

So if the goal is to become like Jesus, then of course, we need to be imitating Jesus. And ... we need to discipline ourselves to do things over and over again, especially when they don't come naturally or comfortably. If I want to become as prayerful as Jesus, then I need to discipline myself to pray a lot, not just when I feel like it or when it comes easily. If I want to become merciful like Jesus, then I'm going to have to be as dedicated and disciplined about it as any athlete because responding mercifully when others insult you or attack you or treat you unfairly does not come any more naturally than pole vaulting or running

a 400 meter race when all you've been doing is sitting on the couch eating Oreos in front of the TV.

Last week, I said that Paul was more hard-nosed than Jesus. I want to retract that, because Coach Jesus tells us to love our enemies and do good to those who curse us and show mercy to those who do only wrong to us. That's hard! And if you're keeping your eye on the goal, that means, "If it's hard, do it more until it becomes natural."

Speaking of difficult things, guess what starts on Wednesday? Lenten Season! If you're going to give up something, don't just randomly give up chocolate because that seems like the "normal" thing to do. Find something about yourself that really needs the work and design a Lenten discipline accordingly. That's why I usually take something on during Lent instead of giving something up. Keep in mind that there is no one size fits all approach to the disciplines required for each of us to grow into the fullness of our destiny. If we heed Paul's call to model ourselves after elite athletes, then we need dedication and discipline and a willingness to put in the long hard hours it takes to achieve a goal. We need to take Jesus on as our model of what it is we are seeking to become. Then we will begin to see what we need to get to where we are called to be. And I'm sure if the Apostle himself was here, he would want to finish by saying "do whatever it takes" because the prize, the goal, the destiny of crossing that line and being gathered fully and finally and forever into the life and love of Jesus is so over and above worth it that nothing is too much.