

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Isaiah 58:11-12, Psalm 112:1-10, 1 Corinthians 2:1-16, Matthew 5:13-20, Sunday, February 9, 2020

The Spiritual Athlete – Bill Skubi

Not long ago Carol Hansen of our parish told me about the shortest sermon she ever heard. A wise monk simply read the passage, “And they put down their nets and followed Jesus.” And his message was, “Would that we do likewise.”

This I would call a triumph of “bumpersticker theology,” putting such a sharp focus on a scripture that a single line or great idea stays with us all day long.

This is totally in keeping with several hundred years in our Episcopal tradition where the scripture readings each Sunday are distilled or collected into single short prayer – the collect. In our current age of distraction and shortened attention span we need to get that down to a couple of lines or less.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is shouting it’s bumper sticker theology at us today, with the greatest one liner in the New Testament, ***“But we have the mind of Christ.”***

“But we have the mind of Christ.” Let’s drive down the road a while with that on our back bumper, shall we?

Are you puzzled by the one liner, ***“But we have the mind of Christ.”*** Then I encourage you to READ and reread Isaiah 58, because it describes what a people of God living the mind of Christ will do, will look like to the world, then we can see how we are matching up.

I have preached on Isaiah 58 once before in an election year and concluded by reading the passage aloud to you ending with, the coda, ***“I am the Lord, your God, and I approve this message.”***

*If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.
I am the Lord your God and I approve this message.*

You know if I were a sensible person, I’d stop right there.

“But we have the mind of Christ.”

Jesus in our gospel message today is telling us, “you have the mind of Christ, now Use it or Lose it.”

Jesus has given us his mind and heart to be the salt that flavors up the great feast of his good news to all the world, but we go worse than tasteless, when we do not put it into daily practice.

‘So, Here I am, here we are”

What I have to say today is about getting back into training, getting back in the game, because we cannot build up the mind of Christ without exercise and practice. This is about working up a spiritual sweat to regain our saltiness, becoming the dream team of spiritual athletes that we can be with God’s help.

Say amen somebody!

As a young boy just beginning to understand how the world worked I was impressed by the fact that every four years something very special took place. No, I’m not talking about presidential elections, because in my young mind elections were completely and utterly overshadowed by something far greater, the Olympic Games.

Citius, Altius, Fortius, Faster, Higher, Stronger, these are classical ideals of the Olympic Games. They appealed so strongly to my ten year old mind that even though I was excused from P E classes because of a serious congenital heart defect I could not help but dream that there must be at least one Olympic Sport I could medal in. Faster, Higher, Stronger, these were the values of the world’s greatest athletes, these were the values of the competitive world I was learning to live in.

“But we have the mind of Christ.”

Around the same age, in my Seattle Episcopal church, I was introduced to another set of values while learning my Catechism for confirmation.

These values seemed strangely at odds with the competitive values of the world; and athletic and academic achievement. Yet in a strange way they seemed even more attractive and compelling. Both sets of values are within me, the world’s values and God’s values, and I often wonder which values I have exercised most during the past 60 years.

So it is important to ask. Are we, at this moment, the people of St. Augustine’s being called to be worldly athletes or spiritual athletes?

Faced with the daunting task of preparing our church to flourish, and further the kingdom of God on Whidbey island, our first inclination is to try and do it all ourselves.

As evidence of this I note that when we convened our cottage meals a few years back to ask Members of the parish nine questions about our church we receive over 160 unique answers and only one mentioned the name Jesus.

You know we've got a million dollars in the stock market in our endowment, the building is paid for, hey we've got this, Faster, Higher, Stronger, what could possibly go wrong?

"But we have the mind of Christ." And the mind of Christ tells us we can do nothing Without God.

No, We can't buy the future of St. Augustines.

"Enough with the competing for worldly prizes," god is saying to me and to you, "it's time for spiritual athletics now."

But if the world goads it's athletes with the words Faster, Higher, Stronger, what should the spiritual athlete's mantra be?

Our Bishop has hinted at this when he instructed us to take two to three full years before calling a new pastor.

So, casting logic aside and following the foolishness of God, as Paul preaches in first Corinthians; I suggest these are the watchwords of the spiritual athlete:

Not Faster but Slower, not Higher but Deeper, not Stronger but Weaker

There's a bumper sticker for the ages, ***"But we have the mind of Christ – Slower, deeper, weaker"***

Now, I hope you are ready for my 16th century power point.

Slower

In Psalm 147 we read 'God takes no pleasure in the strength of a horse or a runners legs'

The right Latin word for slower in this case is lentus, the forward plodding that Favored the tortoise, lentus also conjures the slow season of Lent when we take stock and renew ourselves to the purpose of god in our lives. So, let's all slow down into this Lenten season and share with one another what god is calling us to be.

Deeper

From today's passage in First Corinthians, paul teaches

'for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.' How much time do we spend searching everything, even the depths of God? Guess what, you have slow down first to do that. How much room are we giving god's Holy Spirit inside us, inside this church? You know the Holy Ghost needs a lot of room to move, the Holy Spirit of God will not be confined.

Say Amen, somebody!

On the subject of deeper it is Interesting that the opposite of Altius, Higher in Latin is the same word. Altius is used in Latin to describe diving deeper into the sea just as climbing higher up the mountain. the opposite of Altius we are seeking is a different Latin word – Interior, didn't know you spoke Latin did you.

Interior is the Depth, of looking deeper within, into the depths of God or the depths of the our own spirit, a point reached in meditation, not exertion.

Weaker

You could say that Paul won a spiritual gold medal when he founded the church in Corinth, but he tells us, 'I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.' Not too impressive by Olympic standards, but Paul had to be weak, because God needed to do the heavy lifting. Weakness, woundedness, **vulnerable**, in Latin. This is the agony of defeat to the worldly athlete, but the place of hope and resurrection in Christ, the place of all possibilities in the mind of Christ.

So, Looking out on this congregation I see, and God sees so many tired old saints, like Sarah and Abraham, not likely to impress anyone on our own, but we are perfectly suited to do the most wonderful things together in faith. If we, in our human weakness, humble ourselves and let God do the leading. If we, in our interior depth, tune ourselves to God's will for us in Christ. Exercising in good works to taste the salty mind of Christ, and in our plodding slowness take time to walk together down a common road we will know and share the kingdom of God on Earth in marvelous ways.

Say Amen somebody

The best example of what I am trying to share with you I found recently in Kevin Sandri's retelling of his pilgrim walk in Spain. If we doubt for a minute that with God's love we old crones and codgers can build this church I urge you to read, in this copy of The Light, how a blind man taught Kevin to see. In fact Kevin's story is all about being emptied and spent, and plodding to the point of discovering his need of God and fellow pilgrims along the way.

You know when Paul shared his first letter to the Christians at Corinth it wasn't scripture, it was a letter, The Light is the newsletter of our Church, I recommend you read it, discuss it, contribute to it in this wonderful time in St. Augustine's.

Lentus, Interior, Vulnerable, let these be our watch words, slower, deeper, weaker, under this banner we will build up this church, not in competition with each other or other churches but in teamwork with God and each other.

We will plod this pilgrim path together and along the road of shared love every one of us will eventually die,

and by the grace of Jesus we will live again.

Say Amen somebody!

Bill Skubi