



“ENDURANCE TRAINING”
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 8; ROMANS 5:1-5
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
June 16, 2019
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Psalm 8

8:1 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

8:2 Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.

8:3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established;

8:4 what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

8:5 Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

8:6 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet,

8:7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8:8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

8:9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Romans 5:1-5

5:1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

5:2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

5:3 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

5:4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,

5:5 and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

It's a distance runner's trinity—run, rest, repeat.

You're never going to be able to run farther, if you don't run farther. And you won't be able to run farther if you don't let yourself recover from running farther.

Run, rest, repeat. That's how you build endurance. And endurance—the ability to last through unpleasant experience, is what distance running is all about. It's not about talent, it's not about equipment, it's not about speed; it's about endurance.

Endurance is the stamina to keep going when it's hard. Realizing the depth of your stamina as a distance runner is what builds confidence and the will to keep running, to keep getting better.

Distance running doesn't work if you are not willing to leave your comfort zone—you have to embrace discomfort. Discomfort is your friend.

That might sound sort of twisted, but befriending discomfort is actually not just what distance runners need to do. It's actually a practice required for any kind of growth and development in human life.

Getting better at anything means you will have to leave your comfort zone—you will have to befriend discomfort. And it is a central part of following Jesus—this willingness, this importance of discomfort.

Isn't it interesting—and disturbing, how Christianity in our current cultural moment has become in many ways a force pushing for stasis, for closed systems and closed doors, for going backwards instead of stretching into new territory.

It could be easy for us in a vibrant, growing community like ours to think that settling for comfort instead of discomfort is something other Christians do, not us. But I challenge us this morning to leave our own comfort zones when it comes to our faith—and ask the hard question—how comfortable have we become, how much do we really want to be stretched, how much do we really want to grow in our faith, how readily do we embrace the intensity required to truly follow Jesus in a world of injustice, suffering, and broken relationship.

The question is important for many reasons—but the Trinity is what pushes us forward today into new territory—God is always and already stretching—that is

what the Trinity is all about—God’s awareness that authentic, life-giving relationship means stretching into different modes of experience, different ways of participation in the unfolding of life. The Trinity speaks of the dynamic and adaptive nature of divinity, of the mysterious ways God leaves the comfort of transcendence and enters into the suffering and discomfort and responsiveness of immanence, of being here, in the midst of being and becoming alive.

I doubt the Apostle Paul was a long distance runner. The Bible doesn’t really do a great job of giving us physical descriptions of its main cast of characters. But the extra canonical text (one of the books that didn’t make the cut into the biblical canon), *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, describes Paul as: “A man of small stature, with a bald head and crooked legs.”¹

But by all accounts he had the disposition for the kind of endurance training that is required when you follow Jesus. His intensity and commitment made him a man who had no quit. He wrote to the church in Rome for unknown reasons, but with a clarity and passion that makes this letter some of the most impactful writing in all of scripture.

Romans has been the go-to text at many pivotal junctures in Christian history as a text that calls the church and believers to be honest about our distortions especially when Christian institutions and believers get too cozy with Empires.

Romans is the text that brought St. Augustine to clarity about God’s grace when he had gotten stuck in destructive ways of living and thinking.

This is the text that brought Martin Luther to the epiphany that defined the Reformation—it is God’s grace that vindicates us, not the church.

And Romans is what emboldened Karl Barth to drop his theological bombshell into the world of theologians, clergy, and believers who had turned into apologists for the Third Reich. Barth left his comfort zone and risked his own life when he refused to swear an oath of loyalty to Hitler.

You see Paul’s Epistle to the Romans was a letter written into the heart of Empire. Paul was writing to the political, economic center of his universe—the locus of military might and structural power.

He was writing into a context where the Emperor was called “Lord” and “Savior.” Where peace was understood as within the power of the Emperor to secure as he saw fit.

Romans seeks to shake loose the church from its distorted ways of thinking, from its wayward theologies. Romans is a letter about God—about God’s power to restore the world to right relationship, what NT Wright calls “cosmic restorative justice.”²

Romans is about God’s righteousness, which can also be translated as God’s justice.

Paul boldly claims that justice is found through Jesus, not through Rome.

So these verses in chapter 5 about endurance, about suffering, about hope in the midst of suffering are a powerful counter point to the Roman world view that interpreted suffering as a sign of divine judgment.

Suffering when you follow Jesus is actually a part of what tells us we are on the right track—following Jesus is not about comfort or ease, it is about a new relationship with suffering—we no longer see it as punishment, but as integral to a Christ-centered life.

It’s not that we love suffering or seek it out for its own sake, it’s that we know it will come our way when we live our lives like Jesus did—when we lead with compassion, when we provoke for justice, when we speak truth to power, when we are honest about our own afflictions, when we are willing to be a loving presence in the suffering of the world.

Author and Entrepreneur, Tim Ferriss, who wants to change your life and change the world talks about the importance of looking closely at the cost of inaction, the cost of avoiding the action you need to take to change the world and change your life.

We have to think deeply and descriptively about what our lives will look like, what the world will look like, in 6 months, a year, 5 years, 20 years, if we do nothing, if we just stay the same. He wants us to really acknowledge what he calls, “the atrocious cost of the status quo.”³

This is THE question for all people of faith today—the people who claim to have the best interest of the world at heart. Are we willing to see “the atrocious cost of the status quo?”

If you follow Jesus you don’t get to opt out of the hard questions: In what ways are you challenged to leave your comfort zone because you follow Jesus? In what ways are you stretched, tested, pushed by the faith that you claim?

If it’s hard for you to see the cost of sticking with the status quo that means you are not stretching enough, that means you are too comfortable. On so many levels, the status quo has us all on a path of destruction—kinda like Rome. People of faith who

think the world is ok as it is, are not really people of faith. Because faith is the belief in things unseen, the willingness to stake our lives on the yet to be, on the promises of a mysterious yearning for a better world.

What is tempting you to give up, to give in, to not know, to avoid the difficult actions that we are called to engage in today?

Our Trinity, as Jesus followers, our “run, rest, repeat” is the way of life empowered by our Creator, Redeemer, and our Sustainer.

Our endurance training is about our relationship with the One in Three—the Creator made us for endurance; our Redeemer shows us how to push beyond our comfort zone; and our Sustainer abides with us with the nourishment that empowers us to endure in ways that are courageous and not fearful.

If we wrote a letter to Washington DC today, like Paul wrote to Rome, what would it say. How would we deploy God’s justice to put human pride and abusive power in its place? What bold word of endurance and hope would we sound into the streets of power and influence, into the halls of military might and economic policy?

This past week hundreds of faith leaders of all kinds of traditions—Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and others, gathered in Washington D.C. to deliver a message to those with formal political power—not just to a single individual, but to all who are using their power to abuse, to harm, to hoard, to spread lies, to use faith as a cover for greed and violence and the status quo.

They gathered at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church—one of our sibling congregations in the PCUSA, to begin their march to the White House. They were issuing a call for repentance, a call to account.

Dr. William Barber, President of the Repairers of the Breach and co-convenor of the Poor People’s Campaign, said: *“We have come as a prophetic witness against what we are seeing in this nation, and to deliver a moral indictment against ... this administration’s policies, the policies of his enablers, and the policies of the religionists who try to suggest that what is wrong is actually right.”*⁴

Faith leaders called our political officials to account for poverty, health care, and state sanctioned violence.

Rabbi Esther Lederman⁵ spoke passionately about the Homestead Center just outside of Miami, Florida, that has recently been expanded in size from 240 beds to over 3000 beds, to detain immigrant children separated from their families, mostly asylum seekers who came into this country trying to engage our lawful systems of

entry for those fleeing violence, exploitation, and oppression in their home countries.⁶ There have been many reports in the last few months of prison like conditions for these children, and some are using the language of internment camp to describe how the Homestead Center and others like it are functioning.

Rabbi Lederman said, “I’ve lost track of how many times we’ve spoken out against the moral crimes committed by ... this administration, but I’m not tired! We’re not tired! We can do this every day until every child is released from Homestead — and that is a promise.”

So Grace Covenant, I challenge you to leave your comfort zone—to honestly ask yourself if you are more tired of hearing about the terrible things happening in our country, than you are tired of the terrible things themselves.

Because if we are more tired of having to hear about the violence than the violence itself, then it’s time for a gut check—it’s time for a spiritual interval workout, time for us to increase our pace, time to raise the intensity of our endurance training.

Only then will we realize that we do have the stamina to engage these difficult realities courageously and consistently as followers of Jesus—because we are vindicated by God, we are reconciled by Jesus, and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to leave our comfort zones.

We have what it takes to go further than we have gone before. We have what it takes to keep stretching, to keep growing, to embrace discomfort as a way of life in this world.

It’s a Jesus follower’s endurance training regime— hope, stretch, repeat.

Thanks be to God.

¹ Malherbe, Abraham J., “A Physical Description of Paul,” JSTOR, The Harvard Theological Review, vol. 79, no. 1/3, p 170.

² NT Wright, “Romans,” The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. X, p 400.

³ “Comfort Zone,” Ted Talk, April 2018.

⁴ <https://religionnews.com/2019/06/12/boisterous-faith-leaders-and-a-silent-pete-buttigieg-rally-against-trump-at-white-house/>

⁵ Rabbi Lederman is the Director of Communities of Practice and Congregational Innovation for the Union for Reform Judaism.

⁶ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/homestead-nations-largest-holding-facility-for-migrant-children-expands-again/>