

Sunday, June 1, 2014
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon: Training for Your Spiritual Health

I read a great essay this week called “Why your minister should be like your physical therapist.”

The author, Dr. Bill Wilson, is the founder of a consulting group called the Center for Healthy Churches.

He draws on a thirty-three year career in ministry as he tries to bring a new, fresh perspective to the life of the church.

In his essay he reflected on the work he had done with a physical therapist to repair his injured knee.

For anyone who has ever availed themselves of the services of a good physical therapist, Dr. Wilson’s description rings true. He said:

“On this side of my relationship with my physical therapist, I am grateful for the good work she did with me.

However, in the midst of the therapy, there were days when I dreaded seeing her and hated her for the pain she inflicted upon me.

She was merciless.

She was insistent that I could do more than I thought possible.

She scoffed at my protests and offered little sympathy for my discomfort.

She held me accountable for my promises to exercise, chastising me when I grew complacent or lazy.

She exhorted me to finish what I started, even if it hurt.

She knew that I was capable of giving more effort than I did, and she refused to allow me to fall short of my best.

She encouraged me to stretch and push and expand my limits.”

That certainly describes my experience a few years ago when I had shoulder surgery.

I had to force myself to do the at-home exercises and I hated it when the physical therapist would note that she could tell I wasn’t doing them.

Dr. Wilson goes on to describe how his early resentment of the therapist gradually turned to appreciation as he realized he was indeed getting stronger and more mobile.

He said, “As the time passed, I came to appreciate her wisdom and training and discipline.

I grew to trust her judgment and believe that she knew what was best for me.

Even when I didn’t fully understand how a particular exercise would benefit me, I extended to her the benefit of the doubt and gave it my best effort.”

Dr. Wilson’s account of his PT experience is meant as an analogy for the role a minister plays in a healthy church.

He makes the point that ministers have a dual role.

The first is to provide empathy, comfort and a warm embrace when life’s challenges demand a listening ear and an understanding spirit.

However, perhaps more important he says are the times that you “need your minister to function more like a physical therapist than a teddy bear.

You need someone to hold you accountable to your promises.

You need someone who insists that you can do more and are better than you believe.

You need someone to push you and prod you to stretch yourself.

You need someone who sees beyond the present pain to the possibilities ahead.

You need someone who makes you uncomfortable with where you are, and who knows what it takes to help you get where you need to go.”

This, my friends is the work of the church.

We come together to encourage each other to live up to our full God-given potential.

This is the kind of leader that Jesus was to his disciples.

He promised them if they worked hard, kept at it, gave it their all, that they would have the reward of eternal life.

Eternal life. Life in the presence of God.

I wonder why we don’t talk much about eternal life.

We mention it at memorial services – as an after mortal life experience but in today’s prayer Jesus defines eternal life as knowing God. He doesn’t say anything about having to die – he simply prays that his disciples will be one-as he is one with God.

One with him and with each other.

Just as Jesus promised the gift of an Advocate in the Holy Spirit, today he prays that his followers will have the gift of eternal life, the knowledge of God and Jesus Christ here and now.

He wants the best for these people he has come to love, just as your physical therapist or your minister wants the best outcome for you.

I'm sure there were days when the disciples resented all that Jesus expected of them, resisting his encouragement to try a bit harder.

I'm sure there were days when they felt they couldn't go any further, couldn't give any more – but then they began to realize that Jesus knew what he was talking about.

They felt their lives change. They experienced the presence of God.

Dr. Wilson ended his essay with this prayer:

“I pray you will awaken to find that your life is less painful.

I pray that your faith grows more mature and stable, that your problems become less traumatic and your capacity for managing stress grows incrementally.

One day, someone notices that you seem more at peace than before, or that you are more patient or more respectful of others.

Perhaps someone will remark about your newfound kindness or capacity for caring.

You may even discover the unique joy that comes when, for the first time, you give part of your life away for the sake of the kingdom.”

This is my same prayer for you.

As your pastor I try to help you discover who you are as a child of God and to explore what you might need to move closer to God.

I want you to have less anxiety, to care more deeply for your neighbors.

I want you to know the richness that comes from generosity.

I believe that our lives can be holy and blessed right now.

We don't have to wait for eternity to experience God's love.

We certainly do not have to die to exercise our spiritual muscle, but unless we exercise we won't have any muscle!

Today is the first of June.

For many this marks the beginning of summer and for some of you it marks the start of your hiatus from church.

I am going to take on the role of *physical therapist minister* for a moment and tell you that taking the summer off from attending worship is not good for your spiritual health.

Choosing to play golf or sit by the pool or work in the garden rather than gathering in community to praise and give thanks to God will not make you a better person.

Steering clear of the scriptures for a season does not enhance your relationship with God.

Sending a message to your children or grandchildren that church is not important in the summer will not foster their faith or impart Christian values.

This summer we are going to undertake the study of two important pieces of scripture.

From the end of June through the end of August we are going to explore the Book of Job.

Each week I will preach on a different passage from Job's story.

The forty-two chapters of Job tell the story of a righteous man whose faith is challenged by misfortune and calamity.

The age-old questions of God's action in the lives of humans are explored in both poetry and prose.

The author asks whether virtue depends on a universe that operates by the principle of reward and punishment.

Does it? Do you know? Would you like to find out?

As in summers past, we will engage in a discussion each week following the sermon.

You are invited to read Job on your own, to prepare for our discussions and to bring your thoughts and analysis to share each week.

The second area of study will be Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the fifth, sixth and seventh chapters of Matthew and the sixth chapter of Luke.

This will be the topic of a weekly bible study group that will convene on Friday mornings (tentative) led by Bruce McEver.

In this group we will examine the foundational teachings of Jesus' ministry and work to understand how these lessons can be lived out in our daily lives today.

What did Jesus mean when he said "You are the salt of the earth" or "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God?"

I invite you to join us for a summer of stretching our spiritual muscles, massaging our compassionate hearts and firming up our faith.

I know that most of you would never go three months without physical food or exercise.

As your spiritual trainer, it is my responsibility to warn you that your soul cannot survive a starvation diet.

I hope that you will make room in your hearts and your schedules for worship this summer.