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Preaching: Rev. Ronni Sue Verboom

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

“Why do we hafta?”

When I was a girl I often exchanged complaints with my friends about all the things our parents made us do.

Some had to peel potatoes, wash dishes, make beds, do laundry, sweep floors. Others had to shovel snow, mow lawns, weed gardens and watch younger siblings. Some had to do all their homework before playing outside; take off their shoes when entering the house; practice piano, trombone, flute or violin, clean their plates before eating dessert. Others had to call adults “ma’am” and “sir”; attend catechism class or Sunday School, shake hands when introduced; earn their own spending money; and even WAIT UNTIL AGE 16 BEFORE BEING ALLOWED TO DATE!!

Together we would moan and groan about these ridiculous and persisting demands. We’d agonize aloud: “I just don’t see why I hafta DO all that! It’s not fair!” And to our parents we’d implore with indignation: “WHY do I HAFTA??”

The answers we received seemed arbitrary and unsatisfying:

Because it’s good for you.
Because we need you to help out.
Because you’ll never learn if you don’t practice.
You’ll understand some day.
One day you’ll THANK me.
And the ever infuriating: *Because I said so.*

Oh, how we looked forward to becoming adults when we would no longer “hafta” do any of those things, if we didn’t want to.

Then, what happened?

Well, unfortunately, most of us have experienced some of the undesirable consequences of choosing for ourselves.

Instead of going through the hassle of peeling potatoes, we eat French fries from the corner fast food place, and discover our health and weight are affected.

We eat dessert before cleaning our plates, or any time we want all day long, and discover our health and weight are affected.

We use our spending money any old which way we like, and end up with a \$20,000 credit card debt we never seem to make a dent in.

We refuse to “help out” around the house, leaving laundry, dirty dishes, dirty floors, snow shoveling, and lawn mowing to others, then find our marriage is in trouble, or our children don’t respect us.

All the FREEDOM to decide for ourselves what we “hafta” do gets complicated. We’re not as happy as we thought we’d be. We experiment with various things, hoping we’ll run across something that will make us feel the way we thought we’d feel when we were kids dreaming of being our own “boss”.

In order to attempt to maximize our chances of magically running across something that will make us happy, we RUN a lot.

There’s a cartoon which shows two Martians looking down at people on earth, watching them scurry here and there, everywhere. One asked the other, “What are they doing?” He replied, “They are going.” “But,” asked the first, “WHERE are they going?” “Oh,” said the other, “they are not going ANYWHERE; they are just GOING.”

Our “going”, our “running” can become almost frantic. We become confuse and tired. We listen for voices that might help us.

The WORLD’s voice is the loudest. “GRAB MORE,” is what we hear a lot. When you have MORE it will be ENOUGH and you can STOP running, rest and be happy. The problem is that MORE never seems to be ENOUGH. We eventually think we need MORE of something else, then something else again, when we find ourselves perpetually dissatisfied.

This can turn out to be such a mess. We waste YEARS of life, determined to be our OWN BOSS!! We may need to get FED UP with “being our own boss” before we decide to look elsewhere. But here we can run into some more scary problems. We may make another PERSON our “boss” and this generally gives disastrous results.

Our faith teaches us we were not made to be our own “boss”. We were created to have one boss and one boss alone—and that boss is GOD. God alone is trustworthy, God alone has the wisdom, God alone loves us unconditionally, eternally, beyond our comprehension. God really does know what is BEST for us, for each of us individually.

When we first come to faith, we may rejoice in that divine love, and look for opportunities to feel it, celebrate it, drink it up and bathe in it. That is a GOOD THING. God delights in our joyful receiving of his love.

BUT, God’s place in our lives isn’t meant to stop there. We have to find our way, as we grow to trust in his love for us and in his wisdom- we have to our way to SERVING HIM AS LORD, obeying his instructions.

When we do this, we will find God has some strong directives for us. And at the heart of his directives, we will find SELF-DISCIPLINE. The adults in our lives may have been God’s agent- in trying to teach us some early lessons in self-discipline. I have numerous opportunities to do this with my four-year old grandson. There are times when what he is doing represents DANGER to himself or others around, including the family dog! I have no inner struggle at all about the appropriateness of my saying, “No, we’re not going to do this! That isn’t going to happen.” We readily see the value of such discipline with little ones. I even understand myself to be God’s agent at times! But when we become adults, it’s harder.

Our culture is not currently really “into” self-discipline, for the most part. But there is one arena where we do understand it, and that is the arena of athletics. We admire athletes. We understand their need for self-discipline. We applaud their excellence. I am looking forward to doing just that as we watch the upcoming Winter Olympics this year. We encourage athletes to strive for improvement, to continue to stretch their abilities. We know that in athletic endeavors you have to consistently discipline and train your body, to achieve athletic goals.

In once had a chiropractor who praised the benefits of endurance sports, like long distance cycling, walking, running. He said that those sports can’t help but teach, mold and affect the athlete in SPIRITUAL as well as PHYSICAL ways. The depletion of our resources is very instructive. We learn that indeed, we can’t just float along from day to day and expect to achieve significant goals.

My husband, son, grandson and I just had the wonderful opportunity to spend three days skiing in Utah. When I learned I would be moving to St. Charles last February, the first routine that suffered was my exercise program. I spent all my free time sorting through closets and packing boxes. My husband and son experienced a similar situation as part of the transition to St. Charles. So, there we were, out in the mountains, appalled at how quickly we tired and how out of shape we were! I kept

urging my husband and son, “Oh, you guys go ski on some of the expert terrain! I’ll take care of little David.” And they’d reply, “Oh, no, we’re doing fine, we did that this morning, we’ll just hang out here on the beginner slopes.” We returned home with new resolve to get back into regular routines of exercise!

In our New Testament reading for today, the apostle Paul utilizes our understandings of athletic accomplishments to draw a parallel to our spiritual lives. God wants us to embrace the truths we know about athletics as truth for our spiritual well-being. We ARE in a race, but not in the competitive sense—only in the sense of moving towards a goal. We don’t need to be the first to reach that goal, the fastest to reach that goal, the best or most entertaining in reaching that goal. We don’t need to try to prevent others from reaching the goal. In fact we WANT others to reach the goal.

Our life is a journey toward the goal God has for all humankind: What is that great goal?

To love God with all we have and all we are.

To love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus, when questioned about the greatest commandment, shared those words, saying that together they sum up all the commandments and all the laws that God has ever given humankind. Everything we say and do is meant to move us towards that goal.

And friends—the happiness we long for, the fulfillment, the joy, MEANING for our lives is ONLY FOUND as we move towards that goal. Nothing else will satisfy us. Most of what the WORLD says will satisfy us is just like cotton candy—it’s sweet at first, but then melts into nothing, and leaves you with a queasy stomach if you have too much.

Now, as we think about God’s goal for us, love for God and love for neighbors as ourselves, we may think with longing of the days when our parents were our bosses! It’s a lot easier to wash dishes, to shovel a walk, to practice piano, than to “love our enemies” as Jesus teaches us. We can’t do it alone. We need the Bible’s words to guide us, the stories of Christian friends to give us inspiration and encouragement. We need the community of faith to correct and challenge us, as well as to nurture and care for us. We need God’s Spirit made known to us through nature and music and literature and art.

But there is a wonderful aspect of this whole business about self-discipline. I have experienced through sports AND through my spiritual walk.

WHEN YOU BEGIN TO CONSISTENTLY DO THE THINGS YOU “HAFTA”, it starts to feel good.

When I get myself into an exercise program of cycling, or walking or running, it's hard at first. I can't seem to find the time, it's a "CHORE" – a kind of BURDEN. But once I get going, I find that I enjoy the time on my bike or on the trail. I start looking forward to it. I actually begin to PROTECT the time needed to do it.

This is true as we follow God's directions in taking time to pray, to attend worship, to read and ponder the stories of the Bible, to care for others in our community and world, to reach out to brothers and sisters in our church, to share our stories, to open up and even share a tear with a friend. It moves from being a CHORE, an OBLIGATION, and becomes a JOY and a GIFT.

So--- let's run the race, friends. Let's accept those things God says we "hafta" do. WHY? Because on that road is JOY, PEACE that passes understanding, a sense of fulfilling the PURPOSE of our lives. And most important, along that road is LOVE. Love today. Love in each day. Love tomorrow. Love the day after that. LOVE eternal. Now and forevermore. World without end.

I'd like to close with a personal story. As many of you know, my 33 year old son-in-law died last month, after a battle with brain cancer. A few weeks later my daughter and I had lunch together. As we talked and cried and shared, she told me, "Mom, it's so amazing. At the visitation and funeral, there was such an outpouring of love- so many people came, from my work, from my high school and college days, from Gavin's world of work and friends. You could actually FEEL that love. I hope Gavin could feel it too."

I replied that I am sure he DID feel the love, and still does. Then Andrea said, "It just seems so strange that it takes a tragedy like this, an immense loss- to open people up that way." I agreed with her- but said I experience that as a blessing that is woven through the sorrow, and that I have observed this on many occasions.

Then she told me how a young woman, a friend from high school, came up to her at the visitation. She wrapped her arms around my daughter and sobbed, saying, "Oh, Andrea, I'm not going to take anything for granted any more. I'm going to just cherish my husband and tell him how much I love him and recognize that none of us knows we'll still be here tomorrow."

Then, by the next week, she phoned my daughter, half-laughing to say, "Oh, you won't believe this, but I'm back to normal and have found myself fussing and squabbling with my husband again!" They laughed together, recognizing the power of our human nature, and our need for forgiveness.

My prayer is that, even though we are human, and it is so easy for us to fall back into old patterns, that we would find a way to keep our focus on our GOAL—of manifesting and expressing LOVE today, every day. With the Holy Spirit's help, we

can learn to TRAIN ourselves, to DISCIPLINE ourselves, to remember our purpose. And maybe we will speak love, live love, overflow with love, EVEN on a COMPLETELY ordinary day. Let's do it—starting THIS day. Amen. Amen.