



August 20, 2006

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Ephesians 5:15-20

“Exercises for the Body of Christ: A message in five parts”

Part One: INVITATION

A few years ago, I looked at a program to help Christians support each other in a weight loss group. The materials included a videotape of interviews with participants. One woman really touched me. She was so exuberant and full of life. She said, “When I began the program, and discovered one of the covenants I’d be asked to make was a promise to exercise daily, I felt defeated. I told our leader, ‘I don’t know how I can do that part! I would like to, but I don’t see how I can! I weigh well over 300 pounds, and to be honest, I can just barely walk!’” The woman smiled, remembering her group leader’s response, “She looked me in the eyes and said clearly, ‘My dear, then that’s how you begin: just barely walk, but do it every day!’” This 45 year old woman went on to lose almost 200 pounds over the next two years, and her favorite hobby became kayaking.

Fortunately, we hear a lot these days about the importance of exercise. We’re encouraged to be active, to take up sports, to do some kind of workout at our own level several times a week. I confess I struggle to do this, and have weeks when I manage it, and weeks when I don’t. Yet I am thankful for the many voices that remind me to see this as vital for my health and well-being.

Today, we’re going to extend this reality into another realm. We’re going to consider the importance of exercise for another kind of body: the Body of Christ. What’s the Body of Christ? -the church-- people who gather in Christ’s name-- those who have promised to follow Jesus. That’s the Body of Christ. That’s us.

A couple questions:

First, **WHY?** Why do we need to exercise and strengthen the Body of Christ?

A long time ago, a follower of Jesus named Paul wrote to a church he helped start in a town called Ephesus about that exact issue. Let's read a part of his letter: (Liturgist reads Ephesians 5:15-20)

Why do we need to keep the Body of Christ strong? The church needs to be wise and strong to contend with the evil days we live in. (Share news from the morning paper). We don't live in New Testament Ephesus, but there's plenty of trouble in our world too. Paul called his church then and calls our church now to make use of every moment to spread the love of Christ, which alone can conquer the evils of this world.

That's **WHY** we need to keep the Body of Christ strong.

The second question is "**HOW** do we strengthen the Body of Christ?"

Paul said we should be "filled with the Spirit" rather than "drunk on wine". Paul knew our need for elation, for intoxication. But the only elation that is ultimately fruitful is the elation of being filled and enlivened by God's own Spirit.

Paul went on to stress how important it is for Christians to gather together, as a **GROUP**, so that we can sing, make music and encounter the Holy Spirit. To learn wisdom and to live in the Spirit we **MUST** gather together. Christ's presence comes to us in this **BODY**. To keep it in shape, we must come together to worship, sing, and experience song in our hearts.

The Vineyard in Anaheim CA has developed exercises for the Body of Christ as it meets to worship. They call this the "Five Phases of a Worship Workout". In each of these five parts of worship, the Body of Christ can stretch another set of spiritual muscles.

Worship begins with **INVITATION**. This is a "sprinting" type of movement. Psalm 95 tells us to "sing for joy" and "shout aloud". We extend this invitation **TO EACH OTHER**. It's not just the worship leaders and preachers that invite us all to worship. **WE ALL** invite each other to worship and we **MEET** and **SEE** Christ in one another.

Friends, believe this is true. We **DO** meet and see Christ in one another. As many of you know, when I came to this church a year ago, our family was struggling with a painful reality: my son in law was battling brain cancer. He died last January. In my first six months here, three people, two of them new members!—shared with me they lost a brother to brain cancer. What a help and comfort that has been, to know others have traveled the same road and understand heartache. When we invite each other to

worship on Sunday morning, we can be filled with expectation that CHRIST IS HERE and will touch us with his power and love!

It's time to WAKE UP to the presence of God right here, right now. It's a time to WARM UP our hearts through the love flowing through and among us. It's a time to CELEBRATE and worship with childlike joy and enthusiasm.

Let's experience the power of worship through #558 in our hymnals, singing verses 1-2 of "I am the Church".

Part Two:

This song has moved us into the second phase of our worship workout: ENGAGEMENT. This is a jogging mode that moves us along without depleting our energy. The Psalms invite us to "Come before God with thanksgiving." In our enthusiasm we need to remember the REASON we are here: to worship GOD, not the beauty of our sanctuary, not even the pleasure of our friendships in this church family. This engagement exercise turns us away from one another and towards God. We turn to him to love and praise and thank him.

When ancient Jewish rabbis were asked, "Where is the Lord?" they didn't say, "Up in heaven." They said, "The Lord is enthroned on the praises of his people." Did you ever think of that? That as our words and hearts and music praise God, we build the throne on which God rests?

Sometimes the organ music swells and fills this place, and I feel as if the whole church is about to rise up into the air. Sometimes a prayer or a hymn touches my heart in a powerful way. When the choir or a soloist sings, tears come to my eyes. ALL THESE FEELINGS in ALL OF OUR HEARTS lift up joy and gratitude to God, who is then ENTHRONED upon our praises!

If you are able, please stand and join in singing verses 1 and 4 of Hymn #73: "O Worship the King".

Part Three: EXALTATION

This brings us to the third phase of our exercise program for the Body of Christ: EXALTATION. This phase slows our workout down to a walk, as we might slow our stride on a hike up a wooded bluff. We know we are coming to an open space, where a wonderful view will stretch to the horizon before us. "The Lord is a great God....in his hands are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land."

I have a daughter and son-in-law who lived many years in Colorado. When we visited them, they often took us on hikes up into the foothills of the Rockies. My husband and I loved the hikes, but as middle aged folks used to lower elevations, we would get winded pretty quickly. We learned to STOP and ENJOY the vistas on the way up, partly so we could rest a minute. Our son-in-law figured this out, though, and he made his way back to us saying, “Come on- I know what you’re up to—you’re RESTING! Keep on moving, we’re not even half the way there!” It was humorous, but also a delight—I DID enjoy the amazing beauty and found that our stops were holy moments.

Exalting God is an act of entering into God’s transcendence. We don’t need to lift God up, because God is high above us without our doing anything. But we DO need to exalt IN God. Just to marvel at the wonder of our Creator.

Our family used to go camping a lot. Then, in more recent years, we haven’t camped at all. I told my husband once, “I think camping was healing to me- I really miss it.” I realized that when I camp, the first thing I do when I wake up is to grab my toothbrush and head to the shower house. As I go there, I walk along a little path through trees, marvel at the blue of the sky, listen to the birds and breathe the freshness of the air. Daily activities give me a chance to experience God and be filled with joyful gratitude. When I brush my teeth at home, I stumble to the bathroom where the things I notice are spots on the floor and smudges on the mirror! I am learning I NEED to focus on the wonder of God’s creation in each day- that helps me exalt IN God.

Think about the beauty of this world, of beauty you saw as you drove to church this morning, about the beauty of color and light as they dance here in this place.

Let’s sing the first two verses of #144, “This is my Father’s World”.

Part four:

The fourth phase of our workout is ADORATION.

This is a moment to sit or bow. Psalm 95 invites us, “Come, let us bow down...let us kneel.... We are the people of his pasture.” Though God is magnificent, God is also intimate, closer to us than a brother or sister. Jesus brought God right to our sides. This is the God we adore. Jesus brings us ABBA God, the one who we can call Papa or Mama, like a young toddler at her parents’ knees.

(Move into sharing our joys and concerns, prayer at the altar, the Lord’s Prayer, then Breathe presented during the Offering, followed by Doxology #94.)

Part five:

The fifth stage in our workout for the Body of Christ is EMPOWERMENT. We are given power from God's own being, but power FOR GOD'S RESURRECTION BUSINESS IN THIS WORLD.

We're not here today for ourselves. We do not worship out of selfish desires to benefit only personally from this encounter with God. We have invited, engaged, exalted and adored the divine presence in our lives and in this Body to be empowered. To be pumped up. To be a strong and mighty loving presence AS A GROUP, in this hurting and evil world. Our weekly worship workout is an exercise of spiritual conditioning that prepares us to go back into the world, ready to minister in Christ's name. This is what God wants. This is what we will do, if we truly listen to God's voice.

A year ago last April I attended the Large Church Initiative seminar in Denver, Colorado. One of our speakers, the Rev. Dr. James Forbes, Jr. of Riverside Church in New York, shared a story from his life. He often travels around the country and the world on speaking engagements. He mentioned how we usually are drawn into conversation with the travelers seated next to us. "You know how you talk about this and that, and eventually one question ALWAYS pops up: What do you do for a living?" This lively African American pastor said he was truthful and replied, "I'm a preacher." This often led to an embarrassed silence while his companion was likely scanning his memory in anxiety, wondering "What did I say to him? Did I use any bad language?" Rev. Dr. Forbes felt bad—he didn't want people to get all stressed out around him!

One day, he was again on a flight chatting with his seatmate when the inevitable question was raised, "What do you do for a living?" And without thought or planning, these words popped out of his mouth: "I'm in the business of raising the dead." As you can imagine, his companion drew back and remained silent the rest of the trip. But ever since, Rev. Forbes has answered that inevitable question the same way: "I'm in the business of raising the dead."

Friends, after he shared that story, I was absolutely convinced that he had given me the focus for my life. This is what God is up to in this world—

Raising the dead from all kinds of death:

- those suffering a literal dying—from starvation or lack of water.
- Those bound in the chains of alcohol or drug addiction
- Those who are scorned, abused, oppressed
- Those who have never known their worth or value
- Those lost in our world's lies that offer material wealth as salvation

God is also raising the DEAD who HAVE LITERALLY DIED- to new life beyond this world.

God's business IS raising the dead, and God has decided, though this often is a mystery to me, to **CARRY OUT HIS BUSINESS THROUGH US**. We are called to be his agents in the business of raising the dead. Everyone who wants to follow Jesus will also be in the business of raising the dead.

So. When we come here on Sunday we are not just resting on the benches and pews. We are here to be **PUMPED UP**- to give our spirits a workout, to grow closer to God, stronger in the Spirit, and more loving with one another. We are here to receive inspiration and strength to carry on God's business. But just as we can visit a gym and watch others exercise, or sit on a mat and observe the aerobics class, it is possible to zone out in church and let the worship workout be done by others.

Gordon Cosby, founder and pastor of the Church of our Savior in Washington , D.C., tells about preaching as a guest in a church somewhere in New England. The worship was dull and uninspiring. Nobody sang, nobody smiled or reacted. The only things that moved, he said, were the offering plates. Afterward he and his wife were somewhat depressed. The church had reserved a room for them in a roadside inn, above a tavern. And they couldn't help compare the sounds of laughter, music, and camaraderie below with the grim lifeless exercise in religion they had experienced. He said, "I realized that there was more warmth and fellowship in that tavern than there was in the church. If Jesus of Nazareth had his choice, he would probably have come to the tavern rather than to the church we visited."

Friends, we have no excuse for "going through the motions" worship. We have good exercise equipment here: the stories of Scripture, the songs and music we experience, the insights and messages brought through them. We have the best teacher of the ages, Jesus Christ himself. What's keeping us from **THROWING OURSELVES** into worship: invitation, engagement, exaltation, adoration and empowerment? Let's get into our workout, building energy and passion, Sunday by Sunday, with spirits elated by the **HOLY SPIRIT**, which is filling us now, and always moves among us- **SO THAT WE CAN BE A PART OF GOD'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD! WITH JESUS WE CAN DO THIS! WITH JESUS WE CAN DO THIS!! AMEN!!**

Join me in singing verses 3-5 of #557: "I am the Church, YOU are the Church"!