

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany B – Brian Hartley

2 Kings 5-14; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

This week was not a particularly good one if you are a baseball fan. The news that Alex Rodriguez had taken a banned substance several years ago only further reiterated the fact for many of us that there exists an entire generation of baseball heroes who will probably be forever listed with a set of asterisks behind their name. We had all hoped, in our naivete, for there to be some kind of purity, some shining light to whom we might point as an example for our children. Because baseball has so many wonderful analogies from which to draw in terms of understanding life (like our desire to “go home” or the sometime necessity of “sacrificing” for the team), some of us have maintained devotion to the game believing that, in the end, the brightest and best would yet emerge triumphant. But, instead, we were, once again, brought down to earth realizing that sport as pure competition remains an ideal which oftentimes functions better as analogy than in reality.

This morning’s epistolary text reminds us that this very ideal of athletic competition is nothing particularly new. In fact, the Isthmian Games, of which our Olympics are a modern imitation, were once held in Corinth, itself. So it is no surprise that here, Paul chooses to draw on this familiar sporting metaphor as a means of moving forward his lengthy excursus on the nature of the Christian life with this most difficult of congregations. For, chapter after chapter previous to this text, the apostle has had to challenge their most basic assumptions about what it means to be Christian and to suggest that their behavior has oftentimes been downright inappropriate. The entire mid-section of the letter is framed by the repetition of the same little phrase, “now concerning. . .” It is almost as if the apostle has something of a laundry list of complaints which must be addressed before they can move forward as the people of God.

It would seem that at the heart of the misunderstanding with the Corinthian congregation was their tendency to view their faith as something they might simply acquire like some kind of commodity and then move on in life, bracketing their newfound Christian faith in a category separate from the everyday demands of living in a Hellenistic city. This is not unlike something of the call we hear in some political quarters that faith is fine, as long as it does not impose itself on the public square. Or, it may be even closer to those who have confused the nature of the Christian life with a simple one-time private transaction with God whereby eternal life has been secured and it makes little difference what happens beyond this point in one’s life. Paul counters this attitude by suggesting that the cruciform life subjugates all before it—from the food we eat to the way we treat others. In contrast to their understanding of Christianity as a bit of knowledge that one might obtain at a particular point in time, Paul appeals to them to see their calling to be conformed to Christ to be an everyday affair that takes continual attention and which is never truly ended until we are glorified to be like him. Today’s passage outlines what he understands to be the necessary elements in order to win the prize in their Christian journey.

The first element necessary Paul suggests has to do with innate desire: “run in such a way that you may win,” he maintains. Our two lessons which surround today’s epistolary text

contrast something of this inner desire. Both men suffer from the horrific manifestation of leprosy. In Israel, the Levitical law was clear: leprosy might mean a lifetime of isolation from the community. Imagine not being able to be with those you love and never being able to touch or to be touched. The pathos of such a life comes through in the appeal of the unnamed leper before Jesus. The man is portrayed as both begging and kneeling—signs of obeisance which represent a willingness to subjugate one’s self in hopes of something, anything that might lead to a cure. But, Naaman the Syrian, a man who is used to being treated as a superior (remember, we are told that he is the commander of the army and most military officers are constantly aware of where they stand in the pecking order), becomes angry at the very thought that he would have to humble himself and go down into the dirty waters of the river Jordan. “I thought that for me he (the prophet Elisha) would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy!” The initial result is that he walks away, the Scripture says, “in a rage.”

Desire is a funny thing—it makes us willing to forget everything else in our quest for the object of that desire. On Saturday, we celebrated the cultural rituals of St. Valentine’s Day, a time when savvy marketers managed to make money off of the cult of Cupid. Did you know that more flowers are sold on Valentine’s Day than even on Mother’s Day? On this day we give voice to the passions of desire, whether through the gift of a dozen roses or a box of chocolates. And the reason that our beloved has come to expect these things is because they are cultural signals of their singular importance—that they are the one desired more than anything else on earth.

Perhaps many of you, like me, learned the hard way that earning the love of another requires downright hard work. With my strength of Command, at the age of eighteen and nineteen I thought otherwise—why wouldn’t she simply do as I commanded? No, the art of wooing required new skills from me, like careful planning and the pursuit of a goal—something I would have understood had I had the strength of Strategic! If I wanted the young lady my heart desired, the girl everyone else looked up to as spiritually winsome, I would have to take my time, win both her and her friends over—in short, I would have to take the long view and learn the importance of persevering, no matter what the trials and tribulations of young love.

Likewise, in this passage, Paul recognizes that while baptism has set the Corinthians on the proper course, not all have persevered as they should. They have taken their eyes off of the crucified Christ, have begun to compare themselves to one another, and have ended up creating the greatest example in the early church of a carnal, back-biting, selfish and egocentric congregation. Like any good marriage counselor, Paul is here reminding them of their experience at the beginning and calling on them to reclaim their desire for Christ and service to him.

But desire by itself is not enough. Good athletes know that the exercise of self-control is absolutely essential. Now, most of us might marvel at the way the ancient athlete went about this. The belief was that sexual activity drained the body of the necessary stamina necessary to compete, so athletes would always adhere to a significant time of sexual abstention prior to competition. Sometimes they would carry this even further, sleeping with a cold metal rod between their thighs in order to harness the body’s strength. Now, while such activities might

no longer be a part of our worldview, there is truth in the maxim that self-control is at the core of those who succeed and those who don't.

Some have maintained that superficiality is the curse of our age, that we Americans are always looking for the quickest, easiest, most economical answer to even our deepest concerns. As we have begun a new year, some folks have decided it is time to lose weight. Most of us know what to do in order to make this happen: eat more nutritious meals with fewer calories, establish a regular pattern of exercise, and keep after it day after day. But instead, many go looking for a magic pill which will lead to success or a quick fix under the plastic surgeon's knife. This easy way out has even imposed itself on the church's evangelistic message: Have a problem, can't find a way out—come to Jesus and he will solve all of your problems. If you just accept Jesus as your personal Savior, life will turn suddenly rosy. The fallaciousness of such thinking was pointed out by David Batstone a few years ago in an article he wrote regarding how the author of The Prayer of Jabez walked away from the complexity of problems Christians were facing on the continent of Africa. Apparently, simply asking Jesus into one's heart does not guarantee a life of health, wealth, and happiness.

The word, "discipline," comes from a Latin root which has to do with remaining teachable. This "teachability" Latin educators discovered was oftentimes overcome by two great barriers. The first was reaching a point of stagnation or a belief that one no longer had need to learn anything. Such an attitude usually produced a sense of "hubris" and, according to the Greeks, was the prelude to a fall. The second great barrier was an unwillingness to continue paying the price—whether in time, sweat, or focus. Discipline, the great masters taught, always requires us to set priorities and to set lesser things aside. For athletes, this may mean commitment to a rigorous daily schedule, regular vigorous exercise, and an extremely restricted diet. The athlete undertakes this regimen because she knows it is the necessary price in order to attain the prize at the end.

Early Christians came to understand this as well and gave themselves over to similar spiritual exercises. Some, like the Benedictines, committed themselves to living a rule which incorporated a regular rhythm of prayer and work into their day. They took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity as a means of self-discipline. The genius of the Reformers was to appeal to an earlier model that wasn't just for a select group, but for the entire body of believers. This "priesthood of believers" was invited to enter into that self-same life of prayer and work and Thomas Cranmer inscribed it into the Book of Common Prayer in such forms as Morning and Evening Prayer. It was this tradition of British self-discipline which John Wesley and his friends embraced wholeheartedly and led to them being branded "Methodists," a pejorative term at the time. Inward disciplines such as prayer, fasting and study, were to be balanced by outward disciplines of simplicity, service, and solitude, along with corporate disciplines of confession, guidance, and worship. Wesleyan spirituality, perhaps above all else, is an attempt to live out in one's life a form of self-discipline made possible only within the boundaries of community accountability. By doing so, we don't hope to earn anything except the kind of conformity to the cross of Jesus Christ to which Paul appealed on behalf of the Corinthians.

But even with the discipline added to desire of which the apostle speaks, he recognized the danger of overconfidence: "I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be

disqualified.” As he himself proclaims to the Galatians, if anyone had room for boasting it was the Pharisee Saul. He was born into the proper family, had the right education, made all the right contacts. He was destined for greatness as the consummate insider. Yet, in another passage in Philippians he dares to call such a curriculum vita, “skubala,” a word before which the translators cringe. Suffice it to say that it is best translated as a four-letter word that begins with the letter “s”.

The picture Paul paints here, then, is the necessity of never, never, never giving up (to paraphrase Churchill). He recognized the enormous danger of thinking one’s self better than others and simply running on one’s previous accomplishments. The recourse, as he suggests, is not just any kind of discipline—simply running or boxing—but a life of self-discipline which is lived purposefully and with a sense of direction. Remember that this was being spoken of in the direct context of Corinthian culture. Here a man could find whatever his heart desired—fine wines from Italy, some of the best craftsmen in the world, and perhaps the very best brothel in the Roman world. The temptations must have been absolutely enormous for those early Christians and, in particular, the temptation to at least occasionally compromise.

Perhaps 21st century America is not so unlike the great city of 1st century Corinth. The sirens of entertainment and of consumerism are all around us beckoning us like the harpies of old. One can’t even read the front page of the newspaper any more without wading through page after page of advertisements. Our human desire for a life of ease and all of the accoutrements that go with it perhaps makes living the disciplined life even more difficult. While we might wish to think that Babylon is somewhere “over there,” perhaps it is in our own back yard. The result may be that unlike the leper in today’s gospel story who recognizes that he has no hope unless Jesus hears him cry out and so is willing to do almost anything, we are, in reality, more like Naaman the Syrian, appalled that we would be called upon to stoop to the same spiritual exercises and the life of cruciformity to which the apostle called the Corinthians.

This call does not require that we all become Mother Theresa’s and get on the next boat to India. Certainly there are a few who are called to such a vocation. But the good news is that we can be made clean right where we are in the dirty waters of the river Jordan, right here in small town Greenville. What is it that has laid claim to our desire to love and serve God? Where do we need to restore self-discipline and call into question our overconfidence in ourselves and our so-called accomplishments? In this season of Epiphany, we are offered an opportunity to join Jesus in the waters of the Jordan and to rediscover our vocation and ministry. And, having heard the voice of the Father, only then will we be ready to be thrown by the Spirit into the Wilderness during the coming forty days of Lent. May God grant to each of us the insight necessary to reclaim our desire for God and the wisdom to embrace the self-discipline necessary in order to prepare ourselves to walk the way of the cross. Amen.