

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11
Title: At Fifteen
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I've been running, riding, and racing for as long as I can remember. I've run the verdant hills of Ecuador, the stone streets of Rome, and the parks of London. I've run down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées in Paris and Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. I've run alongside the Sea of Galilee, the Gulf of Mexico, and the harbor in Hong Kong. I've run over mountain passes and under moonlit desert skies. Running has been a motion of God's grace in my life. I couldn't be more grateful.

As I've gotten older the desire to run hasn't diminished but I'm slower, stiffer, and it takes longer to recover. I still have all my original parts but there's some wear and tear. I know that to keep running I need to work on core strength, balance, and flexibility. Rather than run more miles I need to spend more time strengthening and stretching. Rather than more time outside I need to spend time inside with balls and mats and straps and machines and yoga classes. To keep running I need a commitment to core strength.

Through green fields of growth and rugged valleys of loss Hope Church has been running for 57 years. We are no longer a frisky filly running in an open field; we're a little slower and stiffer. We have history, maybe a little limp, and a hard-won wisdom, but we're still running and the desire to run is undiminished. So, with hearts of gratitude, what should we be doing to keep running?

Fifteen years ago, we named a set of core commitments. (Inserted in your bulletin.) Rooted in this morning's text we identified four core muscles that help set our stride and keep us upright. Fifteen years ago, we used this text to get at the core of what it means for us to be church. And, this morning, at the direction and encouragement of the Elders....

We're going to pay attention to our core.

We're going to revisit those muscles.

We're going to do some gym work,

so that we can continue to run the race that's set before us.

Have I adequately run that metaphor into the ground?

With deep affection Paul writes to the church in Philippi that if there is
a common encouragement from being united with Christ,
a common comfort from love,
a common sharing in the Spirit,
a common tenderness and compassion,
a common joy, then it will be found in life together.

Dear friends, at our core there is a commitment to *koinonia* ~ to a shared life in Christ. We are not called alone; we are called together. Our Value Statement puts it this way:

We value the shared life of community in which we celebrate each other's joys and bear each other's burdens.

But, as we are scattered from Bourbonnais to Berwyn to Beverly to Brookfield how will we live into that core commitment? How will we nurture *koinonia*?

I think there are two primary issues that call for our attention.

One. At its best Hope is a web of mutually supportive relationships. While “households” serve an organizing function, substantive-authentic-relationships grow organically through other interests, connections, and histories. We have ways to help get a toe-hold (choir, book clubs, Mom’s Group, nursery, etc.) but core relationships develop outside of or alongside of church programs.

So. If Hope is more ecology than machine how can we encourage new sprouts and sink deeper roots? When our friendship cards are full how can we effectively enfold new relationships? Are there new exercises to strengthen those core muscles?

I’ve begun to wonder about regional clusters. What if we organized gatherings that connected folks who are already neighbors? Or, maybe there are events or projects that can engage regional groups? I know that would take more organizational chops than we have but we need to think creatively about how to build deeper connections. The meaning of church membership is murky but the longing to belong runs deep and it calls for investment from all of us.

My joy spikes when I hear of someone new to Hope sharing a meal or going out for a drink with someone old to Hope. It is a little sign that we’re running like God made us to run.

Two. Hope has 90 people who are 69 or older. They are the spine that carried Hope for many miles. But, as that part of the body ages there is an increased need for care. How can we best support and encourage folks who are dealing with aging issues? Some rightly want and welcome their church’s help; others want only those organically grown friendships. How will we organize around and invest in these saints? When Hope’s preacher is not very good at that sort of thing; how will that part of the body life thrive? I don’t have answers but I know that it calls for our best attention.

Paul calls the Philippians to “the same attitude of mind.” It is an odd phrase because the translator is trying to pick up on the notion that “mind” is not just rationality or brain activity, but the fullness of human disposition, psyche, or worldview. To follow Christ is not just to be a part of a community, but it invites a shared habit of heart and mind...

Therefore, education is a core commitment. Education is essential for effective running.
From the Value Statement:

We value education and nurture that equips and challenges us to be better informed, wiser, biblically-grounded, and more like Jesus Christ.

Again, two things....

There are about 110 children who are active in life at Hope. We have done a wonderful job of investing in Children in Worship, God Loves Me, and nursery space. We enlist a small army every week to tend after this treasure. Thanks be to God! But....

But, we need to turn our attention to building on those strengths. We need to consider what “rites of passage” might look like as these kids grow up and grow in faith. How might we surround them with mentors? What meaning or function does “profession of faith” play? We have great traditions in Sunday School, Cadets, GEMS, and YEEPS but is there space to supplement how we might help these kids grow in the mind of Christ? How can we more effectively live into the vows we took at their baptisms?

A recent study confirmed that the average American church member goes to church (the language was “accesses the means of grace”) twice a month. That seems in keeping with Hope’s practice. American church historian Martin Marty writes about it this way:

Why are they declining? Certainly not because a few atheists write best-sellers. I always look for the simplest causes, such as rejection of drab and conflicted congregations and denominations. Or changes in habits. I watch tens of thousands running past in Sunday marathons or heading to the kids’ soccer games and recall that their grandparents and parents kept the key weekend times and places open for sacred encounters.

The last thing I intend is to scold or slather on guilt. If this wasn’t my gig I wouldn’t be here as frequently as I am. (There are lots of races to run.) And I know that there are all sorts of ways to be trained in Christ. Worship attendance alone is an unreliable marker. But, being trained in Christ is part of what we’re doing when we gather....

I know of one Hope family who decided this year that if they were in town they would be in church. They wouldn’t let other things distract or detour. That seems like a wonderful and reasonable commitment to being shaped by scripture and community. It makes space for sacred encounters. It exercises a core muscle.

We are halfway through our work out.

Paul writes:

In your relationships with one another have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage; rather he made himself nothing....

The Greek word here is *kenosis* ~ emptying. Our text proclaims the staggering mystery of the self-emptying of God in Christ from deity to death. And, the core value here is the emptying of self for the sake of others. Therefore:

We value a full engagement in the world as a faithful, tangible response to God’s grace.

Our Deacons do a great job of offering opportunity for service. For example: we’re helping support two missionary families, we have a consistent partnership with Roseland Christian Ministries, and we’re sending an intergenerational mission team to Texas to listen, learn, and work alongside those who serve migrant workers and homeless folks. The list is long of other ministries that we support and boards on which Hope folks offer leadership. And, through our budgeted giving we support the work of the Christian Reformed Church all over the world.

Dear friends, in the past fifteen years, from out of this little mom-and-pop-god-shop, we’ve sent out well over one million dollars in Denominational Ministry Shares. That’s remarkable!

But, sometimes that can feel impersonal and distant. Therefore, we’ve been wondering how we might be more connected to mission, service, and self-emptying....

One idea that has some life is to come alongside Erin and Moises Pacheco. They are both uniquely gifted musicians and theologians who are dreaming about planting a new church in East Garfield Park ~ their neighborhood. They have relationships that could form a core team, they have vision and passion, they’re searching for the leading of the Spirit, and they’re wondering about partners who might be poured-out in helping plant “Hope in East Garfield Park.” Do we have the imagination, call, and strength to run alongside them? Can we join them in praying and searching for the leading of the Spirit?

I think one core commitment that we have to keep working at is how best to leverage our considerable gifts for the common good, for the coming of the kingdom, and for being caught up in the mission and movement of God.

Finally, the *kenosis* of Christ leads to an expression of worship wherein every knee bows, and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Our Value Statement puts it this way:

We value worship that intentionally awakens us to the presence of God through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments.

In the landscape of middle-American churches Hope has carved out its own little niche. We remain committed to liturgy, hymns, intergenerational leadership, and peculiar preaching. Dora and Lynn have served and sustained our worship together by playing organ and piano since the early 1970s. They are both just a handful of years away from 50 years of leadership. Thanks be to God! And Erin has been helping us sing new songs and pulls out the gifts of all sorts of musicians and all sorts of instruments. Throw in the choir and the children's orchestra and resident singer/songwriter Marjie Coleman. We are richly blessed. Thanks be to God!

These things will get attention this summer.

We have sound system issues that we need to address. I still believe that we can produce bulletins that are consistent with our aesthetic and yet saves a few hundred old growth trees. There's a little collection of folks that are going to write liturgies for worship this summer. We will launch our new website and sermon podcasts. Erin has begun pulling together musicians to learn new music and deepen their groove. Dora is working at raising up new organists. There is lots to work on and lots to celebrate.

And then there's this...

A professor at Princeton told me that I needed to plant myself in a congregation and preach for 20 years and see what difference preaching makes. I've got 4 more years on that project. In that spirit I've been turning down inquiries from other churches. It seems like we're hitched for a while yet. I hope you'll help me recognize when it's time for a new running partner.

Dear friends, with a deep sense of gratitude may we long run after Christ through community, education, service and worship. May we look for ways that we can build strength on strength with balance and flexibility. And....

.... since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus...

Amen.