

JOGGING

2 Corinthians 5:25 "We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see -- we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

When I was a young priest at my first parish on Beacon Hill in Boston, more than 43 years ago now, I took up jogging as part of my Lenten discipline one year. There were a variety of factors encouraging me to do so. First of all, I was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, meaning that the other Assistant priest was already a dedicated marathoner and the Rector had taken up running about a year before. So now it was officially

my turn. Second, Boston was a perfect location to begin running. Just a couple of blocks down from my apartment was the beautifully paved running path that ran alongside the Charles River on both shores for miles. At several points along the way, you could take a bridge across the river and return on the other side, allowing for both longer runs and shorter ones. The scenery was beautiful in the parks along the river, and more importantly, it was level! Thirdly, I needed an exercise routine in my life and had been without one for years, since before my undergraduate days. This was an important first step for me as a young adult to begin taking care and responsibility for my physical health. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I wanted to experience those endorphins that I had been reading so much about; that euphoric sensation found in intense and sustained physical activity, like jogging.

So, I was determined to do this. First, I purchased a copy of books about running. Jim Fixx was the popular writer at that time, so I got several of his, and begin excitedly reading them. Jim Fixx, you may remember, was credited with helping start America's fitness revolution, popularizing the sport of running and demonstrating the health benefits of regular jogging, though I will also note that Jim Fixx died of a heart attack at only 52 years of age while jogging. Secondly, I purchased the necessary apparel, not only cool running shorts and shoes, but also things

like hand weights and a portable music source and sweat bands. Finally, I had everything I needed. I was all set. And once Lent arrived, I began running.

It didn't last long. I just didn't find it very enjoyable, and I noticed that the other runners were never smiling as they ran. So, it was hard to stay motivated as it didn't turn out like I thought it would. And I never experienced those endorphins, or anything like them. Eventually I gave up. Running was not for me. Two years later at Oxford, I started playing squash again, and that has been my regular physical activity since, at least until I moved to Kent where there were no public squash courts. Alas, I now rely mostly on hiking for exercise.

Still, we all know that regular physical activity is something we all need to do. And so is regular spiritual activity, and during Lent many Christians try to take on some kind of spiritual discipline, the same way I took on jogging in Boston. And like me, they make some of the same mistakes. Too often, Christians buy all kinds of religious books and read them, but never get around into actually engaging in the religious life. Knowledge about something is not the same thing as doing it. Christians may purchase all sort of prayer tools, for instance, Rosary beads, Lenten devotional materials, daily bible verses, but never really use them much. And far too often

we are looking for that spiritual 'high,' those divine endorphins, and we quit when they do not come easily.

It takes real discipline to be a real disciple. And discipline is hard work. But it is necessary work if we want to be healthy, either physically or spiritually. So, I encourage each of you to get off the couch and do something this Lent to make yourself a better Christian, a better person, more the person you can be, more the person God longs for you to be. Don't be a pew potato, like those who just come to church each week but never do anything more. Of course, I am preaching to the choir here, as most of our Sunday regulars are not present tonight.

Remember that the very same Baptismal Covenant which first brought us all into the church, also sends us all out into the world. At every Baptism, we all promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. We also promise to proclaim by our word and example the Good News of God in Christ, and to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self. We promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being.

So how are we all doing with that? And why aren't we all doing better than that? Tonight, marks the beginning of the season of Lent, and I pray that by the time these forty days are

over, we will all have begun to fulfill those baptismal promises in new and different ways. In the words of Jesus, let us "not store up for ourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where our treasure is, there our heart will be also."

If we are truly serious about our Christian vocation, then this can only be accomplished by great effort. Our Lenten disciplines, whatever they are, whatever we choose them to be, they can effect changes and establish new patterns in our lives, so that the activities we seek to accomplish during Lent, eventually become part of the very habit of our being, a part of who we are. So that year by year, little by little, our lives can be changed and transformed by such efforts, until finally we are not the persons that we once were, but more the persons that God calls us to be, full of love and mercy and compassion. AMEN.