

"STRETCHING IS THE BEST EXERCISE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago I happened to observe my somewhat inelegant profile in a mirror. I didn't like what I saw and resolved right then and there to get in shape. I made up my mind to start exercising every day and began a discipline that would soon bring me back to perfection. And so the very next morning, I threw off the covers, jumped out of bed and began doing a few sit-up exercises. I said to myself,

"This is the first day of the rest of my life,  
and I'm going to spend it with a smaller waist".

I did better with those sit-ups than I thought I would...for about two weeks. I felt good about myself, as the saying goes.

But one morning as I started to get up from the floor, I felt this sharp pain in my lower back. I had pulled a muscle. I could hardly straighten up. But I didn't think much about it. After all, there are times when you have to "play hurt" in this life and I knew that it would soon go away. It didn't.

Several days later a friend by the name of Al saw me wince as I eased myself out of a chair in the lounge at the Health Club where I had taken out a membership a couple of years before. Now, my friend Al is in good shape. It's disgusting. Al not only eats junk food, he over-eats junk food and back then he was running in the NY Marathon. He asked me what had happened and I told him my story. He then delivered to me his "lecture" on physical fitness. He pointed out how the old exercises like push-ups and sit-ups are now considered passe. And he said, "stretching is the best form of exercise..."

I've never forgotten that bit of advice that Al gave me. I gave up on the push-ups and the sit-ups and began "stretching"...it's a lot easier at my age and before going out to play racquet ball, I try to do a couple of minutes of stretching. "Stretching is the best exercise". I liked his advice and felt that it might be fitting for today's marathon meditation.

### DEVELOPMENT

Turning to the Scripture lesson for this morning, we find that Paul is writing to his Philippian friends not about stretching muscles in a stationary exercise...a sort of "marching forward in place"...but about the Christian life. He says it's like running a race in which you are stretching forward...always straining, always moving, always exerting yourself, always reaching for the tape ahead of you. Listen to his words again,

"Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to  
what lies ahead, I PRESS ON toward the GOAL of the  
prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

This vigorous athletic metaphor of the religious life has always appealed to me; it's a favorite passage and it brings a simple message to us. Stretching is the best form of exercise - and not just for the body, but for the spirit as well.

Ours is a religion of stretching. By contrast, some religions may be characterized as religions of sitting. For some of them the good life is the

life of contemplation, the life of turning inward, a life of meditation, a life of transporting oneself estatically out of this physical world into another dimension of spiritual reality. But the tradition in which stand and which we have received through the Bible is the tradition of stretching and of moving on toward the goal and continuing to become better persons than we are - always growing, always maturing. In the Old Testament it was often called the Promised Land, and then coming over into the New Testament we speak of it as the Kingdom of God and the "upward call of God in Christ".

#### THE UPWARD CALL

Jesus gave us a standard for life that will not let us settle down. He did that in the model of His own life. The writer of the Book of Hebrews called Him "the Pioneer of our Faith"...and that is to say that He is the One whom we are to follow...which means that we will never sit still.

He Himself said, "Be ye perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect". A lot of people stumble over that line. They find it difficult to believe that Jesus really said that. It's unreasonable. Nobody is perfect. Why would Jesus ever tell us to become something that we could never possibly attain. It will just make us more neurotic than we are. Some of us have enough trouble living with the guilt we already have in this life without Jesus telling us that we have to be perfect. Why does He do it?

I believe He does it so that we will always be stretching, always keep moving, and growing and maturing...so that one day we would finally be able to say with St. Paul,

"Not that I have already obtained this where I am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me His own."

Jesus really got through to Paul. Jesus gave Paul a goal in life that he would be stretching toward all of his life. And that's why Paul is saying he's always pressing on toward the goal, always moving toward that "upward call of God in Christ".

And that, I want to suggest to you this morning is what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of Christ. Here you have a goal that will keep you busy and moving for the rest of your life. A bit of "divine discontent" in our lives. Two points emerge for me and let me share them with you.

#### IMPROVE SOCIETY AND MAKE IT A BETTER WORLD

First, I think that all of this means that we will always be trying to improve the society in which we live. We'll always be trying to make this world a better world...to make this city a warmer place, a more humane place in which to live.

Reinhold Niebuhr once defined the Kingdom of God as an "impossible possibility". I like that. You may consider that phrase a bit of a nonsense statement. How can you say something is possible and impossible at the same time. It has to be one or the other; you can't have it both ways...unless it's something that we cannot fully achieve, and yet we must keep trying to achieve. That's the kind of life that God calls us to so we must always say we have not yet achieved the Kingdom of God. America is not the Kingdom of God. America is not even fulfilling the dream that America has for itself, not yet what we should be.

It has been observed that many of the "activists" of the sixties and the seventies ended up in Eastern mysticism. They started out being concerned about the world about them and ended up being concerned only with themselves. They believed that "re-building the world" was simply a combination of sincerity and energy and when they discovered that their human efforts were not sufficient to move the inertia of society many of them dropped out of the race.

Building a better world is not a matter for sprinters, but more of a matter for the "long-distance runners". Not a matter for those who have occasional feelings of goodwill and benevolence toward others, but for those whose goal is the Kingdom of God across a lifetime...and who know realistically that their efforts are probably not going to bring it about, but who nevertheless "press on to the goal" - who make that goal the goal of their life - year after year - because Christ at some point in the past has made them His own.

Alan Paton was that kind of a "long-distance" runner. I always admired him and grew up reading some of his books and remember something he once said,

"Life has taught me not to expect success to be the inevitable results of my endeavors...."

As you know, this citizen of South Africa spent his entire life trying to rid his "beloved country" as he called it...of the evils of racism. All of his life he stretched toward that goal, and finally ending his life under house arrest... but still never giving up, always pressing on...always stretching. Another thing he said was,

"Life has taught me to seek sustenance from the endeavor itself and to leave the rest to God!"

That's the way St. Paul felt...."to seek sustenance from the endeavor itself and to leave the rest to God".

Paton wrote these lines, too,

"The strange thing is that my parents taught me that 50 years ago. I've had to learn it two times in my life. In my youth I learned it as 'Sir Galahad' in the search for the Holy Grail and in my adult life I learned it as Jesus and the Road to Golgotha.

There is only one way in which man can endure man's inhumanity to man and that is to try in one's own life to exhibit man's humanity to man".

If you take seriously the command of Jesus to build a better world on the pattern of the Kingdom of God then you are making a goal of your life an "impossible possibility". That does not mean that you give up in doing it. You won't even consider giving up if Christ has truly made you His own. What it means is that you have chosen a goal toward which you will be stretching all of your life, and there will be times when that stretching is hard and difficult and you may be tempted to "sit it out"...but the real Christian does not and this leads me on to the second point this text is suggesting to me.

"Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I PRESS on toward the GOAL of the prize of..."

IMPOSSIBLE SITUATIONS WHERE WE'RE TEMPTED TO GIVE UP

There will be times when you find your-

self in impossible situations in life where you may be tempted to give up. In the marathon there's a point where the runner "hits" a wall....I've forgotten where that is...18th mile, 20th mile...a psychological barrier...and the temptation to drop out hits most of them at just about the same place....the temptation to give up. \*\*\*

There may be some one present in this congregation this morning who is in such a situation right now and it may be of help to you to note where Paul was when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was in prison, probably in Rome, awaiting his trial. He knows he is not going to get out of there. He knows what is coming and what his life is facing, but he's still "hanging in there"...still stretching, still moving. He's even saying goodbye to them, knowing he will never see them again and he thanks them for all they have meant to him. He tells them always to do what he had done. "Join in imitating me" he writes. "And press on to the goal" Keep on stretching.

The model he is giving us here is that of a person who sees adversity as an opportunity to test what he's made of, or to test what he believes in. In the Biblical sense, adversity is an opportunity to "stretch out" beyond where we are at the present moment and to become better and greater people. That's why some people who come through it are wiser and kinder and more understanding of others and what they face. Adversity is not the end of the race for them. Adversity is another obstacle placed in the race which allows them to stretch beyond their present state of being.

I think we all admire that and we all want to be that way. And I suggest that we can be that way if our attitude about life is that we are not who we should be. We can always become better. And you and I can do it if we see that life is a race toward a goal - a goal not reached in this life. Paul says that it will be given to us as a gift in the next life and I believe that, too... but in this life the rewards are therefore NOT in reaching the goal...the rewards are in the stretching and the striving and the running toward the goal of life. \*\*\*\*

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The other evening, after the Blue Jays had defeated the Braves, I listened to some of the interviews with the players after the game. One Atlanta Braves player said something like this,

"We did our best. We did our best and that's all that can be asked of anybody. We'll try to do better next year."

That's the kind of thing Paul is trying to teach. Do your best and try to go along remembering that "life's a journey and the meaning is to be found in the journey and not in reaching the goal". As we sometimes put on the bulletin board out front,

"Life's a journey. Not a destination."

And I might add another favorite of mine, "The least important fact of life is the score at halftime". As Al said to me that day long ago, "Stretching is the best exercise." Said Paul,

"Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead....I PRESS ON...toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

PRAYER Make us sensitive, dear God, to Your lifting presence in these moments. Wrestle with each of us in the hidden corners of our lives. Forgive us for our much running about...our lack of focus...our lack of clear-cut priorities in life. Indeed, our hearts are restless until they come to find their perfect rest in You.

We know that there is no need that Your treasury cannot supply; no necessity that Your love cannot meet; no guilt that You cannot forgive; no heartache that You cannot heal; no relationship that You cannot mend. We would lay everything before You...for in our better moments we know that You are able!

Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved present with Your warming and healing presence. Point our markers on the path for those who have lost their way. For the race we run is short, O God...even at its longest and we would run it well, and always to Your glory. Amen.

\*\*\* Yesterday's NY Times described it this:

"The WALL...the slight incline of the Willis Avenue Bridge is where many 'hit the wall'...the point where exhaustion sets in and continuing the race becomes a struggle."

\*\*\*\* THE FINNISH LINE

"Those months of training suddenly seem worthwhile as the finish line comes into view. The encouraging words of the finish line announcer and the cheers of thousands of spectators propel runners across the line"

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