

"THE IMPORTANCE OF STRETCHING"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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"THE IMPORTANCE OF STRETCHING"

TEXT: "Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

(Philippians 3: 13, 14)

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 rigorous discipline that would soon bring me back to perfection. The very next morning I threw off the covers, jumped out of bed and began doing a few sit-ups. 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 really good about myself, as the saying goes.

But one morning starting to get up from the floor, I felt this sharp pain, a twinge in my back. I had pulled a muscle. I could hardly straighten up. But I didn't think much about it. After all, you have to play hurt in this life and I knew that it would soon go away. But 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 at the 92nd Street "Y" where I had taken out a membership. Now my friend, Al, looks to be in excellent shape. It's disgusting. Al not only eats junk food, he over-eats junk food and he still runs marathons. His wife does, too. He asked me what happened and I told him my sad story. He then delivered to me his ten minute lecture on physical fitness. He told me that the old exercises like push-ups and sit-ups are now considered passe. He wrapped it up saying, "Reverend...stretching is the best form of exercise."

Well, I've never forgotten that bit of advice he gave me free of charge. I haven't done as many push-ups or sit-ups since. And before going out to jog or to play a bit of racquetball, I always spend a bit of time stretching. "Stretching is the best form of exercise". There's a message in that bit of advice for us to consider on this Marathon Sunday. Let's think about it.

DEVELOPMENT

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

I like his words; it's a favorite saying, a favorite text for me. This vigorous athletic metaphor of the religious life has always appealed to me as

it has to many of you and I want to bring you a very simple message this morning from it. The importance of stretching...not just for the body, but for the spirit as well.

One way to look at our heritage from the Bible is that we have a religion of stretching and it stretches across many centuries. Other religions may be characterized as religions of sitting. For them the good life is the life of contemplation, the life of turning the lamp inward, a life of meditation, a life of transporting oneself ecstatically out of the physical world into another dimension of spiritual reality. That's the religion of sitting.

But the tradition that we have received through the Bible is the tradition of stretching, of moving out and on toward a goal, continuing to become better persons than we are - always growing, always maturing. In the Old Testament that goal is called, first of all, the Promised Land, and then in the New Testament we speak of it as the Kingdom of God, and the upward call of God in Christ.

SHAKERS AND MOVERS

We're all familiar with the term "Shakers and Movers". Now-a-days it's a term that refers to the big shots who have power and who make all the decisions. Look over the papers and you'll see the names of a few of the "shakers and movers" of our world; we've had quite a few of them in the city this week. (Someone told me Thursday night that we had more limosines in NYC this week than there are in the rest of the world, put together). "Shakers and movers"...it's also a description of the relationship between God and His people - the people of Israel, in the Old Testament. God shakes and they move. That's the way they interpreted their history. They were always satisfied with the achievements that they had reached at that point in life and wanted to settle down and be comfortable. And God kept shaking them up through the events of history. He wanted them to keep moving, to keep stretching and straining toward the goal that He had in mind for them.

And Jesus does the same thing for us in the New Testament. He gave us a standard for life that will not allow us to settle down in to some comfortable rut. He did that in the model of His own life. The writer of the Book of Hebrews calls Him "The Pioneer of our faith" - that is to say, He is the one whom we are to follow, which means that we will never sit still.

BE YE PERFECT

Jesus Himself said to us in the Gospel, "Be ye perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Now I see a lot of people who stumble over that. It's unreasonable; nobody is perfect. They find it difficult to believe that Jesus might have even suggested that, Why would He suggest something that unattainable. It's just going to make us more neurotic. We have enough trouble with the guilt we already have without Jesus putting more on us by telling us to be perfect. Why does He do it? I believe He does it so that we will always be stretching, always moving, growing, maturing...so that one day we shall be able to say with 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."

You see, Jesus really got through to Paul. Jesus gave Paul a goal in life that he would have to 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 the

"upward call of God in Christ Jesus". This is what it means to be a Christian. To have a goal that will keep us busy and moving across the years of life.

IMPROVE SOCIETY / MAKE IT A BETTER WORLD

First, I think that 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, this city a bit warmer and more humane place in which to live.

Somebody once observed in my presence that many of the activists of the '60s ended up Eastern mysticism in the '70s. They started out being concerned about the world about them and ended up being concerned only with themselves. They tended to feel that rebuilding 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 they faltered and soon dropped out of the race.

I guess that says to us that building a better world is not a matter for the 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 those whose goal is the kingdom of God and who know realistically that their efforts are probably not going to bring it about in their own life-time, but who nevertheless press on to the goal, who make that goal the goal of their life because Christ has made them his own.

ALAN PATON

Alan Paton was that kind of a long-distance runner. He wrote this. "Life has taught me ~~not~~ to expect success to be the inevitable results of my endeavors." Paton is a marvelous novelist. A citizen of South Africa. He has spent his entire life trying to rid his "Beloved Country" as he called it in one of his novels, of the evil of apartheid. All of his life he has been stretching toward that goal.

He is an old man now, under house arrest, as he has been for 10 to 15 years, not expecting that success is going to be the inevitable results of his efforts, but still never giving up, always pressing on, always stretching. Another time he said, "Life has taught me to seek sustenance from the endeavor itself and to leave the rest to God". And I think that's what Paul would have said. "Life has taught me to seek sustenance from the endeavor and to leave the rest to God". Paton wrote these lines which are worth passing on to you:

"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".

I believe that 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 energies, all of your life and there will be those times when that stretching is tough, hard and very difficult.

IMPOSSIBLE SITUATIONS IN OUR LIVES

There will be times when you find yourself in impossible situations in life

where you may be tempted to give up.

You may be in such a situation right now and it may be of some help to you to know 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 stretching, still moving. It's a beautiful letter - most cordial and most affectionate. He's writing to his favorite Church, to the first Church he founded on the continent of Europe, to Philippi. It's his favorite. He's saying goodbye to them, knowing he will never see them again and he thanks them for all they have meant to him. And he tells them always to do what he had done. "Join in imitating me" he writes. "Press on to the goal. Keep on stretching." Never give up.

The model he gives us is that of a person who sees adversity as the opportunity to test what he's made of, or to test what he believes in. Adversity is an opportunity in the Biblical sense...an opportunity to stretch out beyond where we are at the present time...to become better and greater people. That's why some people who come through it are wiser and kinder and more understanding of others - better persons. 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.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

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 could always become better. And you can do it if you see that your 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.

The other evening, after the Cardinals had defeated the Royals and taken a 3 to 1 lead in the World Series, I listened to some of the post game interviews with the players after the game. One 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 even better in the next game." That's the kind of thing Paul is trying to get across to us. Do your best each day in the daily race and remember that "life's a journey and the meaning is to be found in the journey and not in reaching the goal". "Life's a journey and not a destination" is the way we sometimes put it. And the least important fact of life is the score at half-time!

The importance of stretching. Stretching is the best exercise. I could stretch this out a bit more, but like you I want to see some of the long-distance runners in today's Marathon who will remind me of Paul's words:

"Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on...to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

PRAYER

Our lives are not always easy, O God, and we ask for strength to meet the difficult things that the day may bring to us. Open our eyes to the shining things that lie ahead of us. Help us to put the past behind us, and pour all of our energies into the great race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on Him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen

"The greatest danger to Christianity is pseudo-Christianity. And the marks of pseudo-Christianity are easy to recognize: It always prefers stability to change, order to freedom, law to justice, and realism to love."

—Alan Paton

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(Philippians 3: 13, 14)

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago I happened to observe my somewhat inelegant profile in a mirror. And 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 I began a rigorous discipline that would soon bring me back to "perfection". The very next morning I threw off the covers, jumped out of bed and began doing a few sit-ups. I say to myself, "This is the FIRST DAY of the rest of my life"...and I'm going to spend it with a smaller waistline. And for about two weeks I did well with those sit-ups and I felt "good" about myself....as the saying goes.

But one morning starting to get up from the floor, I felt this sharp pain, a twinge in my lower back. I had pulled a muscle. I could hardly straighten up, but I tried not to think about it...after all, you have to "play hurt" in this life and I knew that eventually it would go away....but 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 Health Club lounge at the 92nd Street "Y". Now my friend, Al, looks to be in excellent shape. It's disgusting. Al not only eats junk food, he over-eats junk food and he still runs marathons. His wife does, too. He asked me what happened and I told him my story. He then delivered to me his ten-minute lecture on physical fitness. He told me that the old exercises like push-up and sit-ups are now considered passe. He wrapped it up by saying, "Reverend...stretching is the best form of exercise".

Well, I've never forgotten that bit of advice he gave me "free of charge". I haven't done any push-ups or sit-ups since. And before going on to the court for a couple of racquetball games, I try to spend a few minutes stretching. "Stretching is the best form of exercise". There's a message in that bit of advice for us to consider on this Marathon Sunday...for ourselves and for our church and for our society.

DEVELOPMENT

Turning to the Scripture lesson for today, we find that Paul is writing to his Philippian friends - NOT about stretching muscles in physical exercise, but about the Christian life. He says it's like running a race in which you are always stretching forward...always straining, always moving, always exerting yourself and always reaching for the tape ahead of you. Hear his words once 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."

I like his words....it's a favorite Bible verse of mine. This vigorous athletic metaphor of the religious life has always appealed to me as it has to some of you and I want to remind you of a very simple message that springs from it....the importance of STRETCHING...not just for the body, but for the spirit, for the Church, too.

A RELIGION OF STRETCHING

One way to look at our faith heritage from the Bible is that we have a religion of stretching and it stretches across many centuries. Other religions may be characterized as religions of sitting. For them the good life is the life of contemplation, the life of turning the "lamp inward", the life of meditation, the life of transporting oneself ecstatically out of the physical world into another dimension of spiritual reality. Call, the religion of sitting,

BUT, the tradition that we follow and which we have received from the Bible is the tradition of moving out and on toward a goal, stretching and improving things, hopefully becoming better...growing, maturing. Back there in Old Testament times that goal is called, first of all, THE PROMISED LAND, and then in the New Testament we speak of it as the KINGDOM OF GOD...and the upward call of God coming to us in Christ Jesus.

"Shakers and Movers" is a term we're familiar with. It refers to the "big shots" who have all the power and who make all the decisions. Look over the papers any day of the week and you'll see the names of a few "shakers and movers". We have a few of them in this city. I remember that some time back someone told me that we had more limosines in this city than there are in the rest of the world....put together. That's often the way the "shakers and movers" move about.

"Shakers and movers" is also a description of the relationship between God and His people....the people of Israel. God shakes and they move. That's the way our Jewish friends interpret their relationship with God...through history. They were always satisfied with their achievements that they had reached at that point in their life and they wanted to settle down and be comfortable. But God kept shaking them up through the events of history. He wanted them to keep moving, to keep stretching and straining toward a higher goal that He had in mind for them.

And Jesus, of course, does the same thing for us in the New Testament. He gave us a standard for life that will not allow us to settle down in to some comfortable little "rut". His own life was a model of that. The "PIONEER" of our faith is the title given to Him in the Book of Hebrews...which is to say, He's the ONE whom we are to follow...which means that we will never sit still.

"Be ye perfect even as your Heavenly Father is perfect". Who said that? Yes, Jesus said that. We may stumble over that. Unreasonable we may say...for nobody is perfect. Why would He suggest something that is unattainable. Why, it's just going to make some of us more neurotic than we already are. Why, we have enough trouble with the guilt we already have without Jesus... putting more guilt on us by telling us to be perfect. Why does He do it? I believe He does it so that we will always be stretching, always growing, moving, maturing, so that one day we shall be able to say with 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!"

TO MAKE A BETTER WORLD

Jesus really got through to Paul and inspired him to do some stretching. Gave him a goal and that's the reason why Paul is saying that he's always "pressing on toward the goal"...always moving in the direction of the "upward call of God in Christ". This is what it means to be a Christian and on this All Saints Sunday, this is why we honor the "saints"...the "A" students of the faith.

They worked hard to make it a better world and to improve society and this is part of our task, too. And this, too.....kingdom building is not a matter for the sprinter, but more of a matter for the long-distance runner. Not a matter for those who have occasional feelings of goodwill and benevolence toward others, or a matter of a seasonal faith....but those whose goal is the Kingdom of God and who know with some degree of realism that their efforts are not going to bring it about in their own life-time, but who nevertheless press on toward the goal, who make that goal the goal of their life commitment because Christ has made them His own.

Years ago somebody observed in my presence that many of the activists of the sixties ended up in Eastern mysticism in the nineteen seventies. They started out being concerned about the world about them and ended up being concerned only with themselves. They tended to feel that rebuilding the world was simply a combination of energy, sincerity and a few other good things and when they discovered that their human efforts were insufficient to move the inertia of society they faltered and soon dropped out of the race. For them it was like trying to re-arrange the deck chairs on a sinking Titanic...is the way that speaker described it and I guess you could say they jumped off the ship.

Alan Paton was a kind of "long-distance" runner. He once wrote that,

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

And he also said,

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

Sounds a bit like Paul. I can see Paul saying that. I believe that 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 energies, all of your life and there will be those tough times when that stretching is difficult and unrewarding and hard. But you keep on stretching.

OUR CHURCH

And all of this comes home to us here...and touches on what we are about to undertake. As Dan Boone has indicated to you we shall be asked to do some stretching in terms of our financial undergirding for the coming year. We've "stretched" before and reached our goal. We're being asked to do it again and I'm sure you will. There are uncertainties in the path ahead, some caused by a possible change in ministerial leadership as my ministry among you begins to wind down. But I hope and pray that all will be on board...stretching and not voting by pledge card. But stretching as much as possible to create an even greater miracle in this place in coming years.

OUR LIVES

This too. There will be times in life when you find yourself in impossible situations where you may be tempted to give up.

You may be in such a situation right now and it may be of some help to you to know where Paul was when he wrote this Letter to the Philippians. He was in prison, probably in Rome, awaiting his trial. He probably knows he is not going to get out of there. He has a pretty good idea what's coming and what's ahead, but he's still stretching, still moving forward. And that's such a wonderful thing. It's a beautiful letter...most cordial and most affectionate. He's writing to his favorite church, to the first church he founded on the continent of Europe - to Philippi. It's his favorite and he's saying goodbye to them, knowing that he'll never see them again and he thanks them for all they have meant to him. And he tells them always to do what he has done. He writes,

"Join in imitating me. Press on to the goal. Keep on stretching...never give up"

The model he gives us is that of a person who sees adversity as the opportunity to test what he's made of, or to test what he believes in. Adversity is an opportunity - in the Biblical sense - to stretch out beyond where we are at present and to become better people. That's why some people who come through it are wiser and kinder and more understanding of others - better persons. 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.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

We all admire this and we all want to be that way. Right? And a step in that direction is taken when we see ourselves with the potential to be better than we are. We can always become better. We need to see life as a race....better a marathon than a sprint...toward a goal....a goal not reached in this life. Paul's belief is that it will be given to us as a gift in the next life and something in me believes that, too, but in this life the rewards are therefore not in reaching the goal...but the rewards come in the stretching and the striving and the running toward the goal of life.

Life's a journey and the meaning is to be found in the journey and not in reaching the goal. "Life's a journey and not a destination" is one of the ways I will sometimes put it....remembering, too, that the least important fact of life is the score at half-time.

The other evening, after the Yankees had swept the Padres, I listened to and read some of the post-game comments made by the losers. I think it was Tony Glynn who said,

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

That's the kind of thing that Paul was trying to get across to us. Do your best each day in the daily race and keep on stretching. I could "stretch" this out a bit more....but like many of you I want to see some of the long-distance runners come through in today's Marathon who will remind me of Paul's advice:

"Forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on....to the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence in these moments, O God, that come to us in this service. Sensitive to Your nearness, to Your peace and to Your lifting and healing power.

Wrestle with us in those sensitive and critical areas of our lives... that rest below the surface....where apathy and indifference, where laziness and lack of faith and determination sometimes take hold...robbing us of the best which is yet to come. Strengthen us in our determination to "fight the good fight...to keep on stretching and then one day to finish the course" with our faith intact.

For the race is so short, even at its longest and we would try to run it well and always to your glory. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.