

“Lessons from the Track” -- Message for July 20, 2008 -- Rev. Laurie McHugh  
Text: Luke 13:6-9 and Philippians 3:1-16  
Part Three in the Five Practices Series: Intentional Faith Development

Most Wednesday evenings you will find me at the Burlingame High School track, where a small group of us has committed to walking together once a week. It started about a year and a half ago when the idea emerged within the Healing Prayer Team -- offering something for health-minded folks, and an opportunity for newer people who were perhaps not yet ready for a Bible study to get to know others in a relaxed environment. We tried a few different walking locations but as it got later in the year, and darker earlier, we settled on the track, where there is always lighting at night, and those of us who brought kids could more easily keep an eye on them if they wanted to go at their own pace.

Now, in spite of the lighting advantages, not everyone liked walking around in circles, and the early evening traffic proved an obstacle for a few people who lived outside of Burlingame, and, you know, it's exercise we're talking about. So, as you can imagine, the size of this walking group has dwindled down over time. The handful of us who still walk still enjoy the fellowship, and we keep it up because those who participate say they would walk anyway, at least somewhere, and they are willing to do it alone if scheduling conflicts mean the others can't make it.

I found myself in just such a spot one Wednesday several weeks ago; I was the only who showed up at the track that day. Well, not the only

one; just the only one from our church. There are dozens of people out there every evening, using the field, the track, and the exercise equipment in the corner. I began walking around, not sure if the others would be late or not be coming at all, but determined to at least get some exercise.

And I asked God, as I sometimes do when I'm alone, to open my eyes and teach me something.

When it became clear after a few minutes that my companions weren't going to be joining me that night, at first I thought I would just do a mile -- four laps -- and then head home. But God delivered, and I kept on going.

What I learned that evening at the track was a lesson or two about the power of community when it comes to one's spiritual growth -- the power of making the journey with other people.

In my ministry I've always come across a person here and there who is for some reason resistant to the idea of joining a small group Bible study. "I don't have the time," one might say. "My work schedule is too tight, or too erratic." Children's bedtime is sometimes a factor, or frequent travel. Others will tell me they are already doing a lot serving at the church, and a Bible study on top of those meetings or service commitments is just too much. And a few people, once in a while, ask me for advice about studying the Bible on their own, because they just can't seem to work a regular face-to-face time with others into their routine. Or maybe, just maybe, I wonder, there are a few who are a little timid about doing this Bible thing with others. "I don't know

enough. I'll look stupid. I want to try it out on my own first so I'll have something intelligent to say if I join a group."

Now, I try to help these folks. I really do. I've given out books and study guides and suggested places to start reading in the Bible. Some folks never talk to me again about it, and I suspect that it's like my lonely exercise at the track: it's a lot easier to say, "I'll just walk one lap and then go home." When there's no one to hold you accountable except yourself, excuses are a whole lot easier to come up with. "I need to get to the grocery shopping, or the laundry, or I'm actually pretty tired."

The other phenomenon I come across when people take this approach is they have questions. And they are the most interesting kinds of questions. From simple definitions of tricky words, to references to other parts of the Bible, to theological questions. And get this: these questions, whether simple or complicated, get people stuck, and they stop reading -- at least until they've got to me and got an answer, and that delay is a powerful inhibiting factor in the whole process. I still remember this vividly from when I was a teenager. I would try to read the Bible on my own, and I wouldn't understand it much, and I'd get frustrated, and put it down. I thought maybe I wasn't very smart. And that thought was enough to get me to leave that Bible behind.

But there's something almost magic about Bible study in a group. I can't adequately explain it except to say that it's the power of the Holy Spirit. I think the Enemy throws up these little roadblocks with these

diversionary questions and momentary lapses in understanding. But the Enemy doesn't function so well in a group. It's rare that there's a question that there isn't someone who's open enough to the Spirit to be able to answer; the group is seldom stymied the way individuals are. And they go on, they keep plowing through, and they get to the depths and find rich meaning and get to the place where they hear God's personal call on their life -- in the group. It's really amazing.

When I was at the track, I noticed many different models for getting physically fit, all happening on the same evening at the same place. There were pairs and little groups walking together, like the group I'm usually walking with on Wednesdays -- people who commit to be at the same place and the same time to share the journey of fitness together, all of the same relative level of fitness, walking the same pace.

And there's a fitness boot camp going on out there; I think the Rec Center offers it. There's a trainer putting the group through the motions of circuit training: in this corner they'll be doing pull-ups on a bar, or sit-ups or working with hand weights, and when each one finishes their reps, the trainer shouts, "Go!" and off they run for a lap, or head for the bleachers to go up and down the stairs. The people in this group are all of different fitness levels. Some are over ideal weight; others look quite fit; others look like they probably spend their days at a desk, and one can imagine that they've decided to get back in the groove. Some, I think, must be training for a special event, like a fundraiser for cancer or something.

Watching them put to mind a Disciple Bible study group. Like fitness

book camp, Disciple is hard work -- no matter what your level of spiritual fitness. But everyone willing to make the commitment -- or even willing to try it for a while -- is welcome. If you're completely new to reading the Bible, Disciple is for you. If you've read the Bible dozens of times, or even if you've taken Disciple before, Disciple is for you. You always gain more from it, and you grow. And you thrive on the encouragement of others. I've known many people who say they need to be enrolled in a class to help them stick to the discipline of regular Bible reading -- otherwise it's just too easy to slack off, no matter how long you've been a Christian or part of a church.

At the track I saw someone walking the perimeter with her dog -- another good motivation for getting out and moving. And I thought of those who get more deeply involved in their faith life for the sake of their children. Because they want their children to be spiritually healthy, they model worship and prayer and spiritual practices. Having someone who's watching us, or who depends on us, in our lives, can keep us honest, so to speak.

There was a soccer team practicing on the field, too, and the same principle applies here, too. When you know the team will be let down if you don't show up, that's one more reason to keep in practice. And while the spiritual life is not about receiving acclaim from fans or playing for an audience, knowing others are watching helps us stay accountable to the goals we set for ourselves -- whether it's playing to win other hearts for Jesus, striving to be the most effective witness in what we do and say, or growing more Christ-like and Christ-centered every day as we respond to the people and situations around us.

Knowing we're on a team helps make our faith development more intentional.

I think I was most struck, that night at the track, by the sight of two young women who arrived a few minutes after I did. One was clad in sweats, a little on the heavy side; the other, trim and athletic -- but on crutches, her ankle taped up. I heard the friend on crutches say, "I wish I could do this with you." As I continued to loop the track, I watched the two of them. The woman on crutches gave instructions and encouragement to the woman in sweats, timing her as she jumped rope, counting as she did other exercises, cheering when she ran a lap. At one point she couldn't just watch; she hopped on her one good foot as the two of them did jumping jacks together. It was something to behold.

And I thought of our role in the spiritual life as wounded healers. None of us is perfect. None of us has it completely together. But our own struggles, our most scarred and bruised places, can be a source of blessing and growth for another. There's no infirmity so great, no brokenness so big, that it can't be a means of glorifying God. There is no one who isn't called to reach beyond themselves to help another person along the journey. So you're tired. So you're hurt. So maybe you find yourself more on the receiving end of things than you used to be, or than you want to be. You still have a gift. There's still something you can do. You may have to think a little outside the box, get a little creative. But you still have growing to do. God is never finished with us.

Like the owner of the fig tree in the parable, God expects fruitfulness of us. Often it takes a good gardener – or a group of such folks – to help maximize the growing conditions: to water us when we're thirsty; at times, to shovel some manure on us; and trim things back, asking the right questions and getting us reflective and focused.

Intentional faith development is a discipline – like training for athletes. And whether in this life your event will be a sprint or a marathon, press forward for the prize. Surround yourself with trainers and fellow runners; you'll be well rewarded. The goal is a worthy one: a life that glorifies our Creator, rich in fruit, abundant and fragrant. It may smell of sweat (and maybe some other things!), but it will also smell of victory. Amen.