

Sermon: God's Most Wanted

I wonder how we really think about Lent given its overtones - giving things up, not enjoying ourselves, facing up to our sins, trying to do better... is there any good news for us in Lent to bear us up or is their only a downside? To help us ..

A WEEK AT THE GYM: ONE MAN'S STORY Dear Diary. For my 65th birthday this year, my wife (the dear) purchased a week of personal training at the local health club for me. Although still in shape since playing on my college tennis team, I decided I would go ahead and give it a try. I called and made my reservation with a personal trainer, Belinda. She identified herself as a 26-year-old aerobics instructor and model for athletic clothing and swimwear. My wife was pleased with my enthusiasm, the club encouraged me to keep a diary to chart my progress.

MONDAY Started my day at 6:00 a.m. Tough to get out of bed, but it was well worth it when I met Belinda. She is like a Greek goddess, blond, dancing eyes, a great smile. Belinda gave me a tour and showed me the machines. After 5 minutes on the treadmill she noted my pulse was way fast, I attribute it to standing next to her. Belinda was encouraging as I did my sit-ups, although my gut was already aching from holding it in the whole time she was around. This is going to be a FANTASTIC week!!

TUESDAY I drank a whole pot of coffee, but I finally made it out the door. Belinda made me lie on my back and push a heavy iron bar into the air -- then she put weights on it! My legs were a little wobbly on the treadmill, but I made the full mile. Belinda's rewarding smile made it all worthwhile. I feel GREAT!! It's a whole new life for me.

WEDNESDAY The only way I can brush my teeth is by lying the toothbrush on the counter and moving my mouth back and forth over it. I think I have a hernia. Driving was OK as long as I didn't try to steer or stop. I parked on top of a GEO in the club lot. Belinda was impatient she said my screams were bothering other club members. Her voice is a little too perky for early in the morning, and when she scolds, she has this nasally whiny annoying voice. My chest hurt on the treadmill, so Belinda put me on the stair monster. Who would invent a machine to simulate an activity rendered obsolete by elevators? Belinda told me some nonsense that it was good for me.

THURSDAY Belinda was waiting for me with her vampire-like teeth exposed as her thin, cruel lips were pulled back in a full snarl. I couldn't help being a half an hour late; it took me that long to tie my shoes. Belinda led me to the dumbbells. When she was not looking, I ran and hid in the men's room. She sent Lars to find me. Then, as punishment, she put me on the rowing machine -- which I sank.

FRIDAY I hate that Belinda more than any human being has ever hated any other human being in the history of the world. Stupid, skinny, anemic cheerleader. If there was a part of my body I could move without unbearable pain, I would beat her with it. Belinda wanted me to work on my triceps. I don't have any triceps! And if you don't want dents in the floor, don't hand me the barbells or anything heavier than a sandwich. The treadmill flung me off and I landed on a health and nutrition teacher.

SATURDAY She - Belinda - left a message on my answering machine in her grating, shrilly voice wondering why I did not show up today. Just hearing her made me want to smash it. However, lacking the strength to use even the TV remote I caught 11 straight hours of the Weather Channel.

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SUNDAY I'm having the church van can pick me up for services today so I can go and thank the Lord that this week is over. I will also pray that next year my wife (what an idiot) will choose a gift for me that is fun -- like a root canal.

Now to be fair, dentists claim that root canals get a bad rap!

The wrong approach to Lent would be to view it as a hideous, unbearable burden. If we see Lent only as a time to be ever yet more aware of ways in which we fail, while not discovering at the same time any experience of God's Good News, it would be an intolerable burden, something to avoid at all cost, or to skate through as quickly as possible, thank you for the ashes, pass me the Easter Lilly.

Today, I want you to receive and accept God's Good News, the Good News of God's Love, Hope and Forgiveness. It is God's Love, Hope and Forgiveness freely offered to all that can turn this season of Lent into a journey of discovery and renewal, moving you into a new way of trusting and believing and following IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF Jesus Christ. This Good News, the Good news that God has for us this Lent, is expressed very well in Jesus' lament over the city of Jerusalem and Jesus desire to gather all God's children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing – hear these words once again: 34Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

These words, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" are in fact a summary of the Good News of God's entire dealings with the people of Israel. God who freed the Hebrew community from slavery in Egypt, who brought them through a time of wandering into a land of promise, who gave them the Law to help them live faithfully, who sent the prophets to call this people, God's people, to faithful living, this God is the God who desired and desires to gather these children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" and yet they were not willing!

These words, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" are an apt and accurate summary of the Good News of everything that God was and is, did and does, for the entire human community in Jesus Christ! In Jesus God created, redeemed, renewed, restored, loved, gave, offered, taught, healed, inspired, died – all on behalf of all of us. Like a hen desiring to gather her brood, to protect, to warm, to nurture, to protect, God in Jesus opened wide God's wings on the Cross for all, and yet they, we, were not willing!

These words, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" are words that fully describe both the Good news that God purposes to meet us in Jesus Christ and at the same time describe so exactly our unwillingness to be so gathered, welcomed, loved and renewed!

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" this is Jesus' expression of the very life and the entire purpose of God – that we - the widest, most complete, fullest way, we are God's Most Wanted and yet... and yet we were and we are not always willing to be loved so utterly!

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God's most wanted this is who we are! You, me, all of us, God's most wanted, yet just like all those who make the FBI's most wanted list, we are on the run, on the lam from God. Here we are, God's most wanted, yet we go undercover, out of sight, on the run. We prefer our own misery rather than the freedom of God; we are willing to make do with our own half-formed, half-baked choices rather than embrace the fullness of the divine life; we would rather persist in prideful isolation than admit that we need a Savior; we would rather imagine that somehow we can "make it on our own" rather than discover that we belong to God and have a life that comes as a gift of love.

You, me, all of us, we all have our faces, our names, our descriptions on the posters that describe us as God's Most Wanted. Maybe sometime today or sometime this week you might have a go – try and imagine and create your very own God's Most Wanted Poster – with your photograph, your details on it!

As God's Most Wanted just how much is it you know you need God, just how much forgiveness is needed?

As God's Most Wanted, how much love, how deep a welcome do you need, how warm an embrace is what will be needed to convince you that being God's most wanted is not a bad thing but something quite marvelous, wonderful, life-changing, freeing, loving?

As God's Most Wanted just how much turning around is called for, how much laying aside and laying down will be expected so you can get about living the new life that God has for you? How much faith inspired by the God of faith will set you out on a new road of living and believing?

Over the past two weeks I along with many of you have enjoyed watching the exploits of the Olympic athletes. This Olympics the athletes who caught my eye more than usual were the cross-country skiers – those guys and gals – they are fit and strong and resilient – quite amazing – they keep on going mile after mile – often quite alone yet inspired from within and without, carrying themselves on from the start towards the goal that lies at the end. Disciplined, dedicated, devoted, determined – words we could apply to these athletes and words that describe what it means for us to walking in the footsteps of Jesus, trusting and believing, giving and serving.

God can post, "God's Most Wanted" posters for all y'all because God, in Jesus Christ, has opened [ARMS WIDE] wide the wings in welcome to and for all y'all for the entire human brood and for the entire scope of God's creation. In part this is the rub, this is our problem, this is what holds us back... for we would rather, truth be told, save ourselves, we would rather renew our own life, we would rather not need a Savior, we would rather not required to be rescued but such talk is foolishness, such dreams nightmares, such hopes dashed, for on our own we are lost and alone.

Your life, my life, our lives as God's Most Wanted touched, welcomed, embraced, loved, lovingly held by God. This Lenten Season some of us need to be working on our response to what being held and loved by God asks of us... And some of us need just to know for the first time or for the first time for sure that you are welcomed, loved, embraced by God.

"How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" People of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church this is how your God loves you, today, tomorrow, always. Be loved by God and love God in return. You are God's Most Wanted and God most wants you to be walking in the footsteps of Jesus. Amen.