

*Healthy Eating and Exercise: Resisting Gluttony and Sloth  
Third in a Lenten Series on My Body: God's Temple*

**The Third Sunday of Lent ~ March 7, 2010**

**Selected verses from Daniel 1: 1 - 16**

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim of Judah, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. Then the king commanded his palace master to bring some of the Israelites of the royal family and of the nobility, young men without physical defect and handsome, versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king's palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the royal rations of food and wine. They were to be educated for three years, so that at the end of that time they could be stationed in the king's court. Among them were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, from the tribe of Judah. The palace master gave them other names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the royal rations of food and wine; so he asked the palace master to allow him not to defile himself. Now God allowed Daniel to receive favour and compassion from the palace master. The palace master said to Daniel, 'I am afraid of my lord the king; he has appointed your food and your drink. If he should see you in poorer condition than the other young men of your own age, you would endanger my head with the king.' Then Daniel asked the guard whom the palace master had appointed over Daniel and his friends: 'Please test your servants for ten days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. You can then compare our appearance with the appearance of the young men who eat the royal rations, and deal with your servants according to what you observe.' So he agreed to this proposal and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was observed that they appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations. So the guard continued to withdraw their royal rations and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. To these four young men God gave knowledge and skill in every aspect of literature and wisdom; Daniel also had insight into all visions and dreams.

**Luke 13: 6 – 9**

<sup>6</sup>Then Jesus told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup>So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup>He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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The season of Lent continues to call us to wholeness and holiness. Each week we are reminded that our bodies ARE temples of the Holy Spirit; therefore, we are to honor God with our bodies. It's tempting, however, for us to dissociate what we eat and whether we exercise from our commitments to God. Dieting and exercising in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are seen as signs of our caring about physical fitness. We want to loose weight so that we look good. We want to feel good. We want to be fit. It's not about God. It's about us.

This morning I invite you to make a paradigm shift. I want you to hear these encouraging words about eating and exercising through your ears of faith. Imagine, if you will, choosing to loose weight so that your body can become a better temple for God's spirit. Or similarly, imagine choosing to commit to an exercise program so that you can better honor God with your body. It's a huge paradigm shift from healthy eating and exercising for ME to health eating and exercising for GOD! This new paradigm offers us a very different incentive for being fit. If we are to be the best we can be for God, if we are to offer ourselves for the work of Jesus Christ on this earth, then it behooves us to take care of our bodies, for they are the only vehicle that will enable us to accomplish God's intentions and will.

All of this rests on the premise that every single life has value.\* There are no disposable people. Every human contains the breath of God that brings life. There are no excuses. God wants the best from each of us. I think of former Superman actor Christopher Reeve. Unable to move his head, totally dependent on a respirator to deliver his breath, that man maximized his gift of life in spite of his overwhelming physical limitations and life-threatening injuries. He traveled. He lectured. He inspired millions. He did the very best that he could with his compromised body. Christopher Reeve demonstrated that the quality and value of life is not tied to the absence of debilitating injuries or disease. His broken, compromised body was a beautiful temple for God's spirit.

Being fit for God. Healthy eating and exercising. Let's begin with the eating. Consider our reading from the Book of Daniel. In 16 short verses, the point is made about healthy eating. The king wanted to beef up the brightest and best to serve in his royal court. Daniel and his friends were among the Israelites selected. The king ordered that they and others be fed "royal rations of food and wine." I can only imagine what these "rations" included. Surely there was plenty of meat, and most likely, it was unclean meat that had been prepared for offerings to the Babylonian gods. Plenty of oil would have been used in the cooking and surely there were sweet pastries to delight the palate. Most likely there was a different wine to accompany each course. This diet weighs in heavily on the meat and beans portion of the food pyramid and rather low on the grains, vegetables, fruits and dairy sides of the pyramid. Think of the resources needed to produce this royal diet. But Daniel is a foil to the royal rations. He asks permission to live on vegetables and water, to fast from the rich diet and feast on the harvest of God's earth. He and his friends most likely ate lentils and beans, whole wheat grains that had not been refined, leeks and green vegetables. This was not only healthier for Daniel and his friends, it was better for the environment and consumed fewer resources. The result? "At the end of ten days it was observed that Daniel and his friends appeared better and fatter than all the young men who had been eating the royal rations."

\*Again, I am grateful to Michael Slaughter and his thoughts and illustrations in *Momentum for Life*. I have quoted him throughout this sermon.

Daniel was God's messenger. This was just the beginning of his wisdom. But he didn't choose his diet in order to improve his own personal fitness, he did it in order to be fit for the work that God had in store for him.

Imagine if we all ate more healthily in order to be fit for the work that God has in store for us? The food pyramid suggests that each day we eat at least 6 oz of grains (half of them whole grains); 2 1/2 cups of vegetables, 1 1/2 cups of fruits; 3 cups of milk or calcium rich foods; and 5 oz. of meat, fish, eggs and beans, with an emphasis on going lean with protein. Now also imagine choosing to live on this diet so that we demand less of earth's resources to satisfy our hungers while providing more for those who have little or none. It's all about reducing "externalized costs" through healthy nutrition and eating habits. The food choices that we make becomes a justice issue. The more we consume, the less resources are available for others. We can choose to be part of the solution to world hunger by healthy eating while working for a world in which the hunger of every human being is met with nourishment.

One of my favorite table graces is this: "God bless to us our bread, and give bread to all those who are hungry, and hunger for justice to those who are fed. God bless to us our bread." (Iona Abbey, June 2009)

Stephanie Paulsell in her book *Honoring the Body* reminds us that table blessings often hold together gratitude for God's sustenance and remembrance of those who hunger. Remembering the one should lead us to think of the other. Every time we sit down to a meal, we can remember two things: that life is sustained by God and that there are many, beloved by God, who do not have enough to eat. Gratitude and solidarity, practiced over and over, three times each day, out to shape not only how we receive nourishment but how we receive our neighbor as well, how, what we choose to eat affects not only our global neighbors but all of God's creation as well. Learning to eat with others in mind is another dimension of thinking beyond ourselves to what God desires for us and for all of God's creatures and creation.

Eating healthy for God leads us to reckon with the importance of exercise. Fitness starts with good nutrition, but unless we exercise our bodies, we will not be the best we can be for God.

Michael Slaughter in his book *Momentum for Life* suggests that both aerobic exercise and maintaining muscle tone and strength are important aspects of exercise. Aerobic exercise is intentional physical movement that keeps the heart rate up for 20 – 30 minutes. The focus of aerobic exercise is cardio or heart health. It is important to do some form of cardio exercise at least 3 times a week. For many, a daily regimen of walking affords aerobic exercise. For others, it is swimming or running on a treadmill or working out at the Y or at a gym. While aerobic exercise makes for heart health, keeping our muscles in shape is also critical. It's a known fact that our muscles are the furnace of our metabolism. Muscle burns fat 24 hours a day, even while we sleep. Building strength in all of our major muscle groups leads to better health and fitness.

Daily exercise calls for rigorous discipline. We all know that discipline is painful for the moment in which it is practiced, but the reward is great in the long run. It's all about the journey, the demanding climb of ascent. Without discipline, without momentum, we become spiritually, emotionally and physically tired and drop off the path of ascent. Writes the author of

the Book of Hebrews, “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Heb. 12:11)

Remember the parable of the fig tree. For three years the tree had not produced fruit. It’s time has come to be cut down. Land is precious. An unfruitful tree could not be allowed to use resources that could nourish a fruitful one. But the gardener intercedes and offers to dig around the tree and fertilize it. The tree is given another chance. With proper care, the tree has a year to bear fruit.

As Jesus’ disciples, are we not like the fig tree? Are we not expected to bear fruit? the fruit of love and kindness, deeds of charity and acts of justice? And the more we care for our bodies, the better able we will be to do God’s work here on earth. We live to discover and serve God’s purpose. The fruitful completion of that purpose and the enjoyment of the fruits of our life’s labors are best served by our continued good health.

Our life is a gift from God. Our bodies are God’s temples. May we all renew our commitment to make our life and our body an honorable, excellent offering to God through the discipline of healthy eating and exercise.

So be it. Alleluia. Amen.