

*Based on *Ephesians 4:1-4a, 14-16. A Student of Paul Urges Building Up the Body*

**Incarnational translation below*

The Second Marathon my colleagues are calling it.

This thing we are all gearing up for come September: Back to the Office, Back to the Classroom, Back to the Sanctuary, in a frantic frenetic “return to normalcy,” delta variant surge notwithstanding.

The Second Marathon my colleagues are calling it. As if the COVID marathon itself has not been enough, here we are, collapsed, exhausted from the first marathon, soaking up a lazy summer, gearing up for the second marathon come September.

I’ve pulled out my running shoes the other day to gear up for this second marathon.

The problem is, I really hate running. Really, I hate it.

I tried “speaking the truth in love” to my running shoes. We had a really good conversation. We were honest with one another about our needs. We tried not to blame each other for the things that were really our own fault. We used “I” statements. We talked about our hopes for the future. We set some shared goals.

And then ... I walked away! In my dress shoes! Leaving these poor second-marathon-ready running shoes haphazardly strewn along the floor of the closet. Collecting dust bunnies.

Oh, my ...

Why does it have to be so HARD!?

In the midst of our agony, here comes a student of the apostle Paul in our lectionary text this morning, turned-personal-fitness-instructor, “building up the body of Christ” over and over again in first century Ephesus. Let’s call him, Paul, Jr.

I wonder what Paul, Jr. would be like on “The Biggest Loser.” You know, that reality TV show where participants compete to see who loses the most weight in a season. Paul, Jr. could be the first century version of Jillian Michaels, the rock hard, tough love, no complaints task-master, getting right in our face every Sunday and every other day in between. Keep running, keep sweating, don’t even think about quitting, we have a second marathon to run! Grow up! Get to work! Go, go, go!!!

Or maybe Paul, Jr. is more like the quieter, kinder, compassionate personal trainer, nudging his clients to do the thing they have already said they really do want to do. Paul does tell the Ephesians to be “humble, gentle, and patient, accepting each other in love.” Maybe he uses the do-it-for-me-if-you-really-love-me approach: I would be so proud of you, friends in Ephesus, if you would just pull out your running shoes once or twice a week, do what you can, eat one less brownie ... even a half marathon is better than nothing, I know you can do it. I’ll be right here with you ... just don’t give up ... don’t give up ... don’t give up ...

Oh, the Ephesians had some body building to do back in the day, just like every other church Paul founded, and Paul, Jr. tended, just like every church throughout the ages, just like we do here at SPC. It would be so much easier to sit back and eat brownies all lazy summer long!

But they are a hodge-podge collection of believers in first century Ephesus—and maybe even a few unbelievers—and they have work to do, over and over again, to keep their body strong. No, they do not have a global pandemic, as far as we know. But they do endure violence and the threat of violence equal to – and worse – than the gripping and gut-wrenching testimony of DC Metro and Capitol Police officers during the Select Committee on the Insurrection hearings this week.

The Body of the Community in first century Ephesus is on the line just as much as ours is – if not more.

On top of all that, there is a generational shift going on in the Ephesus Church.

At the time of this writing this letter, much of the congregation is new to the community, unfamiliar with the rich heritage of what has come before: the tradition so central to the life of Jesus and Paul, Sr. and the ones who have built the congregation from scratch. Those hard-working saints who feel, justifiably so, that they have done enough body building, thank you very much, just want to continue on the trajectory they have known for decades. But here comes Paul, Jr. telling them do it all over again.

In the face of body-crushing politics beyond the community, and in the face of Body-jolting dynamics within the community, all of the Ephesians together have to figure out how to build One Strong Body, over and over again, as time passes and circumstances change and new members come and go.

A Second ... and Third ... and Fifth Marathon, to be sure.

How to equip the saints in Ephesus for their future, Paul, Jr. is trying to figure out.

How to equip the saints at Shepherdstown Presbyterian for our future, we are trying to figure out.

You know, it is an interesting word in Greek, the one we translate into English as “equip.” *katartismos* It is the same word you would use to describe setting a bone after it has been broken. Ouch! That does not sound terribly appealing! Maybe I really would rather have the tough-as-nails Jillian Michaels screaming in my ear!

But think about it. Especially in the time of COVID. Especially in the time of medieval hand to hand combat at the highest levels of our government. Especially in the time of “Greatest Of All Time” Olympians showing us all the values of choosing physical and mental wellness over ANY OTHER real or perceived obligation.

Equipping our congregation, equipping our nation, equipping our global human population, building up The Body, as we transition back to *em*-bodied community, may really be something like setting a broken bone. Because we have been broken.

The good news of what Paul, Jr. is trying to teach us is that, broken as we are, we can still come back together! Day by day. As we learn to abide in this God-given anointing of body and spirit that is the human condition.

Here is how we do it: Comport ourselves worthily in our calling. Grounded and unpretentious, in the midst of hot air from those who profit from deceitful schemes. Persisting, *nevertheless!*, as we speak our truth in deep, radical, steadfast, hope-filled love.

The even better news that Paul, Jr. is trying to teach us is this: it turns out, in the miracle of the human body, a broken bone that has been set and then healed can actually become stronger than it was to begin with. And we can, too!

Maybe it is not, after all, a second marathon Paul, Jr. is gearing us up for. At least not this year. I don't think any of us are really ready for that in our schools or our work or our church. Maybe what we are gearing up for is more like really good physical therapy. One step at a time. One day at a time. As we slowly but steadily transition back to embodied community, rooted in The Way of Jesus, with Radical Hospitality, Holistic Spirituality, and Engaged Compassion knitting all of us together in love to serve one another and, indeed, the world.

So if a really good year of physical therapy is what we are signing up for come September, count me in!

Let the church say, Amen.

**An incarnational translation offers an authentic translation of the ancient biblical text in the context of the current moment.*

Ephesians 4:1-4a, 14-16

*A letter from Paula's daughter,
commissioned in The Way of Jesus
through God's anointing*

*To those who join her on the journey,
trusting also in their own anointing:*

*As one who is, like you, learning day by day
how to abide in this anointing
- captive to this calling -
I call upon YOU
[insert your name here]
to comport yourself worthily
in your own divine calling:
grounded and unpretentious in every respect,
persisting – nevertheless! – through long-suffering,
engaging one another with
the forbearance of agape love,
zealously guarding the oneness of the Spirit
in the bond of peaceful prosperity for all:*

One Body and One Spirit. ...

*We must no longer behave with immaturity,
tossed about in the waves of emotional instability,
and blown about by hot air disguised as truth-telling:
the shrewd gamble of those who
profit from deceitful schemes.*

*Speaking the truth, however,
in agape love,
we must grow up!*

*Captive in our calling
- in every way -
to the One in charge:
The Anointed.*

*Then the Body can work as One,
every joint and ligament serving its unique purpose,
fused together by need and circumstance
to promote the growth of the Body:
building up its full self
in agape love.*

*Peace be to the whole community.
Pastor Gusti*