

## "Learning to Play the Game"

Deuteronomy 10:10-15; II Timothy 4:1-8, 16-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 31, 2014 – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Football season is officially here now that Ohio State has begun its season. As we watch the action we might want to consider that there are really *two* games going on. One is seen; the other invisible. One is clear to follow; the other much harder to discern.

The outer game is the obvious one played against an opponent. It has a lot to do with understanding and mastering the basics like how to swing a racket or club or bat, or how to position your body to best effect. This outer game is what the coaches work on as they try to develop the skills in a person that will make them, and the team, a success.

The inner game, on the other hand, takes place in the mind of the player. It's about concentration and will power and desire. It blocks out everything that would interfere with performance. How a person thinks definitely affects how he or she will do on the court, on the field, or in the ring. It's often the championship difference. Two games, one inner and one outer, and they go on simultaneously.

We often wonder why we play so well one day and so poorly the next. The answer probably lies more with our internal approach than a sudden loss of skills. While we have the capacity to achieve, but we don't always seem to carry through with it. When something isn't right it's usually reflected in performance.

The kicker in football, for example, brings the same skills to the task, the same leg strength, but some days he can hit those forty yard field goals with ease and others he can't even come close. The golfer has the same hand-eye coordination, but sometimes can't drop those short putts for anything. When the inner game is off, so is the outer one.

The Apostle Paul seemed to recognize this two-sided aspect to competition even in those days. Writing to a young missionary named Timothy, he uses sports analogy as he talks about his race of life. For him his days are now almost over and he has not only run, but he has completed the race successfully. "I have fought the good fight," he says, "I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." He knows, too, that an award waits for him at the finish line.

Certainly Paul worked tirelessly to spread the Gospel, but he knew that effort alone wouldn't bring about the results he desired. He could be on the go from sun-up to sun-down, but that wouldn't necessarily guarantee success. To accomplish his goal he had to be in touch with the convictions that spurred him on in the first place. They pushed him to go forward when he wanted to stop and that made him do his best when he was tempted to let mediocre be good enough.

Paul was fully aware that his inner attitude held the key to how well he did. It was the crucial factor in any success he would have. In reading Paul's letters we find he often speaks of the victories he has had in one place or another, but he always acknowledges what really got him

there. In our lesson this morning he says, "At first no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and the Gentiles might hear it."

Paul was either a very unassuming man, modest to the nth degree, or he honestly knew the ultimate source of his power and success. I believe it's the latter, for we see repeatedly that he gives the credit to God. He knows full well the extent of what he accomplishes by his own insight, strength, and perseverance. It takes more than this to succeed, however, and he is able to access what he needs because he has opened himself up to God's active presence.

For most of us life isn't a bed of roses, nor anything like it. We all have many demands and challenges. Sometimes we can adjust and modify the impact of what comes our way, but not always. The question then becomes, "What do I have inside me that will make it possible to deal with today? Where do I find my ability to cope with all the demands that are mine to face'?"

From my own experience I know that what is at the core of a person will determine his or her response to life. What's inward will inevitably affect what's outward. They cannot be separated. If there's an inner game of tennis and an inner game of golf, then you could say that what we're about in the grander scale is perfecting the inner game of life. And the first thing we have to do is discover what God has already placed within to help us deal with our challenges.

One bitterly cold evening a man drove from his home in New Hampshire to a small town in Maine. On his way back after midnight he skidded on an icy curve and the car spun off the roadway into a snowbank. He tells what happened next in these words:

"As I sat in the car getting colder by the second, the gravity of my situation struck me. It was about 20 degrees below zero outside, and I had nothing other than the sports jacket I was wearing. There was no hope of keeping warm in the car while it was stationary, and there was little hope of being picked up by another car. It had been 20 minutes since I had passed through the last town, and not a single automobile had passed me in that time. There were no farmhouses, no cultivated land, not even telephone poles to remind me of civilization. I had no map and no idea how far ahead the next town might be.

"I was faced with an interesting choice. I would freeze if I remained in the car, so I had to decide whether to walk forward into the unknown in the hope that a town might be around the very next corner, or to walk back in the direction from which I had come, knowing that there was certain help at least 15 miles back. I decided to go back.

After three minutes my ears were freezing and felt as if they were about to chip off, so I started to run. But the cold drained my energy quickly, and soon I had to slow again to a walk. This time I walked for only two minutes before becoming too cold. Again I ran, but again grew fatigued quickly. The periods of running began to grow shorter, as did the periods for walking, and I soon realized what the outcome of these decreasing cycles would be.

"I could see myself by the side of the road covered with snow, frozen to death. At that moment, what had first appeared to be merely a difficult situation began to look as if it was

going to be my final situation. Awareness of the very real possibility of death slowed me to a stop.

"After a minute of reflection, I found myself saying aloud. 'Ok, Lord, if now is the time, so be it. I'm ready.' I really meant it. With that I stopped thinking about it and began calmly walking down the road, suddenly aware of the beauty of the night. I became absorbed in the silence of the stars and in the loveliness of the dimly lit forms around me; everything was beautiful. Then without thinking, I started running. To my surprise I didn't stop for a full 40 minutes, and then only because I spotted a light burning in the window of a distant house."

Where do you suppose this energy came from which allowed the man to run without stopping?" Why hadn't he felt frightened during that time? Why didn't he get tired?

I would say that he drew upon a critical inner strength at this very time of greatest need. He didn't give up though he knew full well his dire situation; instead, he acknowledged a power within that helped him finish his run for life. That awareness brought a calm in the midst of crisis.

This is how Paul finished his run as well. It wasn't his own strength, he admitted, but it was strength that came from the Lord. It was an inner force that released the spiritual energy that allowed him to run with freedom, even abandon, to be successful where otherwise he would have failed.

Much of life is learning about when to stop running on our own limited resources and letting God take over. When we do this, the apostle tells us, we discover the full power that the Lord makes available to us. When we do this, we welcome God's energy pulsing through us—whatever the demands and whatever the challenges that come our way.

There are two aspects to living. Unless you work out of both of them, you cannot bring forth your best. One has a way of draining down our strength, but the other—the inner one—promises to take over just where ours leaves off. As this applies to the game of life, consider now that coach Paul, the apostle, has spoken and so let's listen up!