

"Taking It to the Max"

Psalm 15; II Corinthians 8:1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 1, 2015 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

All former English teachers would like to remember how enthusiastic their students were whenever they were assigned a theme. Most often, however, their expressions seemed to imply, "Please, please reconsider. Ask anything, just don't make us write."

Maybe I should have taken pity on them, but I never did. Rarely to never did I hear, "Thank you, Mr. Botts, for letting us express ourselves on paper. We appreciate this opportunity, as well as all the other fine efforts you put forth on our behalf."

Instead I usually got, "Do we have to?" or "We've got a biology test to study for!" And always, after the class was resigned to the inevitability of the assignment: "How long does it have to be?" Is that double spaced or single spaced?" Directions had to be very explicit or I'd get them on wide-line paper with the largest handwriting they could manage. Less words that way. It wouldn't take as much effort and, therefore, not as much time.

I don't know that this should have surprised me. Their reaction to being told to do something was merely an extension of how most children respond, and that's by testing to see how little they can get by with. If you tell Jimmy he can't get up from the supper table until he eats more or his peas, he'll ask, "How many do I have to eat?" If you tell Susan she can't go out to play until she has picked up her clothes, she'll question, "All of them?"

Kids want to know what is the absolute minimum they have to do to comply, and then they proceed to do about half of that. Sound familiar? Good thing we weren't like that when we were their age. It's this modern generation, you know.

Doing just what you're told and no more is the standard by which all too many people operate, even when they grow up. It's completing the minimum requirements, providing the least acceptable service, putting in the fewest hours possible. It reminds you of that old adage, "If you want something done, ask a busy person; the rest won't have the time."

Some people actually seem to exert quite an effort to ensure that they won't have to do anything. A favorite of store clerks is to stare blankly at you when asked the simplest of questions. This usually discourages customers from posing anything truly complicated. Why bother, you figure? The clerk gets off the hook easy.

It's interesting to me, however, that those who shirk from work as a matter of course don't usually seem to be happy people. They often have a frown on their face and go around as if they're mad at the world. I think the saddest and most lifeless people may be those who regularly try to get by with the least. It seems there is usually minimum joy with minimum accomplishment.

Biblical faith on the other hand challenges the believer to live life to the max. "Excel," Paul urged the Corinthians. "We want you to know, brothers and sisters, what God's grace has

accomplished in the churches in Macedonia. They have been severely tested by the troubles they went through; but their joy was so great that they were extremely generous in their giving, even though they are very poor. I can assure you that they gave as much as they could, and even more so. They begged us for the privilege of having a part in helping God's people in Judea. It was more than we could have hoped for!"

As Paul cites the example of the Macedonians' generosity, he also wants the people in Corinth to recall a concern he lifted up in a prior letter. There he urged them to put aside some money on the first day of each week for the relief of impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. Now he says, "Complete this service of love. As you excel in everything-- in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in your eagerness and love-- so excel and be generous as well in this service of love."

Paul, himself, exemplifies the challenge he gave to others. He excelled in that greatest of adventures, which is life itself. He threw himself fully into whatever he did. His dedication, his commitment, his sacrifice, his caring were all to the greatest extent possible. On another occasion he wrote, "I will show you a more excellent way." And that he did in everything he undertook. His admonition and his effort corresponded or, as we might say, "He practiced what he preached."

In every congregation Paul knew there were some members who approached their faith in a limited way. Their attendance would be minimal, they'd make only a token financial commitment, and they would avoid responsibilities whenever possible. They might be part of the church, but stand at its very edge.

To excel in faith means more than simply go through the motions. To excel is to experience life in its fullest. It is to be curious about what you don't know; to enjoy the company of others and to marvel at their insights, skills, and knowledge; to get up each day with a song of praise upon your lips and a prayer of gratitude in your heart; To excel is to see the plight of others with compassion and to thank God for the opportunity to witness through loving service; to take the gifts the Lord has given you and make the most you can with them. To excel is to be unstinting in everything, and that's what Paul was challenging the Corinthians to be—generous givers of self and substance.

A certain scientist had been working in cancer research for the last fifteen years of his career. As he reached retirement a reporter asked him if he was disappointed that his work didn't produce more positive results. "Yes," he said, "at times I have been, but not as much as I thought I would be. I realize that every lead that I pursued will save someone else from following a road that leads to a dead end.

"I've helped in the only way I could. I will not win the Nobel prize. My name will not go down in scientific history. I worked as hard as I could. I would have liked to have made the long-awaited breakthrough, but my destiny was to be one who would lay groundwork for others to continue this quest after me. Still, that is a great consolation. I did not fail, but instead pushed the advancement of research another couple of steps farther. I gave it my best."

We don't always have to succeed in order to excel. We don't have to be best in everything | to be good enough. When it comes to living the Christian life, Jesus does not call us to

success, but rather to faithfulness. Effort is something that we have control over; success is most often not in our power to determine.

Paul encourages us to live life to the maximum rather than to settle for the half-life of the minimum. We have one opportunity, and one only, to taste human existence. Why, then, tip-toe through our days when our bodies are created to run? Why whisper when our voices are made to shout?

Through Paul's letters we know some of what he wrote to those early congregations. I wonder, if he were still around today, what he might write to us at Highlands? I can't be sure of course, but I think it might be something like this:

"Keep on, friends, with the important work you are now doing. Feel good about what you accomplish, but don't sit down yet to reminisce. Look to the future. The Lord has greater things yet for Highlands to do. Don't despair because you are a small church. Don't adopt the world's wisdom of size and worth. Instead, take the valuable gifts you have and multiply them to witness to the power of God at work in you. Consider what you can do, not what you probably can't.

"The seeds that you plant today will show forth in the blooms of tomorrow. Don't be afraid to try the new, for time doesn't stand still. It requires imagination and innovation. Excel in whatever you do. Invest yourself fully in what you attempt. Be faithful, and the Spirit's presence will be felt increasingly in all aspects of your life together."

Yes, I think that's what Paul might say to us as we plan for 2015 and the years ahead. It's a message that says go for the max, whether individually, or together as the church, for that is what it will take. It's the way to live, and the only way to really excel in your faith.