

**Living Expectantly: Keeping Fit**  
**I Thessalonians 5:12-28**

Leontine Price, the famed soprano, retired 20 years ago and yet at the age of 90 she reentered the spotlight in the documentary “The Opera House.” The documentary tells the complex, tense saga of the building and inauguration, in 1966, of the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. The “New Met” opened with the lavish premiere of Samuel Barber’s “Antony and Cleopatra”, tailored to Ms. Price’s radiant voice and prima donna grandeur. Mrs. Price remembered in an interview with the New York Times in December of 2017 that on opening night “she was swept up in thoughts about the unlikely path she had traveled, from her birth to humble parents in the small Mississippi town of Laurel in the segregated South - her mother was a midwife and her father worked in a sawmill - to her momentous Met debut in 1961 singing Leonora in Verdi’s “Il Trovatore,” - to the 1966 theater opening in a made-to-order grand opera.

It left her speechless she said. And yet the reporter noted that at 90 she was anything but speechless in her interview. Price told him that she still sings every day and commented “It’s practically the only thing in me that still works” - at least without Bengay, athletic creams or Emu oil!

And yet like many of us there were struggles along the way. In the prime of her brilliant career, having been in the limelight for over two decades, she virtually disappeared from the stage of the Metropolitan Opera. In an interview, she talked about the reasons for her withdrawal and her selective scheduling of recitals.

She said, “There are certain things in life that you have to have, because without them you’re so uptight and tense that all the joy is gone from performing. While a few years ago, I couldn’t have sat

here talking with a critic, let alone talk about myself. I used to even assume that the conductor's knew more than I did. Now I feel I have recaptured the joy of singing, the feeling that courses through your body when you know the tone is right and your whole being vibrates with it." What Ms. Price experienced in relation to her art, is what we as Christians seek. The feeling that courses through our bodies when we know the tone is right and our whole being vibrates with it. But that feeling doesn't come without intentionality, focus and dedication. And that is what she learned.

Paul knew this and as he concluded his letter to the church in Thessalonica his final thoughts turned to what they would need to keep the body - their own bodies and the body of Christ, the community of faith fit. Actually that is why he wrote the letter to begin with. To encourage them and to remind them to keep fit. That is why in his closing he makes sure that they knew that he wanted this letter to be read aloud to all the brothers and sisters. This was not a letter just for a few but a letter intended for the entire community. Because he wanted everyone to hear his words of encouragement and challenge.

Paul ended the letter with a prayer and a reminder. A reminder that God is always faithful. Important words for all of us. But it is his prayer that the God of peace will make them holy that sums up his message to them. Once again Eugene Petersen's translation in the Message jumped out at me.

*"May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole,  
make you holy and whole, put you together - spirit, soul, and body - and keep you fit for the  
coming of our Master, Jesus Christ."*

Paul's prayer was that they would be - put together -spirit, soul and body - in a way that would be pleasing to God. In a way that would bring harmony and peace to the community. And that is what we too pray for. As Christians it is our goal - the reason for our faithfulness and our desire to

live as Christ calls us to. But note that Paul was very specific about what it takes to stay fit. Our passage today includes sixteen phrases that give shape to our fitness regimen.

Now we all know what it takes to be fit. We need to eat right and keep moving - yes, exercise our bodies and our minds! But the part of staying fit that is the hardest is keeping to the task - doing it every day. Paying attention to every action and decision we make. It requires discipline, learning to do the things that keep us healthy and fit. And that is what Paul's closing comments are all about. These are the ways we should live so that we become holy and whole in God's eyes - until our whole beings vibrate as one with God and our lives are filled with joy.

Paul began by admonishing the community to respect the leaders among them. No specific leaders are named but in every group leaders emerge - those who take charge and encourage others. Paul values their role and knows the body of Christ needs them to find encouragement and to stay faithful on the journey. And everyone's role is to encourage and respect those who lead.

Next Paul said "*Be at peace among yourselves.*" In other words get along with one another. Everyone has a role in keeping the peace and being faithful. Each person within the body of Christ matters. And it is everyone's responsibility to work at getting along and keeping the peace.

Next Paul offers four specifics: *Admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.* He knew that to get along with others different methods are needed with different people. We learn that when we have children. What motivates one child does not necessarily motivate another. But our task is to find the method that works with each person so that all can succeed.

We think of idlers as those who are lazy but what Paul was probably talking about here were not the lazy freeloaders but those who were disorderly or troublemakers. The people who needed

direction and supervision to stay on task. Everyone has a purpose. Some just need more instruction than others and it is our role to provide that within the community.

In every group there are those who are timid and lack courage - the *fainthearted*. They do not have confidence and doubt their abilities. They need encouragement and to be built up and supported.

And there are some who are weak. Maybe weak in spirit, soul or body. They need help to start out slow so they can build up their body and soul until it has been strengthened. Many here know what it is to be weakened by illness. That is why physical therapy is so important because it gradually builds up our muscles until we overcome our weakness and become stronger. And when dealing with all these Paul reminds us that we must be patient with all, attentive to each person's needs. Patience is a virtue that is so important to the body of Christ especially when our ultimate goal is to encourage others and to grow as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Next Paul issued a warning - "*see that none of you repays evil for evil.*" We all know the tendency to strike out when someone does wrong to us. But friends, that is not the reaction that Christ taught. Paul reminded them that there is a better way to respond. "*Always seek to do good to one another and to all.*" Eugene Petersen says it this way: "*be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.*" I love that. How different might our lives be if we were to always look for the best in those around us instead of thinking the worst. It requires a different mindset but friends we are capable of developing this mindset if we continually work at it. If we look for the good and do not dwell on the frustrating.

And what it takes to do that is exactly what Paul turned to next. "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.*" He went on to say "*This is the will of God in Christ Jesus*

*for you.*" Friends, this is our goal. The reason we work to keep fit. So that we develop a heart and soul that rejoices in all of life - the good and the bad. That prays without ceasing trusting that God hears our prayers and walks with us on the journey. And offers thanksgiving to our God who has given us life itself. For when we live a life of gratitude everything around us changes for we view life differently. We see life as a gift from God. And God desires that we live expectantly - hopeful and joyous - with our eyes on God's kingdom and not our immediate needs.

To view life this way we need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit. This is why Paul admonished them to "*not quench the Spirit.*" The Spirit blows among us sometimes soothing and encouraging us and at other times providing a word of caution and warning slowing us down before we make mistakes. Throughout the history of scripture we often hear the voice of the Spirit through the prophet's messages. Which is why Paul reminded them *not to despise the words of the prophets* but to listen carefully for what was said might be important even though it was challenging. And so the final three phrases give guidance on how to listen to the Spirit and how to weigh what is heard - "*test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.*"

These are important words for us today just as they were in the first century. But if we are to test everything we need to know what we are testing it against. What are the criteria we use as a baseline. That is the only way we can discern when the Spirit is God's Spirit speaking and when it is other voices that could lead us astray. So how do we discern the difference? We need to know the word of God - God's story found in scripture.

Several months ago the newly formed Evangelism team began to plan our Bring a Friend Day which will be on September 30<sup>th</sup>. We decided that as part of that day we would have Bibles to give to those who visited. But I was not comfortable with just giving out a Bible because so many Bibles sit

on shelves and are never read. Having a Bible is not enough. Bibles are meant to be read until God's word becomes the guide for our lives. So our team began to talk about what we could provide for people that would help them to begin to read scripture in a way that could change lives. What developed out of those conversations is a two year pathway to reading the Bible. It is not a pathway that reads from Genesis to Revelation because so many people get stuck in Leviticus! But a pathway that moves back and forth between the Old and New Testaments - beginning with the gospel of Mark and an understanding of Jesus' life. For we believe that all scripture should be read through Christ's love for the world. So we start with Christ's life and then move back to the stories found in the Old Testament. Along the pathway we will remember the events that shaped God's people and the challenges the world provided and discover that God's people have always struggled to remain faithful to a loving and faithful God. But it is possible and desirable to remain faithful as long as we test everything with an eye on God's love for all people. And to do that we must raise the good and casts away the evil.

The pathway is set up so that each person can read at their own pace - a daily reading but it is set up so that if you read a step a month you could complete the process in two years. That may seem like a long time but hopefully it is not too much to overwhelm but just enough to keep us fit as we seek to live expectantly. For it takes commitment and dedication to keep fit.

To support us on this journey we will provide the Bibles, Breakfast and Brew monthly gathering - the second Wednesday morning of the month - where we will encourage one another on our journey and discuss our questions and our gleanings from scripture as we enjoy a cup of coffee and breakfast together. We begin this Wednesday at 8 am with an overview of scripture. We will have copies of the pathway to share. If you cannot join us on Wednesday we will also have copies of the

pathway available weekly in the narthex beginning next week and on our Bring a Friend Sunday for everyone who attends. We want to encourage you to think of a friend, someone you know who could benefit from a relationship with Jesus Christ and invite them to join us on this journey through scripture and life. For friends this is the greatest story ever told and it has the power to change our lives.

For friends, our goal is to be made holy and whole - spirit, soul and body - so that we will become fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. It was Paul's goal for the church at Thessalonica and it is our goal as a community of faith. I pray you will join us!