

Faithful Flesh: Carried to Health

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Luke 5: 7-25

This past week Mick Cornett, the mayor of Oklahoma City, came to Battle Creek and spoke at public gatherings at Burnham Brook and at City Hall. He came to challenge us to join his city's commitment to develop healthy lifestyle habits.

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, and Oklahoma City has the distinction of being one of the ten most obese cities in the country. Today obesity affects nearly a third of all Americans and adds \$93 billion to our nation's medical bill annually because of the associated risks of chronic diseases like type II diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, and heart disease.

The truth that we all want to ignore today is that - because of the lifestyle changes that have come with automation and technology - it takes a lot of effort to maintain healthy lifestyle habits. Today our communities are designed around automobiles, not walking or riding bicycles. There is actually very little physical exertion required in our lives any more. We drive everywhere we go. We have elevators and escalators to move us up and down between stories. Not many of us have to do any heavy lifting in our jobs anymore. Our economy has changed from a labor-intensive manufacturing workforce to a computer-driven information-technology workforce.

With our fast-paced lives we rarely take time to cook with raw ingredients anymore. Instead we rely more and more on prepared foods that are calorie dense but nutrient deficient. The simple truth is that today most of us get too little exercise and eat too much of the wrong kind of food.

We know what healthy lifestyle changes are necessary; we need to burn more calories than we consume, and we need to exercise a minimum of 30 minutes a day with a combination of aerobic and resistance training. That isn't news to any of us but most of us choose to ignore it. We hear it all the time and yet, all across America, obesity continues to grow at epidemic proportions.

I believe that one of the keys to recovering the health of our bodies lies in the text that we heard this morning from Luke's gospel.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the paralytic who was carried to health by his friends. Luke tells us that one day, instead of carrying the paralytic to the street corner to beg for alms, his friends carried him to Jesus in the hope that he would be healed. When they arrived at the place where Jesus was staying, they couldn't get close to him because of the huge crowd that had gathered around Jesus.

But they didn't get discouraged. They didn't turn around, give up and go home. Instead they carried their friend to health by lifting him onto the rooftop, removing some of the tiles, and lowering him down to Jesus in the middle of the crowd that had gathered around him.

Luke tells us that when Jesus saw the faith of the friends who carried the man up onto the roof, he said to the lame man, "Your sins are forgiven you...stand, take up your bed, and go to your home."

Luke's story of the lame man who was carried to health by his friends is one of those stories that, when we read it, we say to ourselves, "Yeah, that is what being in church is all about. It is about friends carrying each other to health."

Here in the church, we are pretty good at carrying each other when our bodies are broken. When someone is sick, casseroles begin showing up at the door. When they aren't well enough to get up and cook or to go out and shop for groceries, we make sure that they have food to sustain them through their illness. Here at First Congregational Church we maintain a whole storage room full of medical equipment to lend to people when they are incapacitated - canes, walkers, crutches and wheelchairs. We show up for each other when one of us is in the hospital, and sit with each other for hours waiting for treatment in the emergency room.

We check in with each other when someone is home sick to make sure they are doing everything they need to do to recover their health. We want to know: are you taking your medications...are you getting the rest you need...are you drinking enough fluids...are you eating your chicken soup...are you sticking with the exercises that the therapist prescribed for you?

I doubt if any of us have found it necessary to remove a section of roof tiles to help someone gain access to the

care that they need, but the church is often at its best when one of us is sick, or hospitalized, or grieving, or in crisis. We are accustomed to provide support and accountability to each other when our bodies are broken; but here in Christ's church, I believe that we can also become a community that provides the support and accountability we need to maintain healthy lifestyle habits.

Last year Mayor Cornett challenged the residents of Oklahoma City to lose a million pounds, and they are already more than half way there. One of the keys to their success has been the importance of support and accountability.

Oklahoma City did not launch a self-help weight loss program. Instead they encouraged people to develop healthy lifestyle habits with at least one other accountability partner of their own choosing. Accountability partners help each other honor their commitments by being in regular contact with each other about the very things that most of the rest of us keep hidden from each other - without guilt and shame. They tell each other how much they weigh each week when they get on the scale. They talk about what they ate; the good food choices that they made and the bad ones. They talk about the exercise they got or the exercise they skipped. They set diet and exercise goals together and talk about the progress they are making towards reaching those goals.

Healthy lifestyle changes can only be sustained with the support of accountability partners we can depend on. A few months ago I confessed to you that my wellness

exam had not gone as well as I had expected it to go. When a stranger showed up at my house with a scale and a tape measure and a needle to measure my weight, my body fat, and my cholesterol, I discovered that I exceeded the healthy limits in all three of those categories.

Not long after that sermon, Emily Joye and I made a commitment to each other to be accountability partners around exercise and fitness. We both realized that the work we do does not promote fitness. There is a reason that health insurance premiums for clergy are higher than the national average. It is easy to develop unhealthy lifestyle practices in our profession. We spend a lot of time sitting at our desks staring at computer screens, or talking with people, or sitting in chairs reading. There isn't much strenuous activity or heavy lifting involved in the work we do. Pastoring is deeply rewarding work but it doesn't provide much of an aerobic workout.

Emily Joye and I have both put on weight since starting our ministries here in Battle Creek and we realized that if we didn't make some significant lifestyle changes, we will not be able to maintain the health of our bodies.

So last month we met with a personal trainer at the YMCA who made us weigh in and took all of our body measurements and calculated the percentage of body fat we are carrying and where we store it on our bodies and he wrote all of that information down on a chart. And then he set up exercise routines for us to follow on a three day rotation.

As accountability partners, Emily Joye and I have made commitments to each other to show up every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning at 7:00 at the 'Y' to do 30 minutes of aerobic exercises along with the weight training schedule that our trainer set up for us.

There are days when I just don't feel like exercising, but I get dressed and go in to the 'Y' because I know that Emily Joye is going to be waiting for me. And there are days when I don't feel like staying on that treadmill for the full 30 minutes of our aerobic workout, but I do because Emily Joye is working out on the treadmill right next to me and she doesn't get off early.

Neither of us would be so faithful following our exercise schedules on our own. Sustainable healthy lifestyle changes require the support of an accountability partner.

We don't have to be paralytics to be carried to health by our friends. We don't have to wait until our bodies are sick or broken before reaching out to one another. We can form accountability relationships with each other now to help us develop and sustain healthy lifestyle habits.

There are great resources available on the Oklahoma City's website page at www.thiscityisgoingonadiet.com.

If you can't imagine who to ask to be your accountability partner, send me an email at tom@fccbc.org or to Emily Joye at emilyjoye@fccbc.org and we'll help you find someone who can help carry you to health. Amen.

