

“A Good Muslim Can Out Pray a Christian Any Day”

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(1 Corinthians 9:24-27)
Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany
February 15, 2009

“Run to win,”^[i] says Paul. Red Sanders, UCLA football coach in 1950, said, “Winning isn’t everything. It’s the only thing.” Sports writer Grantland Rice offered a counterpoint: “The most important thing is not whether you won or lost but how you played the game.” Paul’s race metaphor combines both of these points. There’s something in us that loves contests.

Well, how about a **PRAYING CONTEST**? Well, it’s not as far-fetched as you might think. Remember Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a praying contest. He built an altar to the Lord, dug a trench around the altar, and soaked the logs with water and then asked God for fire.^[ii] What an audacious church we need around here: a church that prays to win in the face of the Baals of greed, power, and idolatry.

In 1986, the LSU Tigers basketball team reached the regional finals against the Kentucky Wildcats; the game came down to a final play. Coach Dale Brown called timeout. He didn’t draw up a play. Walking up and down the bench, he asked each player, “Are we going to win?” And yes, the Tigers did win. The church needs to ask, “Are we going to win?”

You may ask, “What does Paul mean?” Winning, in Paul’s mind, equates to faithfulness. In II Tim 4:7, the writer says, “I have fought the good **fight**, I have finished the **race**, I have kept the **faith**.” This turns our ideas of winning upside down. If we cross the finish line, we all win. This is not an individual race, but all God’s people running together in faithfulness.^[iii]

See the church as a **peloton in the Tour de Universe**, stretching from Abraham to infinity. We never arrive. An exhausting thought, but true to our God who claims, “I make all things new.” And we have to stay together to keep pace. After all, the peloton will pick off a single cyclist and leave him hopelessly behind.^[iv]

Of all things, Paul says, “Exercise self-control in all things.” Another five laps around the track. Five extra hours of work to make a deadline. An hour each day for prayer, meditation. Stanley Hauerwas says, “I want to be part of a community with the habits and practices that will make me do what I would otherwise not choose to do and then to learn to like what I have been forced to do.”^[v]

Well, if we are going to be a built-Baptist-tough^[vi] church, we have to strip away all our pretensions, like Naaman, the leper.

Naaman was told to strip off his general’s uniform and stars, his sense of superiority, and most of all, his sense of entitlement and stand before God with nothing to commend him but the word of a preacher. So Naaman immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; and he was clean. Like Naaman, we have to let go of our illusions – like new recruits reporting for basic training.

Let’s concentrate on prayer. The sermon title suggests that Muslims can out pray Baptists. Admittedly that’s a caricature and as Gretchen Root told me Wednesday, “It depends on the Baptist.” And she’s right. There are Baptist pray – ers I’d put in any praying contest. My

dad, for example. At all times – mealtime, bedtime, times of trouble, times of questioning and doubts, Dad would say, “Let’s pray about this.” The trouble didn’t always dissipate, but we came from that prayer stronger. We are so solution-fixated, but when it comes to prayer, we need to pay more attention to the practice and less to the answer. After all, some prayers leave us stuck with thorns.

Listen, the church needs people with the gift of praying. Prayer gives us the resources to keep running and avoid burnout.^[vii] We need to empower magnificent, powerful, and wonderful pray – ers in our midst.

All of you qualify as priests praying for one another. Like May, in *The Secret Lives of Bees*, with her own wailing wall, care for one another’s hurts and pains. I’m asking some of you to hear this call, accept this cabinet position: Secretary of Prayer. I hope all your taxes are paid, but seriously, the vetting process is simply your willingness to pray.

Perhaps the reason God continues to use churches as patriarchal, conservative, moralistic, self-righteous as some churches is that people sitting in those pews are praying. Perhaps the reason God continues to use churches as liberal, tolerant, easy-going as some churches is that people sitting in those pews are praying. I’m not sure which prayer would be more Christian: A Southern Baptist woman praying for her patriarchal pastor or an American Baptist woman praying for her liberal pastor. Such churches continue to produce ordinary people who do extraordinary things that make no sense if people aren’t praying.^[viii] I want to thank you for the praying you are doing for this church.

Why intimate that Muslims are better at praying than Baptists? Well, a good Muslim prays five times a day. Listen to some Muslim teaching about prayer: “Since the prayer is the most important matter of Islam after having the correct belief in God and His Messenger, one must plan his life around the prayer. If a believer is shopping at the mall or waiting at the airport and there is no way to get home or to a mosque, he is still obligated to perform the prayer within its due time instead of purposely leaving out or delaying the prayer.”

Now, listen to the theology of prayer from a Jewish perspective: The *Siddur*, the Jewish prayer book, is the true companion of the Jew from the years of his early youth to the hour of his death. The daily routines of the Jew, his yearly cycles, and the milestones of his life from infancy to death are all accounted for in the Siddur. It permeates the Jew’s living experiences on every level.^[ix]

The more I discover the value of prayer books in other traditions, the more convinced I am that Baptists need a prayer book. “When all you have is the New Testament era and the ‘now,’ you are a bit short on resources to stand against the world.”^[x] Well, Baptists need a prayer book.^[xi] Something material – like the sculpture of Holden McCurry’s “Prayer Towers.” In each tower there’s a fold of paper for writing prayers. Something embodied.

Long term we aren’t competing with Muslims, Jews, or Buddhists. In 1980, Dr. Bailey Smith, then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said, “God does not hear the prayers of Jews.” I bet that came as a surprise to Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and a man hanging on a cross praying, “Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” God hears God’s people: red and yellow, black and white. Catholic and Protestant. Jew and Gentile. Man and woman. Gay and straight. Muslim and Hindu. I have more in common with a Muslim dad praying in Afghanistan for the safety of his family than I do with American Christians praying for revenge. We should all be praying for victory over the violence, greed,

selfishness, and hatred that threatens our world. Right here in Dayton, the peace process will be aided by Jews, Christians, and Muslims praying together. Lord, listen to your children praying.^[xii]

So among us baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit there needs to be more prayer: daily, disciplined, and communal. Prayer gives us a resource not available to the world, so by all means, let us be faithful, consistent practitioners of prayer. Morning, noon, evening, mealtime prayers will be a start. Ask someone to be your workout partner and then pray together. It will keep us faithful. It will keep us in shape for the race we have been called to win by finishing. Now, don't be late for practice.

[i] Paul casts faith into an archetypal metaphor of a race or a boxing match.

[ii] I Kings 18:21-39 Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." The people did not answer him a word. ²²Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred fifty. ²³Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. ²⁴Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God." All the people answered, "Well spoken!" ²⁵Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it." ²⁶So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. ²⁷At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." ²⁸Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. ²⁹As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response. ³⁰Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come closer to me"; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; ³¹Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, "Israel shall be your name"; ³²with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. ³³Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." ³⁴Then he said, "Do it a second time"; and they did it a second time. Again he said, "Do it a third time"; and they did it a third time, ³⁵so that the water ran all around the altar, and filled the trench also with water. ³⁶At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. ³⁷Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." ³⁸Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. ³⁹When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God." ⁴⁰Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape." Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.

[iii] In bicycle racing, the group riding together is called the peloton.

[iv] It is hard to follow a God who keeps making all things new while we keep protecting, clinging to, and obsessing about all things old and sacrosanct. Ours is a faith that sings a new song and there are battle lines being drawn over whether or not to sing "Onward Christian soldiers" in worship. Ours is a

faith that offers new wine and the church refuses to serve wine in communion. Ours is a faith that promises that we shall become new beings and we spend most of our time hunkering down in a mindless attempt to be the same old beings. Ours is a faith that hails a new heaven and a new earth and offers us a new Jerusalem. Ours is a faith that offers us a present with a future (William S. Coffin). We have to keep praying because we don't know where God will lead us next.

Walter Brueggemann says that we are all selective fundamentalists. Conservatives are idolatrous with their insistence on absolutism and certainty. Liberals are actually atheists in their insistence on autonomy and individualism. Food for theological reflection.

[v] Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*. "I am a Methodist – the time I was fifteen I had all the experience and self-understanding I can use for a lifetime. I do not want to be 'accepted' or 'understood.' I want to be part of a community with the habits and practices that will make me do what I would otherwise not choose to do and then to learn to like what I have been forced to do. That is why I find the Anabaptists and the Catholics so appealing. Given their history they cannot avoid acknowledging that salvation is about the cosmic transformation of creation in which, by baptism and through God's grace, we have been included. What such an inclusion offers is not acceptance or better understanding, but participation in God's life, God's kingdom, which protects us from the powers raging against that kingdom."

[vi] I know the Ford truck analogy is cheesy, but I like it. The church needs to be tougher. We are out of shape and undisciplined. We think we can sashay in here every Sunday and sleep through church, complain the sermon is too long, and go back out there and be great Christians. Well, we are wrong.

[vii] Unless we are undergirded by genuine prayer, we will not win this race. We will simply suffer from burnout caused by our lack of spiritual resources. Burnout is the feeling of those who thought that "on issues such as the environment, peace, poverty, and human rights they had built on solid rock only to find out that the rock was sand." Burnout hits those who think that points once proved stay proved. Burnout hits those who believe in the illusion of progress. It is burnout when all you want to do it quit.

[viii] Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 5.

[ix] The prayer-book is the mirror of the spirit of the Jewish people and its development; it reflects the spiritual, economic, political, and social history of Israel from the most ancient times up to the present. This book is the true companion of the Jew from the years of his early youth to the hour of his death (A.Z. Idelson taught liturgy at Hebrew Union College). The Siddur, the Jewish prayer book, has been called a treasure-house of the Jewish spirit. Actually it is more than that. It is also the blueprint of the Jewish religious life at its noblest level. The daily routines of the Jew, his yearly cycles, and the milestones of his life from infancy to death are all accounted for in the Siddur. It enters into the Jew's living experiences on every level. By means of suitable benedictions and prayers, the Siddur infuses the Jew's daily activities with an element of sanctity. Such routine acts as eating and drinking, rising in the morning and retiring at night, dressing and washing one's hands are all within the purview of the Siddur. (Abraham Millgram Jewish Publication Society 1971).

[x] Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 61.

[xi] O. Benjamin Sparks, retired pastor of Second Presbyterian Church of Richmond, Virginia, says that we need to rescue authentic faith and faithful discipleship from the dustbin of ecclesial history. And to do this requires prayer. It is prayer: prayer to the living God in the Spirit, prayer which is regular, disciplined, and communal. Prayer books and worship books and liturgies for Morning Prayer, Noon Prayer, Evening Prayer, and Compline give us a resource not available to the world, give us a power that toughens us for the race. What would happen if we made prayer a central practice of our programming? What if we advertised to parents: We will teach your children to pray. We will

introduce them to the Bible and have them learn memory verses. We will help you know how to raise children in faith. We will provide faith formation. And when they leave for college they will have a faith strong enough to survive the suffocating secularism they will meet on campus.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in a recent sermon in Alexandria, Egypt, called upon Anglican churches to spend more time praying. He says he is bothered by the idea that busy churches may give the idea that the church is about human beings doing things. He recalls a large church with a six-foot noticeboard filled with scheduled activities. And he says, "When you looked at that church you would have thought, what a lot of things they do there. But I'm still wondering if anyone ever asked, **does God do things here?**"

[xii] Lord listen to Your children praying,
Lord send Your Spirit in this place
Lord listen to Your children praying
Send us love, send us power, send us grace!