

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Exercising your Memory"
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Remembrance Sunday

Exercise is a form of discipline. Discipline in this instance simply means making a routine out of something important to you. Exercise, we are told, improves the immune system, the cardio-vascular system and also generally elevates your mood by stimulating what needs to be stimulated in the brain. So why don't we all exercise regularly and religiously?

The word "discipline" comes from the same root as disciple. A disciple is a follower. It is used in the Bible to talk about the twelve that chose to hang out with Jesus for the three years of his earthly ministry. Discipline is a way to exercise those parts of your life and relationships that are important to you.

Unfortunately, many of us don't have the discipline, or so we say, to do what we want to do. Or perhaps we have some self-discipline, but we do not have the control we desire over others.

In any case, we still need to exercise. The opposite of exercise is inactivity. Inactivity leads to inflexibility and atrophy, as those of us who have been in bed for days due to illness or injury can attest. Our bodies are made to be used, wisely, in moderation, for exercise, for movement, for increasing in strength, rather than fading in weakness, for almost all of us, with the exception of major diseases and disabilities. Even with these, we are called to exercise what we can and what parts of the body which are still available to exercise.

The mind is the same way. It is, of course, a part of the body. And there are several here much better trained than I am to tell you about either the body or the mind. But part of being a good steward of your mind is exercising it, in terms of memory, learning, healthy imagination, dreaming and creative expression.

Let me explore these aspects of exercising the mind in the reverse order in which I presented them. First, let's consider creative expression. Sometimes some of us feel the arts are a non-essential, an add-on to our real lives, our basic survival needs and our life in general. But in the creative

expression that we each have, in our language, both in speaking and listening, in our reading and writing, in our drawing, and painting, in our singing, in our other musical expressions, such as rhythm and musical instruments of various kinds, we have a central output of what it means to be human. These parts of the mind are essential to our mental health. Without them being exercised, we might become paralyzed or at least stunted in what it means to be who we are.

I believe this is why God gave us the psalms, the hymns and the spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16) as a central expression of the relationship between human beings and God that we call "worship." This is in part why we read from the Psalms every week. These are the central musical expression of who we are in relation to God, one another and the rest of the world.

As I've mentioned before, many studies have shown a great deal of benefit to the body and the mind in regularly singing. Many of us do so in private, because we worry about our musical abilities. But the fact is that we are to try in public to sing, no matter what we sound like, no matter what hurtful things have been said to us in the past in this area, we are to make music in our hearts, with our voices, with rhythm and with instruments. This is a great gift to us that each one of us can use, for our mental and spiritual health. So although I don't ever literally invite you to sing here, I am now. It benefits you. It benefits us. I believe it is a gift to give to the Lord.

And I could go on with many of the arts as I have about music, because there are similar benefits. I have been in worship services where an artist paints or draws on canvas while the service is ongoing as their expression of worship to the Lord. It has been quite moving and a wonderful gift for the whole community. Perhaps God is moving you to consider such a thing here sometime.

The second exercise of the mind that I mentioned is that of dreaming. Now most of us dream at night, the scientists tell us we all dream, even those of us who never remember our dreams. Dreaming is the way the brain sorts our memories, possibly like the defragmenting of a computer. Our memories and imagination weave narratives and we often receive an insight about ourselves, if we pay attention to our dreams. My PhD is partly in this area and I would like to explore this with you sometime. Meanwhile, let me suggest that our day dreaming, or the healthy use of our imaginations is the way we can exercise our minds for God's cause, for God's community. It is

good to dream about how much better our lives can become and be. It is wise, the Scripture tells us to let our minds dwell on what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy. (Philippians 4:8) If we consider our lives as a place for God to dwell, that our lives, even our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19), then we should allow ourselves enough mental space to consider how God might make us, each one of us, a place of healing for others, a place of peace for others, a place of oasis and refreshment. Now you might say you don't feel like that because you experience storms and temptations and worries and fears. Yes, we do.

And yet we can become much more as we allow God the space to enter our minds and lives. Creative imagination is what is bringing the technological advance we see around us happening at such a great pace. We should know too that we can see more happening spiritually in our lives as we use our imaginations for good, just as in many media today they are being used for evil, for destruction, for deception, for inappropriate use of breaking boundaries, for distorting lives. But our imaginations don't have to be pushed in that direction. They can be used for God's purposes and good.

And know for certain that you can continue to learn, as long as you are breathing. This garbage about teaching old dogs new tricks is not helpful for how we think about ourselves. No matter what age, no matter how old or how young, we are constantly learning. And our ability to learn is not destroyed in our older age. That is pure fiction. We might be slower, but that does not mean unable to learn. And just as the youngest of minds take in an incredible amount of information everyday, both in utero and upon birth, so also do the most elderly of minds process incredible amounts of information. Now we may ask ourselves why we are in a certain part of the house more often than a younger person, but that's not the point. The point is to choose to learn and to not belittle yourself in that ability. Sometimes we have had teachers and others who have doubted our ability to learn, but I believe strongly you can learn and you can choose to learn all that you need to know live well every day.

And part of that learning, a big part of it, is memory. Memory is the basement, the foundation, the studs, the structure which we build upon in order to learn something new. So it is no wonder that what we do often is draw people, here in the church, to remember. We do it at funerals, in remembering the person who is gone. We do it at weddings and

anniversaries, in remembering the love and commitment that makes marriage what it is. We do it at birth, birthdays and baptisms, remembering that our existence itself is a gift and our relationship to God is a gift to be received and cherished.

We do it on the Sunday before Remembrance Day to remember all those who gave their lives for the political freedom that we enjoy and to remind ourselves of the horrors of war and the motivations for making peace around the world. We exercise our memories most of all at the Lord's Table, where we often see written what is written on the front of our own Communion Table. What does it say? Do this in remembrance of me.

We remember the Lord, and that memory causes us to learn that today is a gift from the Lord, and that as we give ourselves to the Lord, we learn what pleases God most, and instills peace inside, truth and love. And we need to exercise our memories more often, or at least realize where we are already exercising our memories, so that we might be more thankful for what we do have, and not worrying about what we do not have.

As we remember the Lord who gave himself for us, and the true freedom that comes from that place, we learn anew the core of our faith, the memory of who we are, while still learning who we are becoming.

This is a mystery that God knows, our being, our becoming, our existence, our pain, our discouragement, our confusion, our wonder, our excitement, our amazement, our longing, our disgust, our journeys. We remember. We learn. We love God more and more.

This is who we are.

Let us pray.