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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
2/15/2009, The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Mark 1:40-45

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>25</sup>Every athlete exercises *self-control* in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.(1 Cor. 9:25, RSV)

This is a sermon about self-control, love, and hope for the imperishable wreath. My theme is that our self-control will be even richer when it is united to love and hope.

It is an old rule of classical morality that “the virtues are one.” You might have heard me make this point before when speaking of the “pirate.” It is because “the virtues are one” that, in the end, there is no such thing as a “brave pirate.” There he goes, let us imagine, dashing into danger. He swings on some great rope, with his pendulum movement hurling him onto the deck of the merchant ship. He flings his sword every which-a-way. He thrusts, he parries, he slays. But, in the end, the man is a coward. Give me a honest shoemaker any day -- a plain man who stitches leather, builds good shoes, charges a fair price, and dares, dares! to earn bread for his family through fair-and-square labor. A pirate *cannot* be brave, for courage demands justice, which the pirate has forsaken.

Likewise, there is no true self-control in this world that is not also completed by love and by hope. That one of steel determination, of iron will: Is he a man of self-control, a woman of self-control? It depends, I say, upon whether that one is also a man, a woman of love and hope.

So, let’s take them one at a time: first, self-control in relationship to love, and then self-control in relationship to hope.

First, about love, consider Jesus in this morning’s Gospel story. That Jesus is a man of self-control had already been demonstrated early in his ministry. His self-mastery was proved out there in the wilderness, when he was sorely tempted by the devil, but triumphed over ever temptation.

But Jesus did not permit his own powers of self-discipline to lead him to condemn those who had failed along those lines. That is a temptation, you know, for the person of self-discipline -- that he or she will look down on those of weaker character. But Jesus never does such a thing! He does not condemn, but rather saves the woman about to be stoned for adultery. He does not condemn Peter who has denied him, nor the other disciples who fled for their lives and forsook him. He does not use his strength to measure and belittle those who are weak.

So, that is one way in which our Lord’s self-discipline is tempered by love: his love forbids him to despise or disparage others.

But there is more to his love than this. Also, his love causes him to have compassion on others. Some people of iron self-will are left hard-hearted toward their neighbors. They are fairly indifferent to the sufferings and disappointments of others. They imagine that *had they* been in such tough circumstances, they would have borne up well, with no complaint. And so they expect such stoicism in others.

But not so Jesus in our Gospel story. The leper, kneeling before Jesus, says to him, “If you will, you can make me clean.” And Jesus does indeed make him clean. But St. Mark makes it clear to us that in making the man clean, Jesus is not acting out of some cold duty, nor calm calculation of political advantage. No, his heart is the thing! Jesus heals the man because he pities the man:

<sup>41</sup>Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I will; be clean.”

O humanity, pity the leper, both the one who suffers with the skin disease and the one who is treated like a leper. Here is a small example of the latter case – the one who is treated like a leper. It is not a story I am glad to tell, because it is a story that reflects badly, I fear, on my childhood church.

I have mentioned to you before that my father died fairly young: he died of cancer at age forty-five after a ten-year struggle. Well, when he died, a strange thing happened in our little congregation: our brothers and sisters in the Lord withdrew from my mother. How can I explain to you how odd this was? It would be like us withdrawing from Ann Siemer or Kathryn Weidmann or Marie Kohl or Davida Goldman. My mother had that kind of standing in our congregation. Yet in her time of sorrow, when she most could have used the support of others, they rather shied away from her. Especially the women of the church seemed to withdraw from my mother.

Part of this, I bet, was simply the human uncertainty about what to say to the one in grief. Well, I’m going to tell you what to say. I learned this long ago from the Pennsylvania farmers of York County: you walk up to the one who is sorrowful, you take her hand, you take his hand, you look in her eyes, in his eyes, and you say, “You have my sympathy.” That’s how you can begin. And if the Spirit leads you elsewhere, then go. But if not, at least you have shared some measure of support for the grieving person.

But there was something else going on in my childhood church. It was as if some of the women of the church suddenly developed a fear of my mother -- a fear that she now posed a threat to their marriages. One farmwife actually phoned my mother, without giving her name, and said that she knew that my mother was trying to steal away her husband. This astonished and grieved my mother. All she could think to say was that she would pray for the woman.

My mother was a strong woman, not easily hurt by others. But this hurt her. In the end, she left that congregation. She had been treated as a leper, through no fault of her own.

But that was how it was with the leper of old: through no fault of their own, they were shoved away. They were cast to the perimeter of the community. Few people would touch them.

But Jesus touched the leper. Sympathy for others can bring tears toward the eyes and tightness to the stomach. It was as if Jesus could feel the suffering and loneliness of the leper. *He himself* could feel it. He did not simply observe the leprosy, but *felt* the leprosy as if it were his own. And so he hastened to heal the man. If ever there were a man of self-discipline in this world, it was Jesus of Nazareth. But his self-discipline is

made even richer by his love for others. He loved the leper, and in loving, his self-control shines even more beautifully.

For the sake of love and for the sake of those God has entrusted to you, stand ready to help them. Practice self-control, exercise self-discipline, observe self-mastery so that you will be ready for the life of love. Let your self-control aim at love and let love encourage you in self-control.

So it is with hope too. The virtue of self-control flourishes best when the sunshine of hope falls upon it. Hope helps us against both despair and against immorality. First, consider hope's help against despair.

A stranger recently asked me whether I really believed in heaven. She seemed to think it a quaint notion in which modern folk could no longer believe. But she was gentle-minded and open to my testimony. In the end, with tears in her eyes, she asked this question, "Do you think I might actually see my mother again?" "Yes, Anna. Trust Jesus about that." My parting advice went simply like this: "This life counts, Anna. It counts for all eternity. So use it well and look forward in hope to seeing Jesus."

That is what hope is about: It is the basic trust in the soul that there is no need for despair in this world, that there is more to life than these threescore and ten years, and that even if loved ones have slipped away, or opportunities have faded, or seasons of life have passed, nonetheless there is Jesus. Our story is not yet done. In fact, the best part is ahead of us.

Meanwhile, exercise self-control for many reasons, including this simple reason: there is no need to fall apart as if all is lost. For in Jesus, nothing good is ever lost to us.

And I conclude with a few words about hope and the moral life of the Christian. Jesus was continually asking his followers to remember the divine dimension to life. Remember that there is more to life than these threescore and ten years.

Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. (Luke 12:33, RSV)

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26, KJV)

And St. Paul, in this morning's Epistle Reading, likewise says that he tries always to be mindful of eternity. He says that he exercises self-control "in all things," not for the sake of a perishable wreath, but an "imperishable" one. And he says that he is willing to treat his own body roughly, even to "pummel" it and to "subdue" it, as an athlete so vigorously exercises and accepts hunger and weariness and tired muscles, because the athlete is aiming at something. So you and I should aim: We should aim for Paul's "imperishable" wreath, even the crown of glory worn by those in Christ's kingdom.

The Corinthian Christians knew about athletic competition:

...the Isthmian Games, a biennial athletic spectacle surpassed in the ancient

world only by the Olympic Games, were held about ten miles outside Corinth...Isthmian winners were considered heroes throughout the Roman Empire, but their immediate reward at the conclusion of the race was in fact a wreath of dried celery... Richard B. Hays suggests that a modern English translation of verse 25 might read: "If these athletes push themselves to the limit in training to win that pathetic crown of withered vegetables, how much more should we maintain self-discipline for the sake of an imperishable crown?" (*First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [Louisville: John Knox, 1997] p. 156)<sup>1</sup>

This too is what hope is about: It is the basic trust in the soul that we do not need to grasp everything *now*, for there is good ahead of us, even beyond the horizon of our mortal life. So, flee from covetousness. Forsake every step that is unworthy of Jesus and of heaven's ways.

Altogether, Christian self-control requires both *striving* for things in life, especially striving to be compassionate for others, and *surrendering* some of the things of life, especially those things that are unworthy of a Christian, in hope, in calm confidence, that there is more to life than our seventy years could ever accumulate, even fullness of life in heaven to come, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Lectionary Commentary: The Second Readings*. Commentary by Professor Michael Rogness of Luther Seminary for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany.