

The Biggest Loser
Colossians 3:5-17

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Northbrook UMC

The Rev. Melissa Earley

I think the most inspiring of the reality TV shows is the Biggest Loser. Have you seen it? The basic premise is that contestants from across the country go to a ranch where they meet Jillian or Bob who are trainers. They have challenges and workouts all week. They learn about healthy eating. They are regularly examined by a physician, and then at the end of the week they have a weigh in. The two who have lost the least percentage amount of weight are considered “below the yellow line” and the rest of the contestants vote who they want to leave the ranch. The final three contestants go back to their “real lives” for a time and then come back for the final weigh-in. The one who has lost the highest percentage of weight wins.

I like the Biggest Loser. There’s something remarkable about watching folks transform themselves. As you watch the show you learn about the contestants and realize what they are up against. Some have been heavy their whole lives and others were thin and fit for a time in their lives but now find themselves battling their weight. In order to lose weight they have to develop habits of exercise and good food. All of them face the challenge of a huge lifestyle change. This isn’t a matter of tweaking, it’s a matter of total transformation.

The show is really inspiring. I think because it taps into something so real for us. Many of us can relate to wanting to lose some weight and now the difficulty of that. Whether it’s 20 pounds or 120 pounds, if you’ve ever had to watch what you eat and start a new work out routine, you know that it’s hard to change those basic habits. And if it’s not weight we need to

lose, there's some way we want to change. We want to organize our closets, get on top of our finances, or revamp our look.

That's what the reality of the world tells us is wrong with us. What needs to change is outward appearance or inward attitude. In this passage from Colossians, it is something all together different. The writer of this letter to the church at Colossae doesn't care a lot about our fashion sense, our waist line or whether our house is ready to go on the market. The makeover here is a more extreme kind – it's about the spirit. The writer wants us to let go of things that get in the way of us revealing the glory of God, that get in the way of our life revealing that our life is in Christ. The world's reality is that we need to lose weight to be happy. God's reality is that there is much more than pounds that we need to shed. The world's reality is that too many pounds make us unhappy. God's reality is that reliance on anything but God will lead to our destruction.

There's no easing in here. The writer starts right in: "Put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." These mostly sexual sins aren't about ancient prudery. These sins are about assuming that people or things exist simply for our gratification. It is the sin of consuming others. It is the sin of not recognizing other people as gifts from the creator.

The next set is comprised of sins that all sins destroy harmonious relationships. "Get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language." Some of us have angry outbursts that are intimidating to others. And some of us secretly and silently seethe, keeping track of offenses so that we can justify ourselves in not working at that relationship any more. Slander is talking badly about someone else. It may be that someone has hurt our feelings and we talk about it with someone else instead of the person. We don't stop the anxiety but spread it.

Finally, just in case whatever is in our way of a holy and authentic life isn't on the list, the writer says, "Strip off the old self and clothe yourself with the new self." This passage invites us to do a spiritual self assessment, to do a reality check on where we are with our spiritual health.

It's kind of a downer, isn't it? It's sort of a finger wagging kind of passage. I had a preaching professor, Don Chatfield, who told us to always think about what the good news is. Don't just stick with the human condition. Remember to preach the good news and there is always good news. God is always is doing something.

In this case the bad news is the good news – at least the start of it.

A couple years ago, I saw the opening segment to the Biggest Loser for the first time. The first segment included a health assessment. Every contestant sat down with a doctor after a complete physical exam. They were shown images of what their internal organs looked like – the blackened lungs of smokers, the heart and other vital organs encased in fat, clogged arteries. They learned what it was doing to their bodies to be diabetic or have high blood pressure. The doctor ended every visit by telling them their biological age given their health. A contestant who was 35 would have a biological age of 62 – because of smoking, being diabetic, and over weight. A 50 year old would have a biological age of 78 because of the physical shape her body was in. It was shocking, and painful. Contestants cried. Certainly they had each been told by other doctors about their need to lose weight, to more healthily, to exercise. But in this episode it was a reality check. For many of them it was as if for the first time they understood what was at stake.

It is painful to watch the health assessment on the Biggest Loser. But is also a moment of grace. The grace is that by recognizing their reality and not being able to ignore it the

contestants are given the opportunity to choose to go a different way. The same is true for us. As painful as it might be for us to do an assessment, to confess where we really are in our spiritual lives, it is also a moment of grace because it gives us the opportunity to turn back to Christ and not delude ourselves anymore. What do we desire more than Christ? Is it another person, is it financial security, is it gratification of some desire? Where have we injured another? Where have we treated someone with less respect and love than they deserve? Where have we hurt someone's dignity? Where did we pass on some tidbit of gossip that was unnecessary? Where did we seek to elevate ourselves by putting someone else down? These are not easy questions to ask of ourselves. And they are not easy to answer honestly. But they are the beginning of good news. These questions open us to what John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called, "Convincing Grace." Grace is the unmerited, unearned gift of God's love. Convincing grace is that aspect of God's love that convinces us that we want a change. It's a wake up call. It's what drives us to the feet of God and convinces us to ask for help.

And that's not the end of the good news. God takes our moment of turning toward God, our whispered yes, and makes it a shout. God sneaks in the door that is just cracked open and makes himself at home in our lives, slowly reshaping and transforming us. In the Biggest Loser, the contestants don't do it alone. There are trainers who help the contestants make huge life changes. Our trainer is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is that face of God, that personality of God that takes residence in our hearts and changes us. We call this work, sanctification. As Methodists we don't believe that we only turn to God one time, but over and over and over again. And each time we turn to God, God turns to us and reveals the image of God that has been there all along.

A few years ago my husband Corey read the book *Younger Next Year*. It's written by a regular guy who decided he wanted to be in better shape and his doctor. In it they map out a way to be healthier, more fit, have more energy – in short “younger” next year. They give good advice – exercise 45 minutes a day 6 days a week, stop smoking, stay married, keep working or doing something that brings you meaning. It holds a great promise of being in better shape and having a better quality of life for longer.

The promises in Colossians are even better: we will share in Christ's glory; there will be unity – no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free -- all belong to Christ and Christ is in all; we will be clothed with Christ; and the peace of Christ will rule in our hearts. What could be better than that? The peace of Christ.

I invite you, as we sing this next hymn, to consider where in your life you need God to enter. Where do you need God to work? And open the door just a bit. It will be enough to begin.

Give up a false life for a real life.

Measure their progress in pounds lost

We measure our progress in