
GRACEWORKS

259 Walker Avenue
Clarendon Hills, IL 60514

Phone: 630-537-0629

E-mail: graceworks@graceworkspublishing.com

July 14, 2024
15th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—CYCLE B

Common thread: Every believer has a calling. We learn our calling the way an athlete trains, by practicing first.

CALLING PRACTICE

The Texts: Amos 7:12-15; Psalm 85:9-10, 11-12, 13-14 (8); Ephesians 1:3-14; Ephesians 1:3-10; Ephesians 1:17-18; Mark 6:7-13

In just a few weeks, athletes will converge in Paris, France, for the Olympic games. Most of them have practiced their sport for so long, that they can't remember the first time they touched a racquet, jumped into a pool, or rode a bicycle. One thing is sure. They didn't read an instruction manual before trying. Most people learning a sport, driving a car, or doing anything for the first time will observe someone else, imitate them, practice themselves, and later learn more about the game's rules. They learn by doing.

What about the disciples on the journey with Jesus? Our "sport" is what the Bible refers to as a "calling." We find that in our occupations or at home. The gift or passion that God has given us keeps us motivated to serve others. We may not fully know what it is yet, and depending on our life stage, we may still be exploring that calling. But we learned this morning that practice is the only way to find your calling.

In today's Gospel reading and the reading from Amos, people are called need to practice. The disciples have still not figured out who Jesus is and are still plagued with "unbelief," the cowardly lack of confidence they need. But instead of waiting for them to learn more about Jesus, he does something that transforms them: He sends them out to practice.

Think about this radically ingenious method. He treats their calling like an apprenticeship. He doesn't send them home to study with more books; he sends them to the world to see what it's like. He gives them enough authority to cast out demons, heal the sick, and experience rejection. He even tells them to move on, shake the dust off their feet, and go somewhere else. Don't get too hung up on those who refuse to welcome you.

Jesus assumes that these disciples will fail, struggle, stumble, and have some success. In other words, their early attempts will not go very well. Like an artist first learning to paint, or a swimmer first learning to swim, they will learn by failing. Something else happens. You begin to learn your gifts. You know what you're good at. You know what God wants you to do. You clarify what gives you life and what gives life to the world.

Amos experienced something similar. By his own account, he was “just a shepherd” in the southern part of Israel in Judah. God sent him to prophesy and preach to those in the North. He experienced the same kind of rejection that Jesus and his disciples experienced, but he practiced nevertheless.

You don’t have to become a priest or a prophet to understand the value of rehearsal. In the Christian life, we don’t study our way into the life God has for us. We live our way and learn what God has for us to do. We step out, we risk, we move forward, we journey. Some of us are called to do the very things we are doing, but we become stuck in a “prayer-alysis,” a form of prayer and paralysis. We pray and think about what we ought to do and never get around to becoming the answer to our prayers. We find ourselves in a state that C.S. Lewis once wrote about, to know our calling but never acting on it. He wrote, “To follow the vocation or the calling does not mean happiness; but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow.”

We can expect something to happen if we do summon the courage to try. The apostle Paul describes every calling as a demonstration of God’s power. Paul reminds us that God has already empowered us for this work. So, we can trust that everything we practice is God’s channel of hope. He prays for the Ephesians and us that our heart’s eyes will be opened and discerned. As we go, we will be able to see and know the other people who can help us with this calling. We may not know exactly what to do, but as the disciples discovered, we do not go alone. We take someone with us; we go 2x2, and as we do, God shows us through discernment how we can serve him and the world. You become the person that the Psalms sing about. Through you, kindness and faithfulness meet. Faithfulness springs from the earth.

So, where do we begin? The same God who called Amos and Jesus and sent the disciples also called you. We start right where we are. We begin to practice no matter our age. The disciples were likely in their late 20s or early 30s. They were at midlife for the average life expectancy of Jesus’ day. We’re unsure of Amos’s age, but we assume he was mature if he was a successful shepherd. Like driving or swim lessons, the only way to learn both is to drive and swim. We get in the car with someone more experienced and learn to take the wheel or swim in the water. Find someone who can go with you. Reach out to a mentor who can help you as you practice.

Let me share one example. Olympic gold medalist Kelsi Dahlia grew up in New Jersey and joined the swim team at age 7—long before winning a gold medal on the U.S. Women’s medley relay team at the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics. But she had another passion besides swimming. Her faith in Christ was first. Her parents and church had instilled in her a love for the Lord. When choosing colleges and wanting to continue swimming, she wanted to make sure that there would be other Christian athletes to support her on her journey. She joined a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) group for accountability and friendship. She writes in one of FCA’s publications, “Training and competition can be anxiety producing. Jesus told his disciples that God would provide all they needed as they trusted Him with their lives.”

We don’t need to be Olympians to understand the importance of training. But we do need practice. Where has God placed you? You’re not alone. Others are waiting to join you. Find your people. Start practicing. Your calling awaits.