Today is the final sermon in our series of four on loving God with all whole selves.

Just to refresh ourselves, let’s remember where we see this command in the Bible. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 talks about loving God with our heart soul and strength. In Matthew 22:37 Jesus speaks of how central it is to love God with all our heart soul and mind. In Mark 12: 30-31 Jesus answers the question about the greatest commandment by telling his listeners that they should love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. In the Gospel of Luke (10: 27), responding to Jesus’ questions, a religious legal expert affirms that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.

In the past weeks, we have reviewed each of these aspects of ourselves, and how we can love God in each dimension of our lives. Loving God with my heart—means putting my will and decision making in God’s hands. Loving God my soul—means finding my very essence grounded in and connected to God, so much that I find complete contentment in that connection. Loving God with my mind—means turning my thought world over to God and thinking on things that direct me to God.

Today we end the series by focusing on how we love God with our strength. Now this word “strength” can mean a number of things. It is sometime translated as “might.” My strength is my “substance,” my possessions, or even my body. “Strength” has to do with the concrete, physical, active world. Though we could go a number of directions, I believe it is fair to say that loving God with our “strength” most often means loving God with our bodies.

Let me start with some images that might help with this.

[View of Grand Canyon from the south rim…]

Two weeks ago Lena and I (and a few others from our family) visited the Grand Canyon. It is an amazing sight to behold. What I would like you to do is consider the Grand Canyon from the perspective of your mind, heart, soul, and strength. I know – this is a bit strange, but go with me here.

In my mind, I can think about Grand Canyon, I can revel in its beauty. (But I could probably do as much with a $50 coffee table book)

[View of Grand Canyon a bit closer…]

In my heart, I make a decision to make a 14 hours drive and go there and to see more, up close. Yet there I am, still at the rim, viewing this wonder like 98% of the tourists.

[View of Grand Canyon even closer…]

Interpretation: Deuteronomy, Patrick Miller, p. 102
In my soul, I find that its beauty feeds me, and from close up I begin to make a connection. I could certainly stop here, quiet myself and ponder, and actually have a pretty profound experience.

But finally I decide to use my strength – and actually start hiking in – all the way to the bottom. What I now realize is that had I not entered the Canyon with my strength, had I not hiked in with my own body, there is so much I would have missed. There is so much I wouldn’t have known. So many ways I wouldn’t have grown.

There is a different kind of beauty the beauty from deep within the canyon. I wouldn’t have seen the powerful Colorado River which created this natural wonder. I would never have experienced the variation in temperature from the cold rim to the temperate canyon floor. I would have missed the hard work and exertion of hiking 8 miles down and 9.5 mile up and out. Without hiking in, I would have been denied the camaraderie of sharing that experience with my wife, daughters and son in law. I would have missed the weeks of the preparation that the cold temperatures required. I would not have learned from the pain, and fear I faced climbing up that last mile. Finally, I would have been denied the exhilaration of a completed task.

You can say you have been TO the canyon, or you can say you have been IN the canyon. We used our “strength” to go deep into the Canyon. We experienced it in our bodies.

So today we talk about loving God with our strength to complete our consideration of HOW we love God. To love God with “everything we’ve got” requires heart/soul/mind – AND STRENGTH. Just as one literally enters a new relationship with the Grand Canyon when one hikes into it, we complete the fullness of loving God when we consider how we do it in the day to day – concrete – mundane – physical experience of our lives.

So how do we love God with our bodies?

Woody Allen is reputedly the first one to have said, “90% of life is just showing up.” To love God with all our strength means just that. We show up with our substance, our possessions, our bodies. We can think about something, we can commit to doing something, we can feel connected to something, but until we actually show up, take action, follow through, in loving action – we have not completed the circle of love for God.

Lest you think this idea of “showing up” is too mundane or not spiritual enough – just think about the events of the past 19 days. If you watched or listened to the news at all, you know that day after day, Egyptian citizens have “shown up” in Tahrir Square.
For 30 years – Egyptian people have dreamed of better jobs, fairer treatment, and a more responsible government. For 30 years many have been aware of these needs. For 30 years some may have even planned on doing something. But Egypt didn't change— and their world didn't change until the day people started “showing up.”

Day by day the crowds got bigger. Sometimes danger loomed. Hundreds of people were even killed for this cause. At times things seemed hopeless; and sometimes the opposition seemed fierce. But people kept showing up and changed the world. One need only to have seen the faces and heard the voices of Egyptians throughout the world to understand what the realization of this yearning meant for them.

What I wonder is – do I even “show up” in my life with God? Today passage in Romans says, I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.²

In what ways do I give my whole self —sacrifice my whole body—in relationship to the one I claim to be my Lord?

Most of us don’t think of the body in relationship to our spiritual life. We have bought into the idea that the “spiritual life” is separate from “body life.” We accept the idea that the spirit is good and the body is bad. But this is not biblical - think about it. God created out bodies and not only pronounced them good but talked about us as created in “God’s image.” Early Christians made a point of reminding us that there would be a resurrection of the body and we would not be just disembodied spirits. Hebrew people regulated bodily actions and functions (like eating) throughout history. Christians have consistently asserted that Jesus was God incarnate—The Divine took on flesh—as an affirmation of the goodness of our bodies. Philosopher & spiritual guide Dallas Willard points out correctly that “the body is at the very center of the spiritual life.”³ The body is at the center of the spiritual life.

Strangely – other religions often get this connection better than Christians do. Jews affirm the body through kosher dietary practices. Muslims practice prescribed prayer actions (kneeling, bowing, etc.) and ritual washings. Many in the east AND west affirm the role of the body in the life of the spirit by various yoga postures and breathing practices.

² Romans 12:1, NRSV
³ Renovation of the Heart, p.159.

It is also worth noting this quote: Some may think it strange that such practices, the disciplines for life in the spirit, are all bodily behaviors. But it cannot be otherwise. Learning Christlikeness is not passive. It is active engagement with and in God. And we act with our bodies. Moreover, this bodily engagement is what lays the foundation in our bodily members for readiness for holiness, and increasingly removes the readiness to sin -- "So that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." (Phil 1:20-21) Article from Dallas Willard, “Human Body and Spiritual Growth,” http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=34³
We Christians are often in denial of the power of the body. Yet Paul the Apostle says “...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you...” The body, far from being a worthless carcass is a temple for the Holy.

I have noticed (in the newspaper and on the internet) that there are a bundle of articles that talk about simple, mundane, practical ways to show your love to a spouse, partner, lover or friend on Valentines day. Rather than chocolates—do a chore or errand that usually falls to your partner (such as picking up the kids, cooking dinner or taking out the garbage). Instead of flowers—take a field trip around the city to places that have meant a lot to you in your relationship. Instead of a fancy dinner—make some sandwiches, grab a blanket, and have a winter picnic.

While these ideas might sound a bit corny to some of you, what is wonderful is that all of these actions require a little more personal investment, they require “putting our bodies into it.”

So how do we put our body into loving God? How do we make our bodies (in the best sense) a “living sacrifice?” Though there are many ideas – I have three thoughts to offer you. I have three practices that you might consider attempting in your life.

The first is fasting. Christians and Jews have a long habit of observing the practice of fasting. Fasting has for centuries been a way to disconnect from the world for a time and connect more deeply with God. It is a way of reminding us of our complete dependence on the one who created us.

But I would like to offer a twist to the idea of fasting. What would happen if for a time we fasted from our technology? What would it be like (for an extended time or a regular period each day) if we turned off our Blackberries and iPhones, ignored our Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, set aside the remote control for our DVR and flat screens, and just allowed for some time and space for God to speak?

Talk about a dramatic change in our existence! Talk about making our bodies a living sacrifice! I believe God would honor a fast like this with a sense of Divine presence, with new insights, and a more centered body and mind.

The second practice is exercise. How many of you have seen the movie Chariots of Fire? The movie Chariots of Fire is a story of two British track athletes, one a determined Jew, and the other a devout Christian who compete in the 1924 Olympics. It is the story of the intersection between athletic competition and religion. It is the story of the intersection of our bodies and our faith.

In the movie, Eric Liddell, the Christian runner makes this statement, “I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.”

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4 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, NRSV
6 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/
What if we really saw our exercise, our care for our bodies, not simply as a way to lose weight, our postpone death, or compete with others? What if we saw our care for our bodies as part of our worship of God? What if we believed that that hour on the bike trail not only gave us pleasure but gives God pleasure as well?

*The third practice is Sabbath.* Almost all of you know that I had a “sabbatical” for the last three months of 2010. Simply put, it was a time away from my work here at Faith. It was an incredible gift to me. I still want to share more about it, but I am having a hard time doing so. And the reason I think it is so difficult is that the whole concept of Sabbath (for a day or for three months) is such a foreign—even anti-American—concept.

When people say to me, “What did you do on your sabbatical?” I want to simply say to them that I “held still.” I “held still.” Then when they get a completely puzzled look on their face—I just talk about our travels Italy or Turkey.

But what if we took Sabbath seriously in all our lives? We may not be able to take three months—but can we take a day (or even an hour) for a true Sabbath? Can we not cease from all work for a time that we might strengthen and renew the body God gave us? Can we not make regular space in our week where we are not sitting in our cubicle, cutting the grass, doing homework, making dinner, serving our customers, even caring for our children? Can we show our love for God by simply “holding still?”

One last thing. I was talking about this sermon with a friend this week and she said, “But what happens when I am out of strength?” What happens when my body won’t do what God or I want it to do?

Scripture is actually pretty clear on this. While we do have our own strength and we do have some degree of control over our bodies, people of God from thousands of years ago to the present day have proclaimed that our strength is always grounded in God. It was Paul the apostle in his writing from prison who said this: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” All that I can do I can do because God gives me strength.

Our strength fails—but God’s power remains. We are never alone in this work. God helps us to express our love in heart, soul, mind, and strength.

So I am called to love God with my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I am called to love God with my will, essence, thoughts, and body. Most days it feels like I have just begun this journey. May God supply all of us the strength to continue this journey. Amen.

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7 Philippians 4:13, NRSV
Next Step Questions 2-13

- Who is the strongest person you know (physical or otherwise)? How does this person use his or her strength? What is the source of his or her strength?

- Where do you use your “strength” in your life? Where do you spend energy?

- In Jim’s sermon, he says that loving God with all our “strength” or “might” means to love God with our bodies, our substance, our physical presence in this world. Does that make sense to you? If not – do you see it differently?

- How do we love God with our bodies? Are there things we can do? Are there things we should refrain from doing? Paul the Apostle writes, “…do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19) Does it help you to think of your body as a “temple” of the Spirit? What does this imply for how we might love God with that same “temple?”

- In the Western Church we have gotten the idea that the body is “bad.” This is frankly, not a Biblical concept. Why do you think we have gotten this message?

- In the Christian church – the two most primary acts in worship (baptism and communion) are something very physical, something very “substantial.” These acts of worship are not something that take place inside our minds alone but involve our very bodies. Why do you think Jesus instituted these acts as important in our faith?

- It is difficult to find much discussion in Scripture about human strength alone. Usually it is coupled with the concept of God as the source of our strength. In Philippians 4:13, Paul says, “I can do all things through him [Christ] who strengthens me.” What does this infer about our human strength?

- Consider this poem attributed to St. Theresa of Avila:
  
  Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
  no hands but yours,
  no feet but yours,
  Yours are the eyes through which to look out
  Christ’s compassion to the world
  Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
  doing good;
  Yours are the hands with which he is to bless [people] now.

  What hints does this give you about loving God with your body/strength?

- A question to consider (you may or may not want to share): Where, when, and how can you love God more with your body/strength?