

Fitness for God's Mission

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Elite athletes from around the world traveled to Beijing to represent their nations in the 2008 Summer Olympics. After months and years of disciplined training, each was preparing to reach the peak of competitive fitness during the middle two weeks of August. The ability to perform effectively in their respective sports is the product of carefully followed physical, nutritional, emotional, and spiritual disciplines that come together in a holistic integration, a fitness for athletic endeavor that matches the particular challenge of each event.

Of course, some element of success is related to natural gifts and ability. Michael Phelps, who has won more Olympic gold medals than any other human being, began with a natural talent for swimming that was identified by his coach, his mother, and himself when he was a boy. In discerning a vocation to swim competitively, his vision of and passion for excelling in the sport matured. Through the endless practice of disciplines that focused his spirit, developed his muscles, and refined his performance, he began an ongoing transformation that rendered him fit for his task. For Phelps and other athletes, identity, discernment, and practice all contribute to a continuing transformation that results in fitness.

Perhaps more illustrative than Phelps is Dara Torres, five-time Olympian and mother of a two-year old, who at the age of forty-one swam in three events in Beijing, winning the silver medal in each. Her Olympic career spanning almost a quarter of a century (1984–2008), Torres has clearly pursued a continually developing fitness for competitive swimming. During that time her identity has evolved, her body has aged, her metabolism has changed, and her vocational focus has developed to include television commentator, print model, and parent.

In answering the call to serve God's mission, Christians are challenged to a fitness that is likewise the product of an ongoing transformation, a conversion into what we discern God may be dreaming for us to become. It begins with our identification with the person and ministry of Jesus. That identity is developed through a process of discerning how our particular Christian vocations might be manifested as we imagine and explore what it means for us to be Christian. By the practice of worship, prayer,

study, and service we grow and are transformed into new life, maturing bit by bit into what St. Paul called the full stature of Christ.

When we hear the term *fitness for mission*, we may think in terms of a narrow measure of moral purity. This is a mistake. When we ask, “Am I fit for God’s mission?” we should not be questioning whether we are worthy of it but whether we are up to the task. Of course, none of us is by our own nature so worthy. It is by God’s grace alone that each of us is invited into the ministry of Jesus. Indeed the gift of ministry is given to each of us as a journey by which we become more godly. Through our various ministries as lay and ordained Christians, God draws us deeper into God’s heart and forms us in the image of Christ. Fitness for those ministries, as with the fitness of an athlete, results from the continual integration of a range of practices and disciplines. It is an ongoing process of growth in Christ that hinges on increasing self-awareness (Identity), grasping a vision of what God is offering us (Discernment), undertaking the disciplines that will realize that vision (Practice), and giving ourselves to the conversion to which they lead (Transformation).

In practical terms, fitness for God’s mission has to do with our ever-developing capacity for compassion, honesty, generosity, humility, gratitude, and surrender. It has to do with our ability to take the “other” into ourselves, no matter who that may be, to the end that we might become more whole ourselves. It has to do with our creativity in response to the broken world around us. Furthermore, it has to do with the faithful nurture, maintenance, and stewardship of the assets God gives us in order that we might do ministry: our bodies, our relationships, our personal and financial security, and the realities of the contexts in which we serve. All of these inform our self-awareness, our vocational discernment and vision, the spiritual disciplines and faith practices we employ for our growth, and thus our transformation into what God is making of us.

One of the gospel stories that well illustrates this transformation is the account of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, who sought Jesus’ healing ministry for her daughter. On the surface, it appears to be about the woman’s fitness to receive Jesus’ attention. She persistently follows him and his disciples, publicly appealing to Jesus to heal her daughter, shouting, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” The disciples are intolerant, as apparently is Jesus, whose initial response is dismissive, likening her to a dog. In judging her fitness to receive his ministry he tells her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” But then something happens. The woman of

Cana, socially inferior to and ethnically other than Jesus and his disciples, pleads again for her daughter while not contesting the social realities of her situation, replying, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” And Jesus is changed. Matthew’s gospel reports, “Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

The story must be understood as being about Jesus’ transformation. Its focus is not ultimately on the Canaanite woman’s fitness to receive for her daughter Jesus’ ministry of healing, but on Jesus’ own increasing fitness for ministry, his increasing fitness for God’s mission of love. Its central focus is Jesus and his self-understanding: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” As a story about both his humanity and his divinity, and about the transformation resulting from his practice of compassion, it is a model for our own transformation, our own conversion to godliness, our own ever-developing fitness for God’s mission. Jesus’ identity, his self-awareness as healer and minister of God’s love, was informed by this pleading mother, whose persistence revealed less about herself than it did about him and his divine vocation. And Jesus’ spiritual practices of listening and compassionate attention, of making room in himself for her, increased his awareness of who he was to be to her. It resulted in a change of heart, a transformation, becoming in his humanity more fully who he was in his divinity. Regardless of how each of us might imagine Jesus’ messianic consciousness, in Matthew’s story his identity is informed and his ministry transformed by his encounter with this woman who believed in him. Her persistent appeal pushed Jesus to engage spiritual and vocational muscles that needed to be stretched.

You and I have practices—physical, spiritual, emotional, and vocational—that make us increasingly fit for God’s mission. Disciplines of prayer, of worship, and of service. Disciplines that define us as disciples of Jesus. Disciplines that can transform us into what we have discerned God is patiently and persistently trying to make of us, and sometimes into what we had never imagined God was offering. God gives us the church, at its best both a supportive community for our growth and one that challenges our security with the diversity and conflicting differences God calls into it. In addition, God gives us the gift of ministries in which to practice. Both of these gifts invite and provoke us to become something new, something more in Christ than we already are; both of them support and challenge our ongoing conversion and make us more fit for God’s mission, more up to the divine challenge in each new day.

Fitness for ministry and mission is the result of committed disciplines that make us something new. It may look natural, as if it comes easily to some, but it is always the consequence of hard work and diligent practice. While it was Jesus' divine nature to love, to incarnate God's mission of reconciliation, his earthly ministry came to fullness in part through consistent discipline and practice, as seen in a number of gospel stories like those about his temptation in the desert and his encounter with the persistent mother from Cana.

It is no theological stretch to understand Jesus' change of heart, as recounted in Matthew 15, in terms of the same Identity, Discernment, Practice, and Transformation model we employ in CREDO. In his response to the Canaanite woman, Jesus' self-awareness was challenged, his call to incarnate God's love was further discerned, his practice of compassionate response was extended, all resulting in a transformation that was revealed in his changed response to a persistent woman who did little more than believe in him. In the same way, you and I are continually brought into deeper awareness of our identity as God's beloved, supported by the church and the Holy Spirit in discerning our vocations as Christians, challenged and developed in our varying practices and ministries. We are transformed by the persistent God who believes in us. In this way we become increasingly fit for God's mission.

It is, therefore, important that we choose disciplines that increase our fitness for mission. In our prayer, study, worship, and service, we should seek practices that stretch and strengthen us. Whatever our disciplines, we should see them not as restrictive, but as exercises that develop us physically, spiritually, emotionally, and vocationally—calisthenics that expand our capacity for transformation. It is by that continuing conversion that we become increasingly responsive to God's mission.

One of my disciplines involves walking with light hand weights. I wake up quite early in the morning, and while it is still dark I walk a two-and-a-half mile route through our neighborhood. It stretches my legs and my arms, my circulatory and respiratory systems, and, at that hour, my eyesight. It also stretches me spiritually. It is the time of my most undefended prayer, when the challenges, fears, and hopes of my ministry as a Christian are most exposed to God. It is when I am least shielded from God's response by the convenient distractions of life and work. It is a time of quiet listening, when I am regularly stretched by God in ways that inform how I serve throughout the rest of the day.

Both as individuals and as a church, how fit we are for God's mission, to what degree we are up to the challenges of ministry before us, depends in large part upon the disciplines we practice. The CREDO life-cycle model of identity, discernment, practice, and transformation offers an effective framework for wellness development and provides lifelong calisthenics for our ongoing conversion as the people of God. Use of it (and other disciplines) allows us to flex the muscles, stretch the ligaments, and strengthen the skeletal structures that sustain our ministries and make us increasingly vital and vibrant ministers of the gospel.