

At the Winter Olympics in Sochi, downhill skiers are reaching top speeds of 90 mph as they careen down the mountain. These Olympians have trained their entire life to be able to navigate a downhill course at those speeds with the goal of winning a gold medal. They didn't start out skiing at those speeds and they didn't start on the double black diamond hills either. They started slow and picked up speed as they trained themselves to tuck, turn and fly downhill.

Imagine if you or I walked onto the downhill slope at Sochi and slapped on a pair of skis and headed down the hill. Chances are we wouldn't make it past the first gate, let alone make it without breaking a leg or two before we slammed into the safety nets along the course.

Downhill skiers at the Olympic level didn't just try to compete the first time they put on skis; they trained for years. They took small steps, each one building on the previous one. The Olympics were a goal that they wanted to achieve and so they disciplined themselves day in and day out to do everything possible to achieve their goal.

Well it is no different for a disciple of Jesus. As we've been saying all along, it is a life-long process of centering our lives around loving God and loving others. Every day we make choices that put us closer to the goal of being like Jesus. We realize that becoming like Jesus in every way is not something that we try, or just happen to fall into; it involves training ourselves-creating patterns- to take the steps necessary to daily become more and more like Jesus. And just like an Olympic athlete we must discipline ourselves if we are going to achieve our goal.

Disciplines are those things that we do regularly to achieve an outcome or goal in our lives. Going to the gym, drinking plenty of water, [list of habits – ask people to name habits and the goal associated with the habit]

In the 1700's a group of young men at Oxford University had in their hearts to be like Jesus. They began to meet together regularly with the goal of engaging in disciplines/habits that they read Jesus and the early disciples engaged in. The group included the likes of brothers, John and Charles Wesley.

The group determined to study Scripture, pray continually and engage with the poor, children and those in prison. Soon this small group of men who were so methodical in their practice of these disciplines were being chided by other students at Oxford. As the band of disciples, who were endeavoring by their systematic patterns of daily living to become more like Jesus, walked across campus you could hear the shouts... Methodists! And 300 years later there are still people called Methodists because of their habits that enable them to love God and love others.

Yes, the very word that marks our denomination started out as a taunt, a sneer. You could say we took the words of our bullies and turned them into a word that became synonymous with people who disciplined themselves to become more and more like Jesus.

This morning we want to look at a few of the disciplines that can assist you in reaching your goal. There are countless disciplines that you can engage in regularly or periodically, but we want to talk about four specific disciplines that we would like you to use during the upcoming Lenten season.

The Lenten season is a 40 day period in the church year which begins on Ash Wednesday, March 5 and concludes with Easter, April 20. (Now if you start counting you will say that is more than 40 days, and you are right because during Lent we don't count Sundays.)

Every year when Lent rolls around people often talk about giving things up- they give up soda or chocolate. Why?

*Lent is a period of preparation and repentance. Lent, the period of 40 days that precedes the celebration of Easter, has its origin in the early days of the Church. Converts seeking to become Christian, who at that time were mostly adults, spent several years in study and preparation. Under the threat of Roman persecution, becoming a Christian was serious business, so their process of preparation was intensive! Then they went through a final period of "purification and enlightenment" for the 40 days before their baptism at Easter. The rest of the Church began to observe the season of Lent in solidarity with these newest Christians. It became an opportunity for all Christians to recall and renew the commitment of their baptism.*

*Today we know Lent as a season of conversion: we acknowledge the ways we have turned away from God in our lives and we focus on turning our hearts and minds back toward God. Hence the three pillars of Lent are prayer, fasting and giving. These observances help us turn away from whatever has distracted or derailed us and to turn back to God. Giving up something for Lent is ultimately a form of fasting. We can deprive ourselves of some small pleasure or indulgence and offer that sacrifice up to God. Or we might "give up" a bad habit such as smoking as a way of positively turning our life back towards what God wants for us.*

So that is why many people give up something for Lent. But too often people give up something without understanding that it is also an opportunity to add something back into our lives.

So as we talk about these four disciplines this morning; I want start with two disciplines that we will caption as disciplines of refraining.

The discipline that is most often associated with Lent is Fasting. Fasting is simply refraining from something for a specified period of time. We primarily think of fasting associated with food, but there are countless things that we can fast/refrain from; all so that we can benefit from learning what controls us.

When we fast from food it can take on several different aspects. Total fast – no food, liquid fast – just liquids; and it can take place for a whole day, or breakfast and lunch, or as Muslims do during Ramadan you could fast from sunrise to sunset.

Some other things that we can fast from include: television, media, cell phones, social media, etc. My personal goal for Lent is to forego watching TV.

You see, the point of a fast is to reveal what controls you. Personally, I can sit down and waste a few hours watching TV. So because I know it is a control issue in my life; I'm going to go on a total fast for the 40 days of Lent.

But I also plan to use the time I regain in my day to do several things that will help me grow in my pursuit of Jesus. I plan to read more, I will focus on my family, and who knows what else may open up in my day to day life. The point is; I want to refrain from something that has the power to control me and instead let the Holy Spirit have control of my time.

Now let's move on to something else that falls under the label of refraining.

[Silence/solitude] [The following lines will be on slides]

Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10

Why is silence so hard to deal with?

Do you wish God's voice would be louder in your life?

Is there a connection between the amount of noise in our lives and our inability to hear God?

Search your heart and be silent Psalm 4:4

The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. Habakkuk 2:20

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Jesus, Matthew 11:28

If I am not still, and if I don't listen, how is Jesus going to give me rest?

Have you spent the same amount of time worrying and talking about your difficult confusing situations as you have spent in silence, listening to what God might have to say?

Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. Luke 5:16

What is it about silence that is so difficult?

Why is it easier to surround myself with noise and keep moving than to stop, be silent and listen?

Does my schedule, my time, my life look like that of a person who wants to hear God's voice?

the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. 1 Kings 19:11-12

So we have two disciplines that help us to refrain from things that easily distract us. Now we want to move into two disciplines that I'd caption as disciplines of Embrace.

The first of these disciplines that we are called to embrace in an attempt to help us love God and love others is service. Service simply means putting others first. Through acts of service we remember Jesus words that he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." Mark 11:45

Service should be a sign of our daily commitment as disciples of Jesus; however during Lent we can embrace our call to service in very intentional ways. Our Church Has Left the Building team has worked diligently over the last few weeks to prepare some special opportunities for you to serve others. [List]

Of course, we can all seek opportunities to serve. This is a great opportunity to engage the whole family, get younger children involved. [ideas]

One of the side benefits of service, outside of your home, is the awareness that it brings to the needs of others. That awareness not only challenges us to see the needs of others and get involved; but the awareness reminds us just how blessed we are.

The other discipline of embrace is daily devotion. While we should all have a daily time to read God's Word and pray; during the Lenten season we can embrace a whole new dimension when it comes to daily time with God. Lent may be a good time to kick it up a notch! Read more, journal, pick up a partner to read and discuss your reading of scripture. Make prayer more intentional by starting a prayer list, etc. Lent may be a good time to establish a pattern for daily devotions as a family.

In your bulletin are two slips of paper where we want you to make a commitment to engage in one of these disciplines during Lent March 5-April 20 One card is for you to keep as a reminder, the other we want you to turn in. We are not asking you to make a detailed plan in the next five minutes, but if you don't make a decision now, chances are good that you will not do anything.

What those early Methodists taught us about disciplines is that they are best engaged in together and with accountability. So with that in mind we are going to invite you to move about the room and meet up with other disciples who are going to engage in the same practice. So you can turn in your card when you get together with the other people in your group. Make some connections, ask questions, etc

Because of the nature of the Lenten season it is often thought of a solemn time. But we want to add a little celebration to our Lenten disciplines; so we are going to be asking you to share some of the celebrations that have each week during Lent. We will have a display in Janie's Place where you can make note of your fasting for the week, how you found time for silence, what you did to serve and maybe how many chapters you read during the week.

We want to make this a celebration of how our disciplines are influencing our choices as we daily are centering our life around loving God and loving others.