Move in our Midst
Phil 2:12-13; 2 Chronicles 7:14

The headline in the St Louis Post-Dispatch when I arrived at Annual Conference last summer read something like “Bodybuilding Classic comes to the America’s Center!” I thought, “Wow! What a wonderful description of what we are all about at conference. After all, the Apostle Paul challenges us to build up the body of Christ “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13). And our Annual Conference mission statement says we exist “To unite, STRENGTHEN, and equip the Church of the Brethren to follow Jesus.” So….. when we gathered in St Louis last year, it was completely appropriate for the local newspaper to refer to our gathering as a Bodybuilding Classic!

Unfortunately, as you probably guessed, that headline wasn’t about us. It was not a reference to the COB bodybuilding conference. It was referring to the NANBF bodybuilding competition. NANBF stands for the North American Natural Bodybuilding Federation. If you attended conference last year you may remember that we shared the conference center with another group that didn’t exactly look Brethren. [I have attached a slide to project at this point] I could tell these folks weren’t Brethren… they weren’t wearing the Brethren garb.

All kidding aside; I hope we will spend our time over the next five days building up the body of Christ, “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” That seems to be what Paul is suggesting when he instructs the church in Philippi to “Work out” their salvation with fear and trembling. What might that kind of Work Out look like? Let me suggest three exercises that will help with our body building this week.

Look Up… Reach Out… Kneel Down!

1. Look Up! - This is an exercise for the heart… not the eyes

Jewish tradition recognizes the parting of the Red Sea as the greatest of all miracles. Through that one miracle God redeemed 600,000 people from slavery. The Midrash, a rabbinical collection of homiletic stories that help explain the scriptures, offers an amusing glimpse of a conversation that might have taken place during the crossing. While the bottom of the sea was still wet and muddy, two men, Reuven and Shimon, were irritated as they slogged through the mud. Reuven said. “Ugh, what is this muck?” Shimon scowled, “There is mud everywhere.” “This is just like the slime pits of Egypt,” Reuven replied. “What’s the difference?” complained Shimon. “Mud here, mud there; it’s all the
same.” And so it went for the two of them, grumbling all the way to the other side. They never once looked up! Because of that, they never understood why everyone else was singing songs of praise on the distant shore. The problem wasn’t with their eyes, but with their hearts.

The hymn, “Move in our midst,” challenges us to look up and see that in spite of the muddy passage to the other side, the Spirit of the God is moving within us and around us and beyond us. Verses 1 and 2 were written in 1941 inspired by youth at Camp Harmony in western PA. In 1941, the entire world was bogged down in the muddy trenches of World War II. The mud was slick and deep, but God knew the way to the other side. The first two stanzas of the hymn are a prayer, “Move in our midst, thou Spirit of God, Go with us down from thy holy hill…” it continues:

- Walk with us
- Touch us
- Lead us
- Guide us
- Show us
- Transform us

“Move in our midst” reminds us to look up, to the one who will lead us through.

2. Reach out! – This is an exercise for the hands and the feet

Paul reminds us that “God is at work in (us), both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Reaching out is the normal, natural consequence to Looking up. The story of Jesus’ conversation with the woman at the well is a vivid illustration of this.

Jesus waited by a Samarian well while his disciples went into a nearby village to get some food. While he waited by the well a woman came to draw water. He asked her for a drink of water, and then offered to give her a drink of living water. She was puzzled at first, but eventually accepted the offer. Then, after tasting the living water, she ran into the village to tell her friends about the one who had invited her to drink deeply. As she was leaving, the disciples returned with food. They were shocked to see Jesus talking with a Samaritan woman, but rather than making a big deal about it, they invited Jesus to have something to eat. Jesus replied, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.” There are those words again: to will and to work.

Paul wrote, “God is at work in your both to will and to work what is pleasing to him.” Our lives are never more pleasing to God than when they reflect the will and continue the work of Jesus. When
Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove and the voice of God reverberated from heaven, “Behold this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” Our lives are never more pleasing to God than when we reveal the will and continue the work of Jesus.

I was involved in a church plant several years ago in Lebanon, PA. God was at work in Lebanon, and many of those who came to Christ and became part of our congregation came had little or no religious training. They new creatures in Christ; old things were being peeled away as new things were put in place. One of our home group leaders shared her conversation with a new believer’s first experience in a Christian bookstore. He was surprised by all of the WWJD paraphernalia in the store. She asked him, “Well what did you buy?” He said, “I didn’t buy anything.” She said, “Why not?” He said, “Because I didn’t think Jesus would buy any of that stuff.”

One of the reasons we need to reach out to those outside the church is it will give us a more accurate picture of what we really look like to the on looking world. Someone has said, “The first book of the Bible some folks read is the book of you and me.” And there’s a song that says, “You’re the only Jesus some will ever see.” We all know Jesus never said, “I was hungry… and you invited your friends over for dinner.” Or “I was thirsty… and you had a drinking fountain at your church.” Or “I was naked… and you paid $20 for a - What Would Jesus Do - Tee-shirt!” We know that’s not what Jesus said! But to those who read the book of you and me, that sounds like the red letter addition.

In his book, “What’s so amazing about grace,” Philip Yancey has a chapter entitled “Wrestling with the real Jesus.” In that chapter he shares a story that appeared in the Boston Globe newspaper. A young couple, with expensive tastes, reserved a space in the downtown Hyatt Hotel for their wedding reception at a cost $13,000. Half that amount was required as a deposit. Unfortunately, the young man got cold feet and backed out of the wedding. The bride immediately went to the hotel to cancel the reception and try to recoup her losses, but it was too late. She was faced with a decision. Cancel the reception and lose most of her deposit, or use the rest of the money she had tucked away for the reception and throw one whale of a party.

The woman was not a stranger to hard times. Earlier in her life she lived on the streets of Boston. After living in a homeless shelter for some time, she got back on her feet and eventually set aside enough money for an elegant wedding reception at the Hyatt. So, rather than wallowing in her breakup, she decided to go ahead with the party. Here’s an excerpt from the Boston Globe article:

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And so it was that in June of 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – “in honor of the groom,” she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-gnawed pizza off the cardboard dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Hyatt waiters in tuxedos served hors d’oeuvres to senior citizens propped up by crutches and aluminum walkers. Bag ladies, vagrants, and addicts took one night off from the hard life on the sidewalks outside and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake, and danced to big-band melodies late into the night.

The first two verses of *Move in our midst* call us to **Look Up.** The last two verses are a challenge to **Reach Out** to the world around us:

- Strike from our feet the fetters that bind
- Lift from our lives the weight of our wrong
- Teach us to love with heart, soul, and mind
- Kindle our hearts to burn with thy flame
- Raise up thy banners high in this hour
- Stir us to build new worlds in thy name
- Spirit of God, O Send us thy pow’r!

### 3. **Kneel down!** – This is an exercise in humility

The dedication of Solomon’s temple was a glorious exercise in looking up. 2 Chronicles 5:14 says “The glory of the Lord filled the house of God.” The verses leading up to that statement offer some interesting insights. First, the priests gathered at the temple “without regard to divisions.” The priests might have gathered in 24 separate divisions, yet that day they gathered “without regard to divisions.” Secondly, the 120 trumpeters assembled there “played in unison.” Thirdly, all the singers sang with “one voice.” I don’t believe these three statements were mere embellishments. They are keys to recognizing why the glory of God filled that place. The priests gathered “without regard to divisions.” The musicians played in unison. The people sang “with one voice.”

Solomon, considered the wisest of Israel’s kings, asked God, “What happens when we leave the place and return to life as usual? What happens when we turn away from you and return to our own sinful ways? God offered this response in 2 Chronicles 5:14,

- “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, they I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land.

When we gather in God’s presence “without divisions,” blow our trumpets “in unison,” and sing “with one voice,” the Spirit of God will move mightily in our midst. But when we are divided, out of tune, each singing our own song, the glory of the Lord is unlikely to fall upon us and the Spirit of God is unlikely to move in our midst. So what do we do? God says, “Humble yourselves and pray.”
Throughout history, the people of God have often struggled to keep the vertical (looking up) in balance with the horizontal (reaching out). Within our own tradition we have tried to be both good Pietists and good Anabaptists, but we’ve struggled to keep the two in balance. The Pietists have accused the Anabaptists of neglecting the work of the Spirit in order to do social work. And the Anabaptists have accused the Pietists of being so “Heavenly minded that they’re no earthly good.”

All through history, God’s people have struggled to keep the “vertical” and the “horizontal” connected. Yet, those who follow Jesus know the place where the vertical and the horizontal meet: At he Cross!

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

When Jesus went to the cross, he humbled himself and become obedient to the point of death. The cross is an object of death. When we take up the cross, we humble ourselves and put to death the things that keep us from doing the will and continuing the work of Jesus: harsh words, sinful attitudes, selfish ambitions, personal agendas must be nailed to the cross.

When Jesus went to the cross he said, “Father forgive them.” The cross is a place where sin is forgiven. When we take up the cross, we are set free from the wages of sin And we are compelled to forgive those who have sinned against us; 70 times 7 if necessary.

When Jesus went to the cross, he said, “It is finished.” His work was complete. The cross isn’t a rest stop on the journey of faith. The cross is the arena where we live out our faith. Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily.” When we take up the cross we roll up our sleeves and get ready to finish the work.

After we sing the closing hymn in a just a moment, I invite you to get out of our seat and make your way to the cross bearer who is nearest to you. There are a number of cross bearers scattered through the hall, each with a basket with tiny wooden crosses that were cut from a Walnut Tree that grew up along the Little Swatara Creek, site of the 1871 annual conference. These were made and are offered with much love from folks at Little Swatara. I invite you to take one of the crosses as a way of reaffirming your commitment to deny yourself… take up the cross… and follow Jesus.