

We live in a state with lots of people who are overweight. According to recent statistics, South Carolina ranks 43rd in the nation in obesity. Meaning that we rank as the 43rd worst state for people being overweight. About 1.1 million residents of South Carolina report that they are obese.

Why is that? Several factors were cited in what I read. One is that 25% of adults in the state report little to no physical activity. 1 out of every 4 adults reports little to no physical activity. The state also reports one of the highest rates of diabetes in the nation at 11.6% of the population.

I read that the CDC predicts that soon 1 out of 3 nine year old children in the US will be born with type 2 diabetes. I heard a story one time on NPR of how many people from India migrate to the US and soon develop diabetes due to the high sugar content of our foods.

What the statistics also show, however, is that one's level of education is directly related to obesity levels. For those of us with college degrees, the rate of obesity is about 25%. For those with less than a high school diploma, the rate of obesity is at 40%. In other words, the ones most likely to be overweight are the poorest among us and the least educated although even among the most educated the rate is way too high.

Fred Bahnson shares the story of a woman who came to work in their church's community garden. He says that soon after they planted the first bed of garlic at Anathoth, their church's community garden, a woman joined who suffered from severe obesity.

Dina came regularly to the Saturday workdays, volunteering with other members in exchange for a share of the harvest. Her weight made it impossible for her to weed or plant, but she laughed and visited with those who did. And notice that the name of the community garden was Anathoth.

For those of you who are the Sunday School class that I teach I want you to ask yourself why the church named their community garden “Anathoth?” Hopefully, if you remember your lesson from last week you remember that Jeremiah bought a field at Anathoth.

For several years Dina came to the Saturday workdays at the church community garden. The church didn’t do nutrition classes or preach the virtues of organic produce; rather, they grew and ate healthy food. At their bi-weekly potlucks Dina learned to eat less sugar and fat and more fresh, green vegetables. Her weight began to drop.

Finally, at one potluck, Dina proudly announced that she had lost 75 pounds. “And I plan to lose another 100!” she announced. Most would attribute Dina’s success to willpower. “Such inner strength,” we say. “Such resolve. You go, girl.”

But Fred Bahnson wonders how much of her success -- and her earlier illness -- was simply about willpower but also about something else. Bahnson also wonders how much of her illness and success was also due to our culture of processed, contaminated, high calorie foods.

I share this information and Dina’s story today because we are in the 5th week of our sermon focus on 7 spiritual practices that help us to become better followers of God. We have lifted up the spiritual practices of worship, prayer, study, and fellowship with Christians. Next week we will focus on serving others and then after that the focus will be on rest or Sabbath.

Today we are lifting up the spiritual practice of healthy living. Is healthy living important in helping us to become a better follower of God? Paul seems to think so in the Scriptures which we have read today.

In the Scriptures we have read, Paul compares our bodies to being like temples. The temple was central for the Jewish faith. The temple was the primary symbol for their faith. So Paul to compare the body to the temple was a really big deal. The temple was the central place where it was believed that one encountered God. According to Paul, our bodies are very important.

But many of us do not act that way. As Fred Bahnson says, in many ways we have a Gnostic faith when it comes to our bodies. Gnostics or Gnosticism is a belief that developed in the 2nd Century that the only thing that mattered was the soul and that the body meant nothing. As a result, one could do anything with your body just as long as one focused on maintaining a spiritual connection to God.

Many of us today have a Gnostic faith when it comes to our bodies. Many of us believe that as long as we focus on being spiritual that it does not matter what we do to our bodies. Many of us would say that it doesn't matter what we eat. It doesn't matter if we get enough exercise. It doesn't matter if other people have good dietary habits.

Many of us would say that it doesn't matter if we support a culture that produces lots and lots of high fat, low quality, cheap food. But our Scriptures today from Paul refute that understanding of the faith. According to Paul, our bodies are temples. And temples are holy places. Temples are places where one encounters God.

So maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important to Paul and it should, therefore, be important to us. So if we believe that our bodies are God's Temple, then our lifestyle must begin to reflect that. So I am going to suggest that we begin to focus more on maintaining healthy lifestyles so that we grow as followers of Christ and I am going to suggest that we model and teach this lifestyle for the community.

I have never been the best at exercise. But a few years ago I made a commitment to walking my dog very early each morning. For me, this serves two purposes. My early morning walks followed by a workout is my time of quiet meditation with God.

But my early morning walks are also my time for exercise. My time to do the things necessary to help me feel good so that as the sun rises I am focused on being open to what God may be revealing to me that day. My morning routine is my time to prepare to receive what God has to offer.

I also seek to be intentional in what I eat and drink. I am not pure by any stretch of the imagination. One only needs to find the Oreos and Nutter Butters in my car to prove that. But I am intentional in what I eat and when I eat it.

I am encouraged by you because I see that many of you have become focused on maintaining a healthy lifestyle around here. I see postings on Facebook of people being very proud of their workout routines. I hear stories of people taking dance, playing golf and running cross country and playing soccer and other sports that promote a healthy lifestyle. I see stories of people being very intentional on what they eat and seeking to move away from our cultural dependency on processed and unhealthy foods. Some are focused on packing healthy lunches for school and work.

Seeking to maintain a healthy lifestyle may mean some lifestyle changes for us. What kinds of foods do we bring to share on Sunday morning or to church pot lucks? Are they focused on health and wholeness? What kinds of activities do we plan? Do they encourage healthy behaviors?

Moving toward a healthier lifestyle is not easy. It is easier and cheaper in the short term to eat processed foods and sit around and watch TV. But the long term consequences can be very harmful to the temple called our bodies. Participating in the cultural norms of fast food and little to no exercise is deadly and an affront to God's desire for our bodies.

So if we believe that our bodies are God's temple then we may need to make some changes in our lifestyle and we may be called by God to do ministry in this area. For instance, if you are someone who has a healthy lifestyle, be thinking about ways that you can turn this devotion into a ministry.

Are there cooking classes you are willing to teach? Are there exercise classes you are willing to lead? If you are a runner or a biker would you be willing to start a group of people running or biking together? If you are a weight lifter are you willing to get some people together to lift weights? I am obviously in such a club.

Remember that most obesity occurs to people in lower income brackets. A lot of this is due to the fact that fresh foods are more expensive than processed, sugary foods. What can you do to help make fresh foods more available and affordable to those who feel that they cannot afford it? Do you like to garden? Are you willing to expand or build a garden that helps to serve the needs of those who cannot afford fresh produce?

A few weeks ago I was at Winthrop Lake in Rock Hill at about 7 am to drop my son James off for his high school cross country practice. There were a lot of cars in the parking lot already. As I hung around I recognized one of the people. It was Courtney Jones, guidance counselor for the Clover School district.

Courtney told me that this particular group of almost all African-American professionals meet at 5 am to run together. This group started because fellow Winthrop alum began to communicate to their friends through Facebook about starting a group to run early in the morning.

If you are not living a healthy lifestyle, I remind you that your body is God's temple. How you treat your body has implications in your ability to follow God. Make a commitment to life changes. Treat your body in the way that God sees your body. Remember Genesis and how God created our bodies and called them "very good."

In the back on the table as you enter the sanctuary are copies of an article I came across this week on how to change your habits. The author walks you through what he did to break a 7 year obsession with bad lifestyle habits. If you are open to hearing how God may be guiding you to develop a healthier lifestyle then this article may be helpful.

Also, in the parlor room class are some questions to help you to begin to talk about ways that we as a church can help to promote a healthier lifestyle among ourselves and our community. You are encouraged to share your ideas and to brainstorm about ways we can help to impact this community in becoming healthier.

Our body is a temple. It may be time for us to take Paul's words seriously and to treat it as a temple. It may be time for us to teach others how to treat their bodies as a temple. The temple is a place to encounter God. And our bodies are a temple. AMEN.

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-Young, Scott, "Fix Bad Habits: Insights from a 7 Year Obsession," <http://99u.com/articles/7040/fix-bad-habits-insights-from-a-7-year-obsession>

-Bahnon, Fred, "Leading With Our Bodies," http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/leading-our-bodies?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=headline&utm_campaign=NI_feature

-Texts: I Corinthians 3:10-17 and 6:12-20

-Given: September 28, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)