

Thanksgiving Eve 2017
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I envy people who are naturally athletic. I've never had an interest or a passion for fitness or sports. I abhor gyms. Every few years, I guiltily sign up for some kind of sadistically named "fun run" where I end up running at the back with the pregnant ladies while getting passed by octogenarian power walkers.

Still, I am approaching a significant birthday, and I decided that I'd like to approach it a little bit stronger and a little bit fitter. So, even though I was feeling weak and silly, I researched some gyms in my neighborhood, and I discovered that a small gym within walking distance was having a personal training special for new members. I thought, that's what I need. So I met with the coach, he seemed nice, and the gym was simple, small, manageable, and affordable. I signed up. I spent the next week worrying that I wouldn't be able to do it, that I'd wasted money, that I didn't really belong in a strength training program. Surely that's for other people.

On my first training day, as I'm doing lunges and trying to block out junior high trauma while not looking too closely in the floor to ceiling mirrors, I notice that there's a great, hulking man there working out on the opposite side of the gym from me and my coach. He's clearly a bodybuilder. I assume we will have nothing in common.

As my beginner workout progresses, the bodybuilder and I have to share weights and space. We introduce ourselves. His name is Andy. Andy piles on the weights for his monster, Olympic-style lifts. As he gets to the apex of his lift, he screams. Really loudly. As he lifts hundreds and hundreds of pounds, he kind of yells out to motivate himself. Please imagine my shock and alarm. After one particularly loud AAAAAAHHHH, Andy looks at me with a huge grin and says, "sometimes, you gotta make some noise." I thought, I'm Episcopalian. I don't really do noise. But I was also intrigued. He would just scream and smile into the mirror—a joyfully exuberant shout at meeting his goals. Kind of a thankfulness for being strong and alive. As the weeks progressed, and I added weight to my different exercises, I notice that things have gotten harder. And, much to my surprise, I've started screaming for the last few reps in a set, when my muscles are tired, and I don't think I can do it. Every Monday at 1 pm, I go to this gym, say hi to Andy. Without fail, he greets me by saying, "We're gonna make some noise today!" And, he's right. We do make some noise. We lift weights and scream at the mirror.

Why do I tell you this long story that has nothing to do with Jesus or with Thanksgiving? Two reasons. 1. It's a great story. And 2. I think it has something to do with the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom is the place where we can bring all of ourselves—the hurt, the worry, the shame, the sin, the doubt, and the deep need. And we find ourselves welcomed exactly as we are. The Deuteronomist reminds the people that the promised land is made possible by a God who keeps the Covenant. "You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you." And Jesus lifts up the one leper who remembers that all healing comes from God. In both cases, we're reminded to give thanks for the promised land in which we find ourselves.

And, for most of us, that promised land is the church. This is that place where we are invited to bring it all before the altar of the Lord—the good, bad and ugly.

And it turns out, in God's beloved community, somehow our shortcomings don't seem so dire. Our loneliness lifts. Our proclivity to look inward is turned into love of our neighbors. And all God asks of us, is to make sure that we give thanks. Not so much for pumpkin pie and stuffing—delicious though they are—but for our welcome into the life and love of God Almighty and into this community wherein Jesus is present. And when that happens, we can't help but make some noise. We might not scream at mirrors, but we do sing hymns, the great songs of the church, speak Amens and Thanksgivings every week in gratitude for God being right here with us.

Like the Gospel says, "Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice."

Tonight, I am thankful for Andy, my new screaming friend who has become an unlikely vehicle for God in my life. I am thankful for the communities of St. Mark's and of Lake Park Lutheran Church who minister to each other and the world. And I am thankful for this good land, the church, that God has given to us for our care and our consolation—even when we don't always measure up. God invites us to the table anyway, and for that I am thankful. Amen.