

Wednesday morning in my Bodyworks Class at the gym, the instructor had us doing plank exercises,

resting on only elbows and toes, trying to keep the entire body straight and level. Then he had us do several variations on the theme that had increasing levels of difficulty, all in the name of increasing our core strength. Core strength concerns all the muscles that have to do with the balance, stability and posture of our entire bodies. Virtually every move we make depends on core strength. It is important to maintain our core strength to be able to function from day to day.

As I was holding my plank position, muscles straining and shaking with the effort, I got to thinking about this season of Lent and the theme of strengthening our spiritual muscles that I have written about the last two weeks. In those I have focused on some of the "cardio" exercises of the spirit, especially generosity and love expressed in service, at the "heart" of the soul. It caused me to consider, "What is the core strength of the spirit?" Well, that would have to do with doctrine.

Doctrine has to do with the specifics of what we believe. Daily life and the influences of the culture as conveyed in the media or the news, other religions, advertising, etc. can and does affect our choices and behavior. A person can have a good, solid upbringing, but get away from their origins and around people who have different values and practices. If they choose to "fit in" by doing things this new group does, even if it is little by little, without considering the foundations or long-term implications of their choices, they can one day realize with a start that they no longer believe the things they always thought they did. The problem here is: belief follows behavior.

As Christians, it is worthwhile to review the teachings of the church from time to time to make sure we are still within the “boundaries of soundness.” For Lutherans in particular, we must be on our guard that we keep our focus on God’s grace—the gift of love, forgiveness and hope—that is totally without merit. It is all too easy to slip into trying to earn God’s love, trying to force others to fit our expectations of what “a good Christian” ought to be like, trying to make the “optionals” (such as worship styles, local customs, personality traits or other such things) into “requirements, and the like.

We lose strength, individually and collectively, when we let our personal doctrine slip. We become more vulnerable to temptation, to compromising our standards, to getting our priorities out of order or even to losing touch with what is really important. Take some time to review what you believe about God, creation, grace, sin and forgiveness, the Bible, the sacraments or any other teaching. You don’t have to do it all at once. That is just too daunting. Take one topic at a time.

So how do you start? Pick something that you haven’t thought about in a while. Or pick a topic related to something that has come up in the news or conversation lately. Attend the Lenten Service series every Wednesday night at 7pm at Incarnation in Swanson Hall. Listen to some of the sermons on this website’s “Just Listen” tab. Go to the ELCA’s “What We Believe” page at www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/The-Basics.aspx. Read a book by a noted theologian (e-mail me or Pastor Luther for suggestions.) Maybe pair up with a friend or your spouse to study together. The main thing is to start, challenge yourself but don’t over-do it (or you won’t stick with it) and have fun with it.

Blessings to you in your spiritual strengthening program.

Pastor Karla