

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
August 26, 2012  
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## The Olympic Games of Faith 3 - How to Train (Or, On Knowing When to Flip Your Cake)

(Hosea 7:1-2 , 8 NRSV) "when I would heal Israel, the corruption of Ephraim is revealed, and the wicked deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely, the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside. 2 But they do not consider that I remember all their wickedness. Now their deeds surround them, they are before my face.... 8 Ephraim mixes himself with the peoples; Ephraim is a cake not turned."

(2 Timothy 1:2-7 Adapted from Eugene Petersen's translation, The Message) I write this to you, Timothy, the son I love so much. All the best from our God and Christ be yours! 3 Every time I say your name in prayer - which is practically all the time - I thank God for you, the God I worship with my whole life in the tradition of my ancestors. 4 I miss you a lot, especially when I remember that last tearful good-bye, and I look forward to a joy-packed reunion. 5 That precious memory triggers another: your honest faith - and what a rich faith it is, handed down from your grandmother Lois to your mother Eunice, and now to you! 6 And the special gift of ministry you received when I laid hands on you and prayed - keep that ablaze! 7 God doesn't want us to be timid with his gifts, but bold and loving and powerful.

Did you catch that closing line from the prophet Hosea: "Ephraim is a cake not turned." Now you need to know two things here: first, "Ephraim" is simply another name in the Bible for the people of Israel; and second, in that day and time one of the staples, eaten at virtually every meal, were thin cakes cooked on stones that were heated in the fire. The result was what we know as pita bread, which continues to be a staple in the middle east to this day and the way of cooking it in rural areas remains pretty much unchanged. So what does the prophet mean when, speaking on behalf of God, he says "*Ephraim, the people Israel, are like a cake not turned*"?

Well, try an illustration closer to our day and time. Most everyone here has made pancakes, right? You mix the batter while the griddle is heating and then you carefully pour the batter onto the griddle. You cook it for awhile, watching it carefully, seeing it begin to bubble up on top, and at just the right moment – you hope! – you turn it so that it is now golden brown on top and the still-liquidy batter is on the bottom. But

what happens if you miss that window of opportunity for turning it, and it stops bubbling and continues cooking on the bottom? Well, then it gets harder and harder and even burnt on one side, and remains gooey and underdone on the other side. Even with all the right ingredients and the right temperature, if you forget to turn the pancake it is not something you want to eat. So depending on the way that you look at this metaphor of Hosea's, he's either saying that sometimes God's people are too often either half-baked or over-baked, depending on the side you're focusing on. He is suggesting that sometimes the character of people can be like that at times: burned and too hard on one side, raw and unfinished on the other. Even when God has carefully supplied all the ingredients, we can end up being half-baked too when it comes to our Christian lives.

There's something similar that can happen when you train your body for a task. Any of those athletes we saw in the Olympics can tell you that they only got there due to years of focused and unceasing training. But any of them could also tell you that if you train wrongly, or if you only train part of your body, or if you focus too much on one part of the body, the result will be, in its own way, the very thing Hosea is describing. A boxer who only trains himself to throw effective right-hand punches will not win many fights because his left hand and arm will be so underdeveloped. And even if you, like me, are the furthest thing from an Olympic athlete, it is also true it is possible to overtrain parts of our lives and under-train other parts. It is possible to become very proficient at certain aspects of life, certain of the traits of being a mature Christian, but to remain ineffective in other aspects and traits.

Does this not ring true? Think of some of the people you have known in your life: There is that one who is always known to keep his word. Disciplined, meticulous about always doing what is right; you can count on him for that. In those areas, he has indeed trained very well. And yet, sometimes, on the other side, the raw, unfinished

side, he seems to have this deficit of compassion; his capacity for empathy isn't as strong as it should be and he is not generous with mercy. One side of his character is done, even overdone and hardened, the other side remains raw. Or, conversely, think of the person who is sympathetic, loyal to a fault. She often indeed offers the precious gift of a supportive word when we need it most. But you have come to know that, in the long haul, she's not very reliable; and when you need her most, she might not be there because her life is a tangle of unorganized good intentions.

Or think of the person who is incredibly productive and industrious and is the one who can do ten things in the time that it takes everyone else to do two things. In him the gift, the character trait of organization and energy is indeed very-well baked, very well-trained, but he shows his more raw side, his more undone side when he always seems to be angry with those who do less or produce less or accomplish less. Or, finally, think of the person who has great courage, a person of high principles, but who has little or no consideration of others' feelings. With her, it seems to be: principle at any price. (And she has a twin, you know: the one who has so much consideration for what others are thinking that she has no courage at all! She is so busy worrying about what everyone else might be feeling that she cannot ever make a decision).

All of these are half-baked, burned, hardened on one side and raw and underdone on the other side, trained superbly in one aspect and flabby in another. It can happen with individuals and it can even happen with churches. One side, one aspect, one trait gets over-developed, over-done, over-strong and the other side remains weak and undone. Now, you may even be thinking, *"Pastor, you've gone from preaching to meddling – why are you preaching at me?"* Well, I'm not. As I have said more than once, sometimes what the preacher preaches are the things that the preacher himself sometimes most needs to hear! And yet if you are one, like me, who worries about a particular side of you that too often seems hardened or over-done, too

often “not turned,” in Hosea’s phrase, then I invite you to think with me about what there might be to say to those of us who find ourselves sometimes struggling with being burnt and over-done on one side of things, and too under-done on the other. Let me suggest three things for your consideration:

First, think about this: cooking is an activity that is best done with other folks; it’s certainly best done for other folks. Is that not true? When I’m only cooking for myself, I can get very, very lax. I tend to cook what will dirty the absolute least amount of dishes. My cooking skills don’t get better when I cook for one, they get worse. And, conversely, when I am cooking a meal for Barbara or for friends, I tend to want to do it as well as I can. I pay more attention. I work harder at it. The virtue of trying to make no dirty dishes takes a back seat to the virtue of trying to give joy to those whom I care for. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century American evangelist Dwight Moody tells the story of the preacher who went to visit a lapsed church member on winter’s evening. The member told the preacher that he still counted himself Christian but had decided to worship by himself now. The preacher didn’t say anything, but simply went to the member’s fireplace, took the tongs, took out a chunk of burning ember, and laid it off to the side by itself on the hearth. In a few minutes the ember went cold. And the member said, “Ok, preacher, I see your point.” A person’s Christian virtues too often grow cold, or – to use the opposite metaphor – get over-done when they are not exercised, discerned, made better and even corrected at times by a Christian **community** that cares for you. Despite what the yards and yards of self-help books and blogs would tell you, you cannot get the pancake that is your life beautifully done on both of its sides, **all** of its sides, without, as the song put it, “a little help from [your] friends.” To be a self-made Christian is an oxymoron; you need that community to help you discern where you are over-baked and where you are yet underdone, you need that community to help you

train every part of your Christian life.

Second, if you find yourself feeling and thinking that the pancake that is your life is too often over-done on one side and under-done on the other, let me suggest to you that you do what all the best cooks do and change your recipe. Don't the very best cooks know that always following a recipe exactly can produce results that are consistently **ok**, but at the same time altering that recipe can sometimes lead to some wonderful improvements? Don't you have a favorite food that once got substantially improved when you were out of a certain ingredient and so substituted a different one – with results that were delightful? It is the same with our Christian character. It's ok to experiment with the recipe. Each of us, you and I, has long standing patterns of the way we react to this or that situation. But sometimes we find those patterns, those recipes, if you will, aren't working as well as we would wish. Maybe it's in your family where there are certain roles that everyone is "supposed" to have but which more and more seem to make for dysfunction. Maybe it's in your relationship with a friend, where you watch him or her do more and more silly things and your pattern has been to not say anything. Maybe it's even in your own spiritual life; maybe you are frustrated by your relationship with God, or your prayer life. The best cooks know that sometimes the best results are achieved when you change the long standing recipe, substituting this for that, substituting, say, a little more forthrightness with that friend instead of your usual reticence, substituting a new way of praying – a new time of day, or a new place, or whatever – for the usual "recipe" that you have been using and which has been leaving you feeling underdone or over-done. Experiment, substitute, try new things.

Which brings me to my third point: don't be afraid to make a mistake when you are adjusting the recipes that have too often led to your feeling over-done or under-

done in this or that area or aspect of your life. Did you know that there are lots of inventions that were products of mistakes? The Post-It Note, for example, was invented when a 3M chemist was working on finding a stronger kind of glue. He failed at that. But he noticed that the residue of what he'd been working on allowed papers to lightly stick to other papers and be removed with no residue. And the Post-It Note has been enormously profitable for the 3M company, and it's hard to imagine any modern American office without these sticky-notes festooning everything.<sup>1</sup> Management consultant Tom Peters – whose writings were very influential in the 1990s among business folks, but that was before he made the mistake of talking about what a great company Enron was! – counsels the executives and leaders of companies to begin every staff meeting by asking their staff members “What was the most interesting failure that you had this month?” I love that question. And, of course, most of us – including me! – are so fearful of failing, of appearing silly, of looking stupid, of losing face that we absolutely hate and despise failure, and so we often go out of our way to do things in a safe way. We may not even be happy with the results of the safe way, sometimes, but those results are predictable and we don't run the risk of being embarrassed by failure. But what would happen if we took Mr. Peters' advice and applied it more to our lives? It might mean that we would more often try behaving differently than we usually do, not knowing for sure whether the results will be better, but risking that they might be, they very well could be, and having the attitude that successes are worth the occasional failure. Because when all is said and done, if you are never having any “failures” in your life, then it may well mean that you are not risking enough sometimes. But the risk is worth it: it can lead to a better pancake, it can lead to a lessening of being too done one side of your soul, and underdone on the other side. It can make sure that you are not under-training one part of your life and over-training another part.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.mmm.com/us/office/postit/pastpresent/history.html>

Because, after all, St. Paul reminds us, just as he reminded his protégée and understudy Timothy so long ago: we were not given a spirit of “timidity” but rather were offered a spirit of power and a spirit of love. And it’s a good word for churches themselves too. It’s a good word for us as we continue in the coming weeks and months, as I said last week, to look both hard and enthusiastically at all of our practices and habits to see whether there are ways that we are unintentionally “speaking in tongues,” using “code words” and practices that might keep people from truly feeling welcome. And in this process, let us not be afraid to take some risks, let us not be afraid to suggest ways that we might substitute some new ingredients here and there; let us not be afraid to try things that are new, knowing that we learn from even our failures. For the goal that we ought always have in front of us as a church, the idea that ought to drive everything that we do, every meeting that we have, every agenda that we create, every word that we speak is to follow Jesus’ Great Commission of sharing the gospel of God’s gracious and unconditional love with those who are hurting and hungry and hopeless, those who may have found themselves alienated from other churches, other kinds of theologies, those who desperately need to know the kind of relationship with God with the kind of God that we are blessed with.

So whether it is in your life or our church, the prophet Hosea’s words remind us that sometimes, indeed, we get ourselves into patterns where we are too done on one side, underdone on the other. But that’s a situation that can be fixed, can’t it? It can be fixed, and our “cooking” improved in both our personal and corporate life together, by indeed working together, not being afraid to improvise sometimes, and being willing to take some risks. The good of doing so in your life or mine can be profound: we can more fully realize and become the person that God hopes we might be. We can continue to become even more fully the church that God calls us to be that reaches out

to a hurting world with the gift of radical hospitality and the joy of a gentle God. In your personal life and in our corporate life we can indeed be trained even better, be baked even better, to the glory of God and the mission of Christ. May it be so. Amen.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I am very indebted to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for pointing out the Hosea passage and its evocative image; the opening of this sermon also draw liberally on her sermon "People Half-Baked," preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Concord, California, May 17, 1998