

Column

Since 1945, Mary Mac's Tea Room in Atlanta has been a destination point for natives and visitors alike. Everybody from axe-handle-totting Lester Maddox to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has dined there. Favorites include meatloaf, fried chicken and a host of fresh vegetables from the Atlanta farmers' market including turnip greens, fried okra and tomato pie. On the side cornbread is served, many choosing to dip it in turnip green pot likker.

When I was there last week nothing much had changed, including people from all races and walks of life being present. While waiting to be seated in the foyer, I struck up a conversation with four well-dressed Black women. Talk soon morphed from how good the food was at Mary Mac's to three things that promote longevity. One had definite ideas on the matter and said: moving (exercise), water and vegetables. She then looked at one of her companions and said, "This one won't eat her vegetables." Everyone laughed.

Later, upon further reflection, I decided the first woman's observation was correct. No doubt, these three things are important and contribute to flourishing and health. I might add to them, laughter, not at people, mind you, but to the absurdities of life, of which there are many.

As there are things that promote health of body, so there are things that promote health of soul. As we are now in Lent, the penitential season leading up to Easter, it might be good if we ask what are they? My list of three, with a bonus fourth, would include: prayer, Bible reading, church attendance and service in the world.

The first, prayer, turns our attention from our own puny resources to the One who is rich in power and might, who loves us and who delights in giving His human creatures good things. Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17 charges his readers not to "trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy." What healthier way to

begin each day than with thanking God for His past blessings and laying before Him our needs and those of others we know?

The second on my list is Bible reading. Psalm 119:105, says “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path,” and so it is. But to gain benefit of that light, we need to open the Bible and read it. Sitting on the shelf or displayed on the coffee table does no good.

We must, moreover, read it intelligently. Intelligent reading of scripture means not just picking out little snippets that suit our fancy but getting our minds round the entire biblical drama and then finding our place in this drama. When we approach scripture like this, it will truly be a light to our path.

The third on my list is church attendance. Humans are social beings. We were made for interaction with others. Fellowship and corporate worship provide that interaction. It keeps the flame of faith burning bright and provides a venue for support and encouragement. “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear,” says hymnwriter John Fawcett.

My bonus fourth is Christian service. As Christ went out teaching, healing and identifying with people of all sorts, so He sends out His believing people. “As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you,” we hear Him say in John 20:21.

Service in the world contributes to physical, emotional and spiritual health. Spending too much time with ourselves, being overly introspective, debilitates. Being out in the world witnessing and serving enlivens. It delivers us from the tyranny of self-absorption. No longer do we fret over whether we are happy . . . whatever that is. Rather we now have a mission and purpose. We and those we serve are mutually encouraged.

Prayer, Bible reading, church attendance and service are to the soul what moving, water, vegetables and laughter are to the body. They are lifegiving and maybe even life extending. All of this and more I learned at Mary Mac's. Maybe I need to go there more often!

Since it is of thy mercy, O gracious Father, that another day is added to our lives; We here dedicate both our souls and our bodies to thee and thy service, in a sober, righteous, and godly life: in which resolution, do thou, O merciful God, confirm and strengthen us; that, as we grow in age, we may grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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