

Striving, or not

By [Clay Oglesbee](#)

September 26, 2011

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Oglesbee's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Texts about "striving" make me itch. They bring to mind our own cultural commitments to speak about lifting ourselves by our own bootstraps to reach high goals.

We like the talk, but we've also learned to approach it with the same wariness we bring to New Year's resolutions. Sometimes it's more a party game than a decision. We excitedly scrawl our new congregational mission plans on napkins, notebooks or iPads, and then we wonder what we were thinking when our best plans and resolutions don't take flight--like the winged, but apparently flightless, old man in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*.

Paul even borrows imagery from athletic contests or marathons. That's inspiring, but how many of us ever even strive to finish the Thanksgiving Day 5k "turkey trot," let alone the Boston Marathon?

What is encouraging about Paul's writing, though, is that it doesn't just describe bootstraps or yearning to reach a goal when it comes to the life of the Spirit. It names a resource: God's transforming power. A few verses after our pericope ends, Paul describes not only the goal he aspires to in Christ but also the power that will take him there, that will "transform the body of our humiliation...by the power that enables him to make all things subject to himself" (v. 21).

The Benedictines speak of this sort of thing as the "ladder of humility." On a daily basis, we walk (or jog) the rounds of our daily duties, one step at a time. This is the horizontal "ladder" of our days. But the insight faith gives us on this ladder is that while we walk it, back and forth, God lifts our days' work toward the heights of the

"heavenly call in Christ Jesus."