

5/16/10 Sermon

“Habits of the Heart”

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“No arms, no legs, no worries.” – Nick Vujicic

Nick was born that way – no arms, no legs and a “no worries” philosophy of living. His spirit is irrepressible, filled with humor, compassion and a gentleness of the spirit. His life work is to bring his habit of the heart – gratitude and a love of life, even as a quadriplegic – to teenagers when he gives motivational speeches. He finds humor in his disability, but he really is not disabled; he plays sports, does everything. He never focuses on what he doesn’t have.

If we follow his lead, we could all find a way to manage our limits and losses. He teaches us that self-pity is a waste of time and energy. He believes we can all learn to be thankful for what we have received from the universe.

Like Nick, I am grateful for many things – my children and grandchildren, my friends, this congregation, even my health challenges that remind me to savor life. At times I wake up thinking today I could meet my end. Perhaps a surprise awaits me – there really is a heaven. If so, then that means there is likely a hell, and I only have a 50/50 chance of getting into either place. Mind you, I am not rushing to meet my demise – I don’t think for an instant there are 72 virgins or even one waiting for me, male or female. I am not that lucky.

I am also grateful for simple things and silly things. I love Lucy Creecher, my cat; and the Lucy and Ricky show, the family she is named after. I love reruns of the Carol Burnett show and Avatar and fortune cookies. The fortunes inside can sometimes serve as a trenchant reminder of the joy of living, a reminder to find gratitude in the mundane, ordinary and commonplace. Recently, after a meal at the China Garden on Holcomb Bridge Road, I opened my fortune cookie and the message read, “Keep moving but stop looking, happiness is just around the corner.” Wow, that stopped me in my tracks.

That sliver of paper with its cryptic message laid out a path to a better life. Happiness, it would seem – the sheer joy of being alive – is within our reach, but we must actively seek it out. We must find the hidden message in the bottle; learn the lesson embedded in each of our experiences, joyous or tragic.

“Gratitude,” writes M. J. Ryan, “creates this happiness because we feel full and complete. Gratitude is the realization that we have everything we need. It is about recognizing and accepting what is our life, even the pain and loneliness of it.”

The Buddha emerged from his long meditation under the Bodhi tree with the revelation of his “Four Noble Truths,” the first of which is that life is filled with sorrow, pain or woundedness. To resist that reality is to be unhappy without hope of healing. We all have pain – some more, some less – but a life free of sorrow is not in the offing. The choice we have is to face our trials with acceptance and resolve or angry resistance. Privation can often teach us gratitude. Adversity can be viewed not as something to be overcome, but as a teachable experience to deepen our souls. Sorrow and joy balance on the head of a pin, but they do not cancel each other out. Gratitude allows us to accept that reality.

With an attitude of thankfulness, our lot in life can be transformed into one of joy, optimism, faith and trust. Remember, the Buddha told us that pain can be dealt with but not avoided. For me, the emotional or spiritual pain I have experienced in my life seemed at times to be more than I could cope with. But as my mentor, Ken Collier, wrote, “I can decide how I respond to the woundedness of my own living. It won’t help at all to blame them (out there), it will help to embrace the pain, to weep with it, and then to move to understand how it is that I can change my life.”

Understanding can bring me contentment if I am able to change my life by moving out of woundedness and into joy that is inherent in living. Gratitude is the agent of change when we strive to understand what our life experiences mean. When we change our minds about things, our experience of the world will also change. Gratitude opens the road to healing by enabling us to look at ourselves more clearly and, in so doing, to live more authentically.

My father died in 2001. But I still think about our relationship, which was filled with stress and missed connections. He did not know how to express love and I didn’t offer mine readily, for fear of being hurt or rejected. He hurt me more than he knew, often joking to anyone who would listen that I was adopted – not of his blood, so to speak. I was made to feel different, not a full member of the family. He failed me by not understanding how hurtful his jokes were; but I failed him in return by never sharing who I was until I came out. Only then could I let him see his son finally joyful at living an authentic life. It was only then that I could begin to remove the barbs and hooks of our relation and begin to heal my wounded heart.

When I began to identify and understand the sources of my pain, I learned to be grateful for that relationship and finally to forgive and heal myself and then begin to express love for my dad. There was always some hesitancy on my part as the hurt was deep and decades long. By accepting my part in a dysfunctional relationship, I became grateful for the years left to heal our breach. By the time he died, our relationship was built on love and not cruel jokes.

A lack of courage to embrace the joy that is born in woundedness, Ken Collier contends, is the opposite of joy. I think the Buddha was right. Life is filled with sorrow. But "this truth is not a condemnation. It is a blessing. For if we do not know sorrow, how shall we know joy? How shall we know love? How shall we become human? How shall we even live? This sorrow is not a problem to be solved; it is a life to be lived. The problem to be solved is how to embrace this life we are given and to live it, at every moment, giving thanks, even for the sorrow."

Gratitude opens us to creating new habits of the heart, new pathways to a love that embraces pure joy.