

Love the Life You Live

^{NIV} **Isaiah 49:13-16** Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.¹⁴ But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me."¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

^{NIV} **Matthew 6:25** "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin.²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

^{NRS} **Philippians 4:4-7, 10-13**^{NRS} Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

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In Ecclesiastes it says, “. . . no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them.”(Ecclesiastes 9:12, NRS) That was how last Wednesday felt. For the third day we had no internet in the church office, the air conditioning repairman was back again because the system in Fellowship Hall was turning the place into a meat locker, the piano tuner was plunking away, a woman dropped in with an urgent need to talk to me about being licensed to preach, I didn't have everything for today's bulletin yet, the sermon wasn't even started, and I wasn't ready for Vacation Bible School, either. So, it felt like a sudden time of calamity. Oh, I knew that it wasn't really a big disaster. I knew that all of the day's problems were small in the grand scheme of things – but it didn't feel that way. By the end of the day, it felt like I had one nerve left – and someone was standing on it. Even my happy, energetic, playful, slobbering dog had a hard time getting me to lighten up!

In Philippians 4:11, the writer says, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content." How can we be content, no matter what our state of existence? Or, put another way, how can we love the life we live? Some years ago, Cathy and I were spending Saturday mornings rehabilitating houses for low income families. As we'd look around the neighborhood and learn about the lives of the families who would be moving in, we'd get a broader view of the world than we experienced in our suburban neighborhood. On the way home, we'd look at each other and say, "We don't have any problems; we just thought we did." Every now and then, we need to purposely get out of our usual rut - and broaden our view.

In 1995, on our first mission trip to Hungary, we were reminded that the air conditioning, clean drinking water, and ready access to discount stores and supermarkets that we take for granted are not the

everyday experience for most of the world's people. In my visits to factories in Taiwan, South Korea, and Mexico, I've been reminded that a middle class existence in our country, is beyond even imagining for so many people. Most of us know two billion people in this world are trying to exist on less than two dollars a day, have no access to clean water, have no health care, and go to sleep hungry. Most of us have heard this. Many of us have seen this. But, that all can get lost in the frustration of the moment. When we're stuck in traffic, we fail to give thanks that we have an automobile. If the cleaners ruins a shirt, we don't celebrate the fact that there are five - or twenty - or forty more, hanging in our closet. When the internet was down for three days, I wasn't giving thanks for the computer that was still working in every other way.

You've heard the saying, "I felt sorry for myself because I had no shoes - until I met a man with no feet." Sometimes we need to remember - that there are people with no feet! We need to put our lives in a broader perspective - and count our blessings. In almost every circumstance, we don't have to look very far to find someone who has less and suffers more than we do. We can love the life we live, because our life is more blessed than someone else's life. That's a step in the right direction. It moves us from being self-centered - to being aware of the conditions that other people live with every day.

The next level is when we realize that hard times do have some benefits. As we raise our children and watch others raise theirs, we notice how children who are protected from every risk and every discomfort, children who have every want supplied, are likely to be described as spoiled. We think that those children will grow up to lack self-discipline, will have weak characters, and will be unable to make commonsense and wise decisions. Of course, as adults, we avidly seek to be spoiled. The limits of what we do and what we get, are often limited only by what we can finance. We often have great difficulty telling ourselves "No." We don't want our children to be spoiled, but we tend to spoil ourselves. Suffering builds character, but we'd rather it build someone else's character. In Romans 5:3, it says, "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." We nod our heads and agree, but emotionally we tend to feel that this process may be overrated. It's hard to love the life you live when there's hardship and suffering involved. We're willing to trade hope, character, and endurance in the future for less suffering in the present. We have difficulty with this and so we need to pray about it. Please join me in prayer.

Oh Lord, we confess before you that if life were all smooth, there would be no patience. If life were all easy, there would be no courage, no sacrifice, and no depth of character. We acknowledge that adversity yields admirable character traits - and that courageous souls are unafraid to face it. In Christ's name. Amen.¹

Because we live in a scientific culture, we have a tendency to look at life in terms of cause and effect. So we tend to suspect that hardship is punishment from God, and easy times and prosperity are rewards from God. Now, the Apostle Paul is about as dedicated a servant of God as we can imagine. How did this work out for him? Writing to the folks in Corinth, he describes his life this way. "Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked." (2 Cor. 11:24-27)

With those experiences, most of us would react in the same way that Isaiah says the children of Israel reacted when they were captives in Babylon. "Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.'" Who could blame Paul, if, as he recovered from thirty-nine lashes, he felt that God had forsaken him. As the torn flesh on his back healed, it'd be easy to feel like God had forgotten that he even existed. Isaiah responds to those feelings of despair and solitude with this beautiful maternal image of God. "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me." It's hard to imagine a love that's stronger than a mother's love. There's a special bond with a child who you carried within your body for months, a child nourished from your own

milk. And God says, "Even if a mother could forget or fail to have feelings for her own baby, I'll not forget you. See, I've got your name written on the palm of my hand. You are always on my mind. Isaiah doesn't say that the people of God won't suffer, but that the "LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones."

Like Paul, we will experience hard times. We will suffer. We will be afflicted. Sometimes, our suffering will be the natural consequences of our own actions. Sometimes, hardship will seem random and undeserved. Through it all, God offers comfort and compassion. Peter wrote that we should cast our anxieties into God's mighty hands, because God cares about us.(1 Peter 5:6-7) The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (13:5) reminds us of the ancient promise of God, " I will never leave you or forsake you."(Genesis 28:15, Joshua 1:5) Paul knew that through all of his experiences, God was with him, God cared for him, and God had compassion for him. And so, even with all of these hardships, and while he was sitting in prison, Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, " I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content." (Philippians 4:11, RSV) What's more, Paul went on to explain, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."(4:13) Paul's contentment wasn't "spineless resignation, but a joyful acceptance of what God provides."² Paul learned to love the life he lived. The knowledge of God's love and presence led him to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, 'Rejoice!'⁵ The Lord is near."(4:4-5)

So we see that we can love the life we live if we remember just how blessed we are, if we remember that our hardships are also opportunities for us to grow stronger and deeper, and if we hold on to the knowledge that God is with us, and has compassion and love for us. But there is one more thing. Given all of this, what shall we do? How do we take this and love kindness and walk humbly with our God?

Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister was famous as the star of the children's television show, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. As a child, Fred Rogers was fat. He was a bookworm. He played the piano. And, he was extremely shy. All of that made him the ideal target for ridicule and meanness. He was tormented by bullies in grade school. It would have been no surprise if he had grown up to be bitter, vindictive, and driven by hate. Those who are bullied often become bullies themselves, given the opportunity. Instead, as an adult, Fred Rogers was known as a warm and loving man who was just as caring off-stage, as he was on the set of the television show. What changed his life was a **friend**, a friend who gave him life-altering friendship, "liberating friendship." Fred's life changed because there was someone who believed in him and wasn't afraid to say so. When he found that one friend in school, that one relationship healed the wounds inflicted by so many others. Evil can't be eliminated, or overpowered, or transformed by evil. Only good can overcome evil. Fred Rogers experienced the healing that comes from steadfast friendship. The Apostle Paul experienced contentment because he felt the steadfast love of God.

How can we love kindness? How can we walk humbly with God? Fred Roger's friend mirrored the presence of God's love by being a friend to a fat, shy, nerd. We are called to be what we were created to be, to be in the image of God, to reflect God's love to others, to be of one mind with Christ, to walk humbly with our Lord. "We are here to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better. Despite the countless and diverse ways we live our lives, every life is a spiritual path, and all life has a spiritual agenda."³ Say it however you wish, we are expected to not only believe, but also to do. And in the believing and in the doing, we come to love the life we live.

Some years ago, I spent six months working in the Sahara Dessert in Libya. Out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire, I learned the power of boredom and loneliness and confinement. It was closer to being in prison than I ever want to experience again. You have been providing the sermon topics this summer. Today's sermon was suggested by a prisoner, our own brother, Mark Warner. A few week's ago, Mark wrote, "I've learned since coming to prison to be more patient and understanding, and to be more grateful to others, especially to God. I don't love prison, but I do love life more than I used to." All of us are on a journey, one that will teach us to love the life we live.

In the summer of 1943, a minister offered a benediction at a worship service. It was appropriate for families who worried about loved ones away in the war. The next year, this prayer was included in a

book of prayers and services, for use by military chaplains. Many of us are familiar with a shorter and simpler version of Reinhold Niebuhr's prayer. The original wording is better and deeper. It asks that we may love the life we live. Let us pray.

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things that should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." Amen.

^{NRS} **Luke 12:16** Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly.¹⁷ And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'¹⁸ Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.'¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'²⁰ But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."²² He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear."²³ For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.²⁴ Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds!²⁵ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?²⁶ If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you-- you of little faith!²⁹ And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying.³⁰ For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.³¹ Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."³³ Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

^{RSV} **1 Peter 5:6** Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you.⁷ Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.

^{NRS} **Hebrews 13:5** Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

¹ after Henry Emerson Fosdick, quoted in *I'm Proud of You*, by Tim Madigan

² Morna D. Hooker, *The Letter to the Philippians, NIB, vol. XI* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2000) p 548

³ Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings* (New York, Penguin Putnam, 2000) p 326