

Children's Moment "Little and Big" - Healthy Living

Good morning, girls and boys. We're continuing with our "Little and Big" lessons. Today's lesson is about doing the best we can.

"Some days doing the 'best we can' may still fall short of what we would like to be able to do, but life isn't perfect ... and doing the best we can with what we have is the most we should expect of ourselves or anyone else."¹ Karen Meyers wrote those words. Like me, she's a fan of Mr. Rogers.

Karen is the kind of person who likes to be in charge, to get things done. Unfortunately, a couple of years ago, she had some health problems that slowed her down and made her rely on other people.

"Karen was forced to accept that some things are beyond her control.

Many of us are plagued by a 'should list.' We feel like we should be a better son or daughter or sister or brother, we should spend more time with our parents, we should do better in school, we should do better in sports. If we don't watch out, we can spend all of our time seeking the approval of others, waiting for applause. We can become stuck, unable to do what we want, because we're afraid of what other people think. We lose our sense of value as a person.

Mr. Rogers reminds you, 'You are a very special person. There is only one [person] like you in the whole world.'

Be who you are and don't feel guilty or ashamed. Accept the best you can be in yourself and in others. Pay attention to the little signals of things that make you happy. Life isn't a performance. You're not your 'should list.' You are valued and loved. Your parents love you. We love you. Esperanza and I love you. Best of all, God loves you and wants the best for you."²

Let's pray ... God, give us the ability and grace to make choices which allow me and my neighbor to become the best we can be.

¹ <https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/2016/01/a-little-and-big-start-to-the-new-year/>

² *Ibid, modified*

Message: "Spiritual Health"
"A Message of Hope"

"When Alice heard her brother was about to get a divorce, she sent him an email telling him how wrong he was. Although she hadn't spoken to him in several years, she had a strong conviction that a Christian's duty was to remind others about what's right and wrong. He should know better than to divorce.

When she received no reply, Alice decided she'd better put more effort into saving her brother from making a serious mistake. She did a little research and found what she thought was the best church close to her brother's home. She sent her brother another email, recommending the church to him. Then she contacted the church and gave them her brother's phone numbers, asking them to call him because he was a Christian in trouble who was looking for a good church."

As you can imagine, Alice never got a reply.

Next Alice turned to her sister, who had moved in Alice and her husband after losing her job. Alice regularly confronted her sister when she crossed the line. Alice worked hard to get her sister to give up her relationship with a non-Christian. It wasn't long before Alice's sister had enough and announced she was moving in with her partner.

Before leaving Alice's sister said, "If you're an example of what it means to be a Christian, then I don't want anything to do with it."

To cap things off, Alice got news that afternoon her brother's divorce was finalized. She was heartbroken and angry.

Alice called her best friend for support, but to her surprise, her friend said, "Alice, all you do anymore is talk about other people. It's like your life is consumed by everyone else's spirituality instead of your own."³

Solomon wrote these words,

"There is a time for everything,

and a season for every activity under heaven: ...

a time to tear down and a time to build." (Ecclesiastes 3:1,3)

³ VanVonderen and Ryan. *Soul Repair*. IVP Books, 2008, pp. 77-78

I believe these wise words capture the heart of today's message.

I don't think we can talk about health without talking about all aspects of our being, the whole person. We've reflected on our physical, mental and emotional health. Now it's time to turn inward, reflecting on our spiritual health.

As Paul reminds us in Romans 13, it's time to wake up from our spiritual slumber and embrace our spiritual lives. After all, we seem to be made for a spiritual life, a relationship with God. It's deep inside of us, poking and prodding us.

It would be nice if our relationship with God was simple. For some people, that seems to be the case. They experience spirituality as a stable source of encouragement. They feel empowered and well fed. But for many of us, that's not the case. While our spiritual lives can be a source of great blessing, it's also true our spiritual lives can be a source for great suffering. We can have unhealthy spiritual lives, like Alice.

Today, I'm talking to the people whose relationship with God has been uneasy, complex, confusing and even hurtful. To assist me with the reflection, I'm drawing on the work of one of my seminary professors, Dr. Dale Ryan, who wrote "Soul Repair" with his wife, Juanita Ryan, who is a therapist.

Any conversation of this nature must be rooted in the experiences of those who are present and engaged. I have a complex relationship with God. Many of you know I was raised in the church, but fell away after college and a painful divorce. After twenty years outside the church, I began seeking answers. That led to a life-changing spiritual experience and, without realizing it, a call that has led me to become your pastor.

I wish I could say the journey has become easier, but that wouldn't be true. My spiritual life ebbs and flows, as yours does. While I never doubt my relationship with God, I do question what it means and how it helps me live. I've been hurt by the church and, sadly, I have hurt others, including some of you who are listening. I'm sorry, please forgive me. I'm still learning how to behave better.

My experience affirms what I’m going to share with you today.

There are no “quick fixes.” What works is a realization that sometimes you need to tear down things you’ve held onto to begin afresh, rebuilding your spiritual life in a healthy way. I’m not talking about theory or in abstract terms, but in real, practical things.

While unhealthy spirituality can erode the foundations of our life, healthy spirituality does the opposite. We can know what it’s like for our spirituality to be a precious, grace-filled and practical resource. We can experience God’s Spirit infusing our spirits with the gifts of humility, kindness and joy. We can know the peace that comes when our spirits are freed from fears, shame and resentments. We can taste the contentment and serenity that comes from sinking our roots deep in the soil of God’s grace and love.

However, experiencing God’s grace and love doesn’t mean we’re no longer vulnerable to destructive, or toxic, spirituality. We’re on a journey, still in the process of understanding the ways our spiritual brokenness affects our lives and the lives of others.

The good news is God seems willing to bless us, even in our spiritual brokenness. That’s our hope: even in our moments of spiritual brokenness, when we can’t see anything but failure, God sees opportunities for blessing.

Jesus said it simply,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3)

That statement doesn’t match the expectations we find inside ourselves after years of toxic spirituality, but it appears to be true. Our spiritual poverty is, in the eyes of God, an opportunity for blessing and not an occasion for judgment, shame or rejection. May God be praised.

Henri Nouwen wrote this,

“The older we become, the more we realize how limited we are in our ability to love, how impure our hearts are, and how complex our motivations are. And there is a real temptation to want to look inside of ourselves and clean it all out, and become people with a pure heart,

unstained intentions, and unconditional love. Such an attempt is doomed to failure and leads us to ever greater despair. The more we look into ourselves and try to figure ourselves out, the more we become entangled in our own imperfections.

Indeed, we can't save ourselves. Only Jesus can save us. That's why it's so important to remove your inner eye away from the complexities of your own broken heart toward the pure but broken heart of Jesus. Looking at him and his immense mercy will give you the ability to accept your own imperfections and really let yourself be cared for by the mercy and love of Jesus.

Thomas Merton wrote: 'God is mercy in mercy in mercy.'

This means that the more we come to know ourselves, the more we come to know God's mercy, which is beyond the mercy we know. Letting go of the desire to be perfect lovers, and allowing God to love our people through us, that's the great spiritual call that's given to you and me. There in the pure heart of God, embraced by God's unconditional love, you will find the true joy and peace your heart is longing for."⁴

If we're like Alice, it may be hard to imagine a noncontrolling way of being involved in the spiritual lives of others, but recovery is possible. The first step is to admit the truth. Maybe you feel like your life is falling apart. I recommend you call a friend, talk with your pastor or find a Christian counselor. I have a coach, who helps me. Be honest.

You will probably discover you have hidden feelings toward God. You may find yourself filled with complaints, yet uncomfortable with what to do about them. You may be anxious. The process won't be easy or quick, but it is healthy. You can learn to express yourself to God and others in healthy ways.

After months of counseling and recovery, Alice's sister reluctantly met with her for coffee. Alice told her sister, "I realize I've been trying to play God in your life and I'm sorry. I'm learning about what I can and can't control, and how disrespectful my behavior has been." After

⁴ Henri Nouwen Society, *Daily Reflection*, September 3, 2020

that meeting, Alice’s sister began dropping by the house. Alice didn’t press her on her relationship. They’re finding a new way to be sisters.

A few weeks later, Alice wrote another email to her brother.

More or less, she said the same thing she said to her sister. She had been wrong in trying to control him and that she hoped to behave differently in the future.

This time, Alice got a reply. It was just two words: “Thank you.”

Jesus said,

“My yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matthew 11:30)

Jesus invites you to come to him and rest. That’s where we’ll find joy and hope. That’s the safest and healthiest place to be in the whole world. While we may be uncertain about a lot of things, we can be assured God is present and active in our lives. We don’t need to fix other people. Instead, let’s turn to God and let God heal us so we can rest.

I can think of no better hope on this Labor Day weekend.

Allow yourself to truly rest in God’s love and grace. Your life will become better when you do.

Romans 13:8–14 (CEB)

Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: *You must love your neighbor as yourself*. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law. As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.