

“WHEN LIFE DOES NOT GIVE YOU WHAT YOU WANT...”

**Text: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give
unto you. Not as the world gives give I unto
you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let
it be afraid.”** **John 14: 27**

**Rev. Richard M. Cromie. Ph.D., D.D.
Sharon Presbyterian Church
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It was not meant to be easy, was it? This whole long journey, I mean, from whenever and wherever it was that someone first set your little feet down upon the terra firma of this big old spinning planet, until the day, far off I hope, when you and I and all the rest of God's created children will have some angel of mercy set our eternal feet in that land of forever and ever more. It was not meant to be easy, not since whatever happened in Eden happened to Adam and Eve and God drove them out and posted a huge cherubim at the East Gate, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way back in, to the tree of life.

It was not easy for the first family out there picking berries in the hot sun, East of Eden, grubbing for their meager existence - all the more wearisome and unbearable because at one time they had everything they wanted in the luscious Garden and they squandered it all away for a wee nip of the forbidden fruit. Out there, as promised, the man had to work from sun-up to dark, toiling through the storms and the thorns and the thistles, with sweat on his brow and an ache in his heart. It was not easy.

And, it was not easy being Moses. He started out life as a baby hidden in a basket in the reeds along the Nile River. As he grew up it became clear that he would stutter all his days. And he had a bad temper. He killed an Egyptian guard who was beating up one of his kinsman. So he had to flee out to the Wilderness country. But alas, he found a nice wife, Zipporah, and with their two sons, he prospered, looking after the flocks and fields of his clever father-in-law Jethro. But just when Moses had everything the way he wanted it, God told him he had need of him back down in Egypt. Moses refused: he was afraid; but in time he took his brother Aaron and they went down to challenge Pharaoh.

Then, after the people of God crossed the Red Sea, he wandered with the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years, forty years, listening to them complain, watching them playing games, turning their backs on Yahweh. Finally, they got there, but the one thing Moses really wanted: to enter the Promised Land he had dreamed about for decades was denied. He never got there. “Wait a minute Lord, I am Moses. I discovered you.” God replied, “No, the same rules apply to everybody!” God did allow him take a peek into the land from atop the mountains of Moab, but Moses died up there and no one knows to this day where he is buried. It wasn’t easy.

And it was not easy being Naomi, the mother-in-law to Ruth. They were happy in the little town of Bethlehem, she and Elimelech and their two sons: Mahon and Chilion. But times change, as we know in North Carolina and everywhere else for that matter, and a horrid years’ long drought hung on and farming was finished, and there were no jobs; and they had to up and leave their house and home and travel over to the land of Moab, east of the Dead Sea, to find their meat and drink. The Moabites were foreigners, traditional enemies of Israel and worse, they worshipped Baal. But Elimelech had to take his family somewhere to save them from peril and starvation.

But alas, they were not long there when mysteriously Elimelech died, and Naomi was left to take care of the boys. They both married foreign girls. Orpah and Ruth were nice but it probably bothered the boys’ mother anyway. For ten years, it says, they lived more or less happily out there, but then both Mahon and Chilion, died. Oh dear, poor Naomi was left alone in a strange land without money or hope. Desolate, she decided to go back home to some distant relatives in Bethlehem of Judea. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth insisted on going with her. Orpah stayed in Moab. Naomi was back home, but Ruth was an immigrant foreigner. That was

not then and it is not easy now. We are all suspicious of people who are different, as they are of us. It was not easy. But ask Naomi if all the pain and desolation and tears were worth it. She would scold you for asking: “Of course it was worth it. It was not intended to be easy.”

And, skip ahead a thousand years: it was not easy being Jesus of Nazareth, either. Born in a stable, threatened with death as an infant, hurled off to safety in Egypt, and cooped up in a little town in Galilee. His father died; his mother never understood him; his brothers told him he was crazy; the neighbors scoffed and snickered. They seemed right when he left his mother behind and wandered through the wilderness, preaching and doing miracles for three long years, without a place to lay his head at night. He never had a savings account, no health insurance or retirement plan. All he wanted to do was be helpful. He mastered life within. But outwardly, he was hunted and harassed and humiliated and beaten and laughed at and spit upon and hung out in the hot sun on a cross, where it took him three horrible, long hours to die. All his friends forsook him and fled; the Roman soldiers cast dice for his only garment. He was finished and done and buried in a borrowed tomb at age 33. Oh, he rose to eternal glory as Jesus Christ our Lord, and it had a happy ending, that’s for sure. But, while he was here on earth, it was not easy.

The Cost of Discipleship, as Bonhoeffer called it, is steep and dear, often nothing less than life itself. I could go on and on through the Bible and ever since, lifting this name and that name, with a paragraph each. But they all would fall under the umbrella that it was not easy; and almost to a person, you would conclude that life did not give them what they wanted. That’s our theme here this morning in this sermon. When life does not give you what you want, “What do you do?”

What do you do when you have to compromise and settle for your second or third choice, or one you never chose at all? Most all of us start out assuming we will have the world on a string: parents to carry us through infancy; then skip through childhood with ease, become popular in high school, good at sports, a college of our choice, a perfect wife or husband to last us all our days, a job we can embrace, a house full of children - all perfectly well-behaved, plus a pocketful of money to take on a Deluxe Suite First Class Cruise all around the world. Only sometimes, even with the best of us, it ends up in an interior steerage room down on the D Deck, gasping for air and dying for a view. So, when life does not give you what you want, when it all caves in, what are you to do then? It is past time we framed an answer to the question – in three parts.

I.

First, when life does not give you what you want. Stop for a minute and mull over where you are and what the Lord has done for you. Oh I don't mean the cheap little guilt ridden ditty that you dare not complain because you have a lot and one day you will know in full. No, when you lose something or someone you love, you miss them, and it hurts. You are allowed to be puzzled and wonder what on earth is going on. You are allowed to take some time grieve.

What I mean is at a deeper level. It hit me like a freight train the other day when I read an article by a United Nations observer who had recently returned from Africa: Kenya, Zimbabwe and Darfur. Combined, two million human beings, more than half of them children, have died of starvation or disease or infected drinking water in the past six months. And that does not include the hundreds of thousands who have been victims of the various tribal battles around those regions. Another two million, he added, are crushed, just waiting their turn. Their health-care system is not broken; it is non existent! There are no doctors to turn to, no

hospitals to rush off to, no pharmacy to get the proper pills to assuage the pain. In the refugee camps there have no houses, no electricity, no fresh food, no sanitary facilities ... and they are the children of the living God, just as we are. They did nothing wrong, nothing at all.

The observer said it humbly but clearly, “When you see the hoards of dying children in Africa, who never have a chance, it is difficult to worry too much about the falling stock and credit markets, or the rising price of gasoline and the pressure that puts on us to take cheaper vacations this summer, closer to home. Or to complain about the price of food and the preference that gives us cause to shop at cheaper super- markets. The old proverb whispers: “I cried because I had no shoes, then I met a man who had no feet.”

If you think your life has hit the skids, and you find it a burden, I will pray for you I promise. But first I want you to ponder how great and wonderful it is to be you: chosen of God, redeemed by Christ, living in America, where we can lavish on ourselves the blessings of the earth. Think of the opportunities still available, even though life has not filled your cup to overflowing. God is not finished with you yet – not by a long shot.

My Dad used to say that he who complains has too much already. We should start out answering the question of what to do when life does not give you what you want, by offering a prayer of thanks for what you have, not for what you want.

II.

Then, secondly, take comfort that you are in the company of those that God loves most of all. II Timothy tells us to “Share in the suffering, like a good soldier shares in the army of Christ Jesus. No one serving in the army gets entangled in everyday

affairs.” he writes. “No, you are there to please the Officer in Charge.” (II Timothy 2: 3) The Officer of this day and every day is Jesus. Our command is to follow where he leads. And, we are never more like the Savior than when we combat the powers of evil and share in his suffering.

I opened our sermon with a brief recitation of those prominent Biblical heroes, including the Lord Jesus Christ, who are charter members of the group. That’s nice company to be in when life does not give you what you want.

Everybody in all stations and places knows the feeling. You might guess that older folks would know it best of all, as they begin to peak up over the top of that high mountain and peer over to the other side. The days dwindle down, and the times are tilted in favor of the young. Time and circumstances can knock the props out from under you, with a variety of illnesses, or when friends and family begin to leave you, or when you can’t remember what great plans you were working on that day. “Has it been worthwhile?” they ask quietly. “Have I accomplished all I wanted to do?” “Is the world a better place because I have been here for this time? Oh please Lord, let the answer be ‘Yes’”. I can vouch that old age is still not for sissies.

But children and young people know it too. We should never underestimate the stressful repercussions which follow the disappointments of childhood. When things do not go their way and children get caught up in the foibles and frustrations of their parents and they are left holding a bag of broken promises, the struggles linger on for decades.

Teenagers know it keenly: when an abundance of change crowds into your life, and your best shot at pleasing everybody does not succeed and almost no one

understands what is going on inside. The suicide rates for American teens continues to gallop upwards, and the incidents of drugs and alcohol are back on the rise. Once some years ago, I was trying to help a woman figure out her life. She was having trouble relating to men. And she couldn't trust her father and she was mystified by the power he had over her. She finally discovered that it all began the errant moment when he swore out loud at her and called her a name when she was 17. And although she was 47 years old, she had never forgotten that fearful moment.

Young marrieds know it too: when the dreamy eyed opening innings are over and it comes down to some mid-game innings of increasing responsibilities in the workaday world. I'll never forget the frustration in the voice of the young woman who asked me as her pastor: "How could a man change so much in so little time? I said, "If I knew that I would write a book about it and retire forevermore."

And middle-agers know it too. We speak of mid-life crises, usually of the man who throws himself off track; or the woman who becomes depressed when some strange feelings take over the body, mind or soul, and they both pause for a look around and ask "Is this all there is?" A single mother whose husband walks out for some new and greener pasture knows it well, far too well. The in-between generation: caring for their own family but wondering what on earth their parents will think of next.

And singles know it too. Oh dear. Churches, including Sharon Presbyterian, are mainly designed for families with children, plus active Senior Adults. And they perpetuate themselves. If you are a new single and trying to love the Lord and serve the Church, it is difficult to break into the circle and make an impact on your own. Most singles know exactly what I mean when I say that life does not give you

what you want. Doors are closed which should be opened; hints and glances tell a long hard tale. And should you have chosen not to be married, for whatever reason, everybody and his cousin wonders what you're up to.

Minorities know it, in this beloved United States of America. Sure, there has been progress, but we are a long way from equality of rank and privilege. The color of a person's skin still is most often the number one factor in personal relations and in the workplaces of the land. It might be easier now to make your way, if you look and talk different, but still resentment and suspicion linger on. It is not easy to be a minority citizen of the land of the free and the home of the brave.

And of course, the ill or lonely or hungry or rejected or deserted know it. I think it was Dostoevsky who said it first, that I know of anyway, "Life promises more than it delivers." It can, and does.

It might not help much when you first hear it, but Schweitzer called this innumerable company: "The fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain." They can spot each other from afar off. They identify with fellow travelers on the road without a word being spoken. Honestly, in my own life, the thing that often helped the most was knowing that others were and are and would be struggling up the same rugged hills as I. It's not so much that misery loves company, but that it helps to have a kindly friend to walk with through the dark. St. Paul takes it to the extreme when he writes in Romans 5: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts." (Romans 5: 3-5)

I heard a touching little story one day from my friend Dr. Tom Kort, over at Sardis Presbyterian Church, about the young woman who felt called to enter seminary. But she found that some of her professors, while brilliant, were no match for the power of her Christian faith. They were preoccupied with what they thought. For example, one lecturer in her liturgical class assailed the old familiar hymn, “I Come to the Garden Alone”, while the dew is still on the roses, etc.. Once the best loved hymn in America, it has fallen out of favor with those who edit hymnbooks. That day the lecturer told the class how shallow that hymn was and that they needed to feature hymns with a deeper theological meaning. “Throw that Garden thing away!” he bellowed.

The young woman followed him after class, stopped him in the hall and told him bluntly how misled he was. “I was an abused child.” she said, “on a regular basis. It was awful. Some evenings the only way I could find the strength to stay alive and not to take my own life was to wander out into our back yard and sing to myself over and over again, ‘I Come to the Garden Alone.’ It held me in when nothing else could. He walks with me; he talks to me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known....”

It’s too pietistic, they say. I know that. It’s too shallow. Perhaps. It’s not good music. Maybe not. But what it meant to her was more precious and important than all Nine symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven echoing in a row. In the company of Jesus Christ she was never alone. Others have been there before you; and others still will follow.

III.

But thirdly, you still have to do battle with whatever and whoever it is that stands in the way of your progress. Jesus was gentle and loving; but he was not meek and mild when he took on the powers of the world. He was no wimp. He got angry. He was forceful. He never ran away, hoping the problem would solve itself. Problems never do; someone has to solve them. He screamed at the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. He kicked over the tables of the money-changers. I have always kept a sign in my study which reads, “Beware of the fury of a patient man!”

I still adore those words from my favorite Dylan Thomas, the Welsh poet as his father was nearing the end:

**Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at the close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.**

**Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words have forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.**

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

What he meant was that the gift of life is precious; and you have to fight to keep it viable. While from time to time we need to be realistic and learn to live with whatever comes, and surrender, still surviving as a Christian in a world which cares so little for what you and I believe, still it is a struggle. Christ did not call us out to waffle; we were called to win the battle with everything and everyone who degrades humanity.

I read with great interest the results of the recent Religious Poll of 36,000 Americans taken by the Pew Foundation and reported in the newspapers and periodicals last week. The Press put a positive spin on it. They were attracted by the public issues and social obligations to the poor and needy as they applied to the

two major political parties. The Charlotte Observer rejoiced that nine out of ten Americans said that they believed in God, including some who also said they were atheists. But only 75% of them believed in heaven and barely 60% believed in hell. The vast majority interviewed said that if there is a heaven, you can get there by trying to be good. No repentance, no surrender, no warfare with the ways of the world, no promise to Jesus Christ.

To me it mainly represented a dilution and a diminution of our faith in Jesus Christ. It applauded the preconceived idea that we are crossing boundaries and working together in the nation. In some ways we are, as we should be. That is a good thing. But at what cost? It's great to keep an open mind, but, as Confucius is said to have said, "Don't let your brains fall out." Tolerance of other peoples' ideas and beliefs is fine, but tolerance is a luxury when things begin to matter. You have to stand up for something or you will fall for anything that comes along. Never give up.

Well, here is where we are as we head for home: When life does not give you what you want: First, ponder anew all that God has done for you. The road is rugged and steep, but we have a wonderful Guide and Guard to take us up.

Secondly, when life tumbles in, look around and realize that you are in the fellowship of those who feel the mark of pain. At its center is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thirdly, be prepared to do battle with whatever and whoever it is that stands in the way of God's truth and righteousness.

IV.

Fourth and last, maybe it should be first: when life does not give you what you want, throw yourself into the arms of Jesus. He will carry you through all the stormy eddies of your life. We lived in St. Andrews, Scotland for a long time. I played golf almost every day or evening, but I also did my graduate studies in Christian Ethics. We live on the North Sea in Castle Gate, just across the street from the castle ruins. There is a promontory there above the sea called The Stepp Rock. I do not know how it got its name.

In the cemetery just along the Scores there are a myriad of fascinating tombstones. Several are for golfing greats. Some noted reformers and Professors. But there is a solitary little one which has always fascinated me. It is the Memorial Stone for a young child, 7 years old, with this inscription: “Jamie fell down off the Stepp Rock into the arms of Jesus.” Oh dear, he did. That was sadder than sad. But how nice to phrase it that way: “He fell into the arms of Jesus.”

Let’s wind it down with a quick peek at the Fourteenth chapter of John. The disciples are together with Jesus in the Upper Room. The times are perilous. The troops of Caesar are gathering just across the Garden of Gethsemane. Our Lord told his disciples that he was afraid and troubled, which of course in turn troubled and frightened them. What would they do now that they had staked their whole lives and future on his success, and here he was telling them that his time was up and he would have to leave them. Oh dear. Sensing what they were feeling, Jesus shared these words of love and beauty.

“Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you; and if I go, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there you may be also. Whither I go you know, and the way you

know. For I am the Way, the Truth and the Life: no one comes to the father but by me.... But, meanwhile, peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”
(John 14: selected)

Normally, back in those days when there were no Holiday Inns, no Marriotts, no Expedia, and no Travelocity. When it was time to make a trip, the Master would send his servant ahead to find him a decent place to stay. The servant had to select it, reserve it, clean it, and stock it with linens towels and food and whatnot. Then when the room was ready, he would come back to get the Master and take him to the Inn, to the exact room which he had prepared.

Reversing that, Jesus, the Master, told his disciples, the servants, that he would go ahead to the eternal kingdom himself and prepare a room for each of them in the Mansion of God. Then, when their individual room was ready, not one moment before and not one second after, Jesus promised that he would come again and escort them, each to his or her own room, made up for them, and us. “Because I live”, Jesus said, “You also will live with me, for now and forever more. Amen.”