

“An Unmanageable Life?”

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Isaiah 38:12b-14

Like a weaver, you roll up my life, and cut it from the loom. From dawn to night you are watching my failure. I cry aloud until the morning, but like a lion you crush all my bones. I twitter like a swallow, I moan like a dove.”

Romans 7:15,18

I cannot understand my own behavior. I fail to carry out the very things I want to do, and find myself doing the thing I hate. . . . Although the will to do what is good is in me, the performance is not.

Matthew 9:36

And when Jesus saw the crowds, he felt sorry for them, because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.

I built my house by the sea.
Not on the sands, mind you; not on the shifting sand.
And I built it of rock.
A strong house by a strong sea.
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.
Good neighbors.
Not that we spoke much.
We met in silences.
Respectful, keeping our distance,
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.
Always, the fence of sand our barrier, always, the sand between.

And then one day —and I still don't know how it happened—the sea came.
Without warning.

Without welcome, even
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand
like wine, less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.
Slow, but coming.
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning and I thought of death.
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.
And I knew then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.
That when the sea comes calling you stop being neighbors.
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance, neighbors
And you give your house for a coral castle,
And you learn to breathe underwater.¹

Is there something in your life that's unmanageable?

Terri's father has been making bad personal and financial decisions lately and he won't listen to her advice. Kitty is facing a mind that will not behave as it used to. For Stu, it's the mind. He

can't make it behave the way it used to. We all struggle in some way. We encounter things, or people, that we cannot control. As the apostle Paul writes: "I cannot understand my own behavior. I do the very thing I hate."

What could you say this about in your life? Samantha focuses on her work to the point that it takes from her time with friends and family. Jim rails at other drivers on the highway. Carol yells at her husband. Since Matt and Rhonda so easily succumb to advertising for the latest product, or shoes, or lifestyle, theirs is a constant struggle with debt. They each know better; why do they do it?

Of course, as Christians, we are called to sharpen our focus on Christ and on following God's way for our lives. The word for this is *spirituality*, and today, we begin an examination of spirituality, with this sermon series based on Richard Rohr's book *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.ⁱⁱ In my announcements, I've focused more on the Spirituality aspect than the Twelve Step part because I did not want anyone to think, "That's not for me." I trust we will all be able to find ourselves in these lessons.

Today we read that Jesus felt badly for people when life was too much for them. He recognized that they were struggling, lost. He knew that God will go looking for every lost person just as a shepherd will search for one lost sheep. I'm glad but I still don't understand God's ways. What does Paul mean when he writes that "power is at its best in weakness," or that "it's when we are weak that we are strong"? (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Is this also about bringing us into the fold of God's love and care?

We've probably all met someone for whom whatever they touch seems to flourish; and yet they don't value what truly matters. We've also met some for whom everything seems to go wrong; yet they're the very ones who learn compassion and godliness, whether they're believers or not. Rohr suggests that "God seems to have hidden holiness and wholeness . . . where only the humble will find it" (2-3). It's a mystery. And, even as we grow to accept and welcome that God's grace is beyond anything that we can imagine, the mystery remains.

I asked about the unmanageable in your life, because, "until and unless . . . [you face] a person, situation, event, idea, conflict, or relationship that you cannot 'manage,' you will never find God" (3). Until you come to the limits of your own reserves, there is no reason for you to do things differently. You will simply keep on as you have always done. We don't learn to draw upon God's resources until our own are depleted. We don't even realize there's another option. Thankfully, God ensures that things come into our lives that we cannot manage on our own (3).

Spiritually speaking, we need the unmanageable so that we will let go of control and learn to lean on God. A.A., AlAnon and other 12 Step groups begin with an acceptance that something in a person's life is unmanageable. They have faced the mirror. This is beyond their control.

Our society favors the self-made ones who don't ask for help, who seem to have it all together. We don't realize the cost. Until it's too late, we don't see the rigidity of personality or the need for ever more, and deeper, control. I tried, for years, to keep everything under control.

Jill thought she was doing the right thing. When the kids were young, she thought she was succeeding. She was the stalwart one through crisis and calm. But the cracks in her veneer got deeper as time went on. This wasn't good for any of the family. And, it was unsustainable.

Rohr says that though we try to hide it, especially from ourselves, the ego always claims moral superiority. (4). We do this. Societies do this. So do churches. Can you name some Christians are

great at condensing the gospel down to one moral issue? Abortion, sexuality, whatever? When we focus on other people's sins, we can ignore the changes God intends for it to make in *our* lives.

Paul reminds us that the ego, this I-know-the-best-way belief, cannot get us where we need to go. Its desires are too small and selfish (Galatians 5:19). Though we resist it fiercely, only powerlessness can do the job. Until we accept our own powerlessness, we'll keep trying to effect our own transformation. It doesn't work. As Einstein observed: No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused the problem in the first place.

Jesus uses the analogy of a grain of wheat. Unless the seed dies, it will never grow. Only by losing itself does any seed sprout. Only by dying to ourselves are we reborn as God intends us to be.

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”

This first step is the hardest. It's often avoided. Who wants to die to who we believe we are? And yet, all mature spirituality is about letting go. When it comes to it, the spiritual life has more to do with subtraction than with addition (Meister Eckhart). If we are to grow spiritually, we have to let our faith in Christ affect every part of our lives. We need to allow God room to effect transformation in us. We cannot do this ourselves.

What if, instead of seeing sin as something punishable or which makes God sad, we were to recognize it as disease? In the same way that addiction is a disease, something that makes one sick, could sin similarly be illness within an individual or a community? If sin truly makes God unhappy, is it not because God wants the best for all of us? Because God longs for wholeness for creation, God wills the healing of this disease? Jesus was constantly healing people.

His teaching and his healing were intentionally linked. This is salvation, in the present moment. Many Christians believe salvation is only a next world thing, but in Jesus' time people accepted that it was also for the present. Only after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire did assenting to certain doctrines become more important than our growing in God's likeness (2 Peter 1:4) and bringing forth God's new creation (Galatians 6:15). Jesus' humanity was deemphasized as the church's focus shifted to a heavenly future and concern for the physical world and our present lives diminished.

But the Church is reclaiming the earthly. More and more, faith communities are committing to live in the present, serving God and following Jesus' lead. This is a good thing. We need this because we struggle with ego and control as much as everyone else.

Does this resonate with you? Do you struggle with ego or control such that there's little room for the transformation that having Christ in our lives makes possible? I do.

Something will control our lives, but only God will do it well. When we resist surrendering our lives to God's power, we still eventually lose control. Take comfort. Our lives are supposed to be that way. For only then will we approach God, saying, “Here is my life. I trust you. Lead me.”

Turn your day, turn your life, over to God.

ⁱ Carol Bieleck, R.S.C.J. “Breathing Under Water” as found in Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, xiii.

ⁱⁱ This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr's *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2011, xii-6.