

“Bittersweet”

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Joshua 1:7-9

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

Proverbs 4:25-27

Let your eyes look directly forward,
and your gaze be straight before you.
Keep straight the path of your feet,
and all your ways will be sure.
Do not swerve to the right or to the left;
turn your foot away from evil.

Philippians 3:12-14

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Today we start a sermon series on “(Some of) the Harder Things in Life.” We actually started last week with “Really, Truly, Fully Living” – which is also hard – but I didn’t call that a part of the series. During these next weeks, we’ll think about: offering help and advice when it’s not asked for, living within God’s intention for creation, family questions, and accepting (and not just tolerating) people who are different from ourselves.

When I came up with the idea for this series, I asked my FB friends what was the hardest things in their lives. Maybe because it’s so obvious, no one wrote about losing loved ones to death. For many of us that is the absolute hardest thing – whether it’s a person or a pet. Saying goodbye to those who have been a part of our life is a loss beyond words. I say this up front because even though we’re not going to talk about this most painful thing, I know, and we all know, how terrible it is. And we grieve with each other in our losses.

Today’s topic is about how hard it can be to let go of the things that make up our lives even when we’re confident that God has good things in store for us. Letting go so that we can step into God’s future was Shantel’s very hard thing.

Shantel was in the first new members class I taught at when I began pastoring at Appleton. She had recently graduated from university in Iowa and had taken a job at the big insurance office in town.

I got to know Shantel a little through our weeks together in the class, and then over the next few years when I'd sub in the handbell choir where she played mid-range bells. Although she hadn't been able to join a mission trip, Shantel was also on the mission team and is passionate about justice. (A good Methodist!) In our years together at the Appleton church, I observed as she recruited some of the church's needle-workers for a project creating reusable personal care products for women and girls in Swaziland who don't have access or funds for disposable types.

Why Swaziland? While in school, Shantel met and fell in love with Polgani, a Swazi. I still remember the excitement after a break between semesters when word leaked out that they were now engaged. Polgani had returned for his last semesters at school. I think of those months for Shantel. They would have been filled not only with excitement but also with curiosity and wondering about how different her life might become. I believe she always expected to move to Africa with Polgani. Yet what a change.

I've thought of her frequently since she left Appleton to join her future husband. When I sent out my request on FB about what were people's hardest things, Shantel responded with, "Right now...leaving/letting go [of] important, cherished things for the new, fresh and unknown. I never understood "bittersweet" to the degree I do right now. ..."

Bittersweet – both pleasant and painful. Loving what we're doing now and who we're with but missing what used to be a big part of our lives. An Iowa girl moves to another continent to live into God's tomorrow, full of hope and joy over that fresh unknown that only God recognizes, and also full of sadness and grief over what she has left behind.

Doing something new and different takes great courage. A few weeks ago, Martie shared that during her first summer doing church youth work, our first text – from Joshua 1 – was on her heart, "Be strong and courageous; don't be frightened or alarmed, for God is with you wherever you go."

We need the courage to pray not only for what we want or need but also – maybe even, especially – for the willingness to discern what God needs us to be and do. We need to ask God to help us want what God wants so that God's desire is our desire. This takes courage because – sometimes – there is no way to reconcile what we want with what God knows the world needs. Sometimes life prevents what we most long for and only with God's help can we make anything good out of our present reality.

When this happens, it can help if we remind ourselves that God is expert at taking the worst events in our lives and creating good. We find this in the bible most especially in the crucifixion of Jesus. His death was not the end of the story. Instead God used this terrible event – and the resurrection three days later – as a means of revealing God's immeasurable love to all the world.

We have all experienced losses in our lives, and likely we will again. Trusting that God creates good out of whatever befalls can comfort us. God does this with endings like deaths, divorces, and losses – of homes, jobs and independence – and God does this with beginnings like graduations, new jobs and marrying. God is at work in all of it.

For us, it comes down to how much we trust God. How well we trust that whatever comes, we won't go through it alone. How much we trust that when we grieve for what we have given up, God is present and does not give up on us.

Letting go of cherished things – or beloved people – is still not easy. It is one of the hardest things you will ever do. Yet until you stop breathing God has things for you to do and what God has in store for you is never in the past.

What God has in store is greater than your worries or fears. It is greater than the mistakes you may have made. And in order to realize this fresh future, you need to stand strong. You need to release whatever keeps you anchored to this “now” or to the past.

Someone famous used monkey bars to describe the process.¹ Do you remember playing on monkey bars? (When I was in 2nd grade I fell off the ones at school and broke my arm. I still like climbing though.) You reach out for the next bar to go higher or farther. But you can't keep going until you do what else? To follow God's lead, first, we need to let go. Next, we might need to move forward. Or we might need to simply be still to notice what's ahead. Either way, when we pay attention God as Spirit will reveal the next step to us. In Revelation, we read, “Look! I have set in front of you an open door that no one can shut” (3:8a). The writer would have had a certain context in mind yet I believe these words are true for all of God's creation.

So, do as the song says, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus.” Train yourself by saying, “God wants this for me” or “I will follow God's lead.” Practice accepting change by taking baby steps. God knows change is hard for some of us, but God still expects us to accept, and even welcome, change, particularly the kind that leads us into God's perfect intention.

Most of the time, once we begin to something, anything – including stepping into God's future for us – we find that we are in a better place. It feels good to know we are taking God's lead rather than pulling our lives selfishly in our own direction. And when we notice that we have wandered in a different direction, we simply point ourselves toward God again. And then again the next time. Each time, we put our trust in God. We allow God control of our ways. We do this by saying along with the psalmist, I will trust in God at all times! I will pour out my heart to God!

Band-Aids are a great invention. What did we ever do without them? Besides keeping the dirt out of a wound and the blood or ointment from getting on us, they also keep us from touching the injury. I bring this up because sometimes, for a period of time, we may need to stop noticing our tender places. If we dwell on what once was before our new life is firmly established, we might decide that all this pain is not worth it. We might decide to go back to Iowa even though God and so much else is calling us to dwell in Swaziland.

To heal a wound you need to stop touching it. Stop touching it and give your hurt over to God. God understands the pain that you are feeling. God gets it. God will grieve with you even as God guides you into your best life. God does this out of love.

God loves you, and me, and all of creation with a love beyond anything we can begin to understand. And between us, we have met some pretty loving dogs (and people.)

Never doubt God's love for you. Let it sustain you and nurture you and shelter you as you gather the strength and courage to press on, eyes forward, feet on God's path, swerving neither to the right or the left.

Press on. And go with God.

¹ “Getting over a painful experience is much like crossing monkey bars. You have to let go at some point in order to move forward.” C.S. Lewis.