

Letting Go of Regrets, March 20, 2019

If I handed you a piece of paper and said, Write down your regrets, I wonder what you would put on the list? When I was 19 I quit college to join a musical group, but didn't pass the audition, so there I was dangling, out of school, without work. I had done some house painting with my older brothers so I went into business for myself. My brother handed me some referrals. But there were so many things I didn't know because I just didn't have the experience. I got into some jams. I did some dumb things. I painted an entire house in semi-gloss, instead of flat on the stucco and a semi on the trim. One homeowner told me I didn't know much more about painting than he did, and he was right. If I were filling out that list this morning, I would regret trying to pass myself off as a professional when I was an amateur.

That's a relatively harmless regret. I've made some decisions as a pastor that I regret, some relationships where I was too legalistic. I refused to baptize the granddaughter of a member at another church because I didn't see any commitment on the part of the parents. If I could do it over again, I would have asked the grandmother to be the spiritual parent. I would have figured out a way to offer that baptism. I regret that. But I learned from it.

Some of us might have regrets about a first marriage, or regrets about the money spent on education that we didn't need, or regrets about a business deal that went bad. How much energy do we spend on those regrets? I want to suggest that the life events that we regret have a place; they are part of the fabric of our lives. Somebody once said that every event in our lives is either a blessing or a lesson. And in God's economy, everything becomes material for growth and change and transformation and redemption. So how do regrets play a part?

In the reading earlier from 1 Corinthians, (15:3-11) St. Paul mentions his history as a persecutor of Christians. When we first meet Saul, as he was called then, in Acts chapters 7 and 8, he is a zealous Pharisee who is contracted by the Jewish authorities to arrest those blasphemous followers of Jesus. He is hunting them down, going house to house, and throwing them in jail. And then he meets the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus who says to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? He is transformed into a follower of Jesus, and becomes the most effective proclaimer of the good news of Jesus in the first century. We are here today because of Paul.

But what does Paul remember about those early years? He says this to the Christians in the city of Corinth, “For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” (1 Corinthians 15:9) Sounds like regret to me. Paul says, I am not even fit to be called an apostle. Those earlier travesties against Christians still apparently seem to weigh him down.

But then he says this- “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain.” By the grace of God I am what I am. God’s grace turned him around. And I wonder how those early years became a part of the fabric of who he was and the decisions he made. I wonder if Paul had more energy in missionizing because he had done so much harm to the Christian movement. I wonder if he may have been more empathetic to those who were against Christianity, because he had once been in that camp. In other words, God didn’t waste those experiences, even though Paul regretted them.

Paul, remember, is also the one who said, “All things work together for good for those who are called according to God’s purpose.” (Romans 8:28).

And he finishes this passage by saying, “On the contrary, I worked harder than any of (the other apostles)—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.”

Paul worked harder than any of the other apostles, perhaps because he felt like he had some making up to do. That regret was woven into the fabric of who he had become.

In the London sewer system last fall, a fatberg was discovered that was 800 feet long. Fatbergs happen when household items (which are flushed down toilets) combine with grease and fat (which are washed down sinks). This is all from what we would consider waste. And yet, alternative energy companies are talking about the possibility of using fatbergs for biofuel. In other words, what is classified as waste could turn out to be energy that might light a city. Nothing is wasted.

In God’s economy, nothing is wasted. I’m wondering about those actions you regret: how did God use those actions you regret to form you into a more useful vessel? I knew a husband in a previous congregation who had

an affair; it could have broken apart his marriage. But the couple stayed together, his wife forgave him, and he learned from that experience. He reinvested in the marriage. Now they have the strongest relationship they've ever had. He is even able to counsel his friends in how to keep their marriages strong. This regrettable action led to a strengthening of the marriage and to the strengthening of other marriages. A fatberg into biofuel, if you will.

We make mistakes. We can be selfish; we can be foolish. We can hurt ourselves and our neighbors. We regret our actions. But nothing is wasted. God uses our regrettable actions to form us into more useful vessels. I wonder if one spiritual strategy is that when we regret something in our lives, yes, we work on letting it go; we accept God's forgiveness when needed; we forgive ourselves; we make reparations when necessary. That's all part of the journey. But we also give thanks for the way God takes all things and works them together for good. Fatbergs into biofuel, if you will. Amen.