

Life's a Beach February 3, 2008

There is a story told about Albert Einstein that I find intriguing. As you are probably aware, he was a scientific genius, a Noble Prize winner, and the originator of the theory of relativity, and yet he was considered a person of simplicity. Swarthmore College threw a dinner party in his honor, and he was asked to make a speech. After greeting the guests politely, he paused a moment. Finally he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I am sorry, but I have nothing to say." As he sat down, he added, "In case I do have something to say, I'll come back." Six months passed, and one day Einstein wired the president of the college and announced, "I now I have something to say." He returned and made his speech.

This is one of those days when I can relate with Einstein—certainly not with his genius, devotion to bettering the world and with his talent, but with the sense that if he didn't have anything he considered significant to say, he didn't say it. Frankly, I'm not very sure I have anything very significant to share today, so perhaps I should just sit down and get in touch with you all when something significant presents itself.

You see, we've done some switching with themes for today, and I have been at loose ends trying to figure out which way to go with this sermon. This is pretty unusual for us, because things are typically a little clearer. One thing I realize is just how much I depend on our team to provide much of the insight and guidance for which way we need to go with Sunday messages.

Nonetheless, for this particular one, I have been really struggling trying to find the focus. The worship team offered several ideas when we brainstormed things, but I was still somewhat lost. Now, mind you, I'm not complaining (so I don't have to move my bracelet), I'm just trying to explain why this one is the way it is. If it's factual, it's not a complaint...right?

At any rate, then it finally hit me---that's what I needed to be talking about and sharing with you—the whole idea that there are times in life when things aren't really wrong, but they don't seem particularly right either. Have you ever had any of those days? You know, no major health issues; no major job traumas; no major catastrophes...just a general angst about life in general?

Sometimes, frankly, it's the little things that can get us down—like finding a flat tire when we're already late for an appointment. It's a little thing, but it has a way of disrupting our day. Sometimes, it's the furnace going out, or a leaky roof. Maybe it's the dreary winter days that get us down, or too much traffic, or just the hassle of trying to get everything done that we feel we need to get done. Life just

plain seems to be unsettled and maybe even out of control. I guess I'm talking about the times things can just seem overwhelming. Maybe what someone said is right: **"We stumble over pebbles, never over mountains."**

As I contemplated all of this and tried to compose a message, it occurred to me that one of the titles Worship team suggested for today's message, thinking it was a humorous one, may have a lot of truth in it. So, that's why I went with "Life's a Beach;" there may, in fact, be many ways in which a beach could be a good analogy of how life is for many of us.

You know what I mean. Most of the time, beach front areas don't have to endure the torrential rains and heavy winds of hurricanes, nor do most of us have to face constant torrents of difficulties. Certainly, there are times that beaches are eroded by such force, and there are times when our lives are laid low by monumental happenings.

However, that's not the kind of thing I'm talking about. Rather, I'm referring to the other, more ordinary mundane things that we, like beaches, have to endure. For instance, beaches face constant scrutiny, as many people cast longing eyes on their warm, sunny surfaces. Beaches have to deal with noisy crowds of people, rowdy volleyball games, lots of walkers and bikers, washed up debris, and both the use and abuse by us humans and by the environment we have created. Much of that resembles what many of us experience in our own lives.

However, even in the midst of all the hubbub on the beach, there's something else going on there. There are things like the washing of the waves, the shifting of the sands, the constant breeze, the warmth of the sun, beautiful sunrises and sunsets. And there is a beauty there that's almost hidden from the eye, unless we're willing to look for it.

Sue Monk-Kidd tells about such an experience in a collection of her earlier writings called *"First Light."* They were staying in a rented beach house, and one night during their stay, a heavy storm came in. The next morning, after the storm had abated, she walked down to the beach to see the shore strewn with all kinds of craziness stirred up from the ocean floor. There were pieces of driftwood, chains of seaweed, and all kinds of broken shells.

As she walked along, however, something caught her eye, and she picked up a Junonia—a speckled pink shell, said to be so rare that anyone who finds one often winds up with their picture in the local paper. Sue Monk-Kidd said that she had collected shells her entire life, and this was the first Junonia she had ever found, and it wasn't just the rareness of the find that struck her; she also realized that this beautiful shell was a reminder to her that in every squall there is a gift.

I needed to hear that, and to think about life on the beach, because it reminded me of how I have

allowed the little irritants of life to get in the way of living life the way I know God wants me to. And it also reminded me that there is a beauty to even the seemingly ugly parts of life. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “It is the wounded oyster that mends its shell with pearl.” That’s something I need to remember.

And there’s something else, too. You see, I hate to admit that I’ve almost been too busy and too preoccupied to keep up my part of the connection with God. I guess I’ve been trying to handle everything myself, and quite honestly, it hasn’t been working too well. Could it be, I wonder, that when I feel restless, out of balance, fragmented, that I am out of rhythm with God?

You see, thinking about life as a beach has reminded me that, not only are the waves and tides attuned to a greater rhythm, so am I, and so are you. If we stop long enough to listen to the sounds of the ocean lapping on the beach, we realize that there is the steady ebb and flow of the waves, the steadfastness of the tides; there is a constancy that is comforting and reassuring, and there is an orderliness that underlies all the seeming tumult.

That rhythm, that constancy, that orderliness—that’s God—the God that’s greater than all of petty problems and frustrations, the God that is always there, the God that we can count on, if we do our part to connect and stay connected.

That’s why we have the Bible passage we have for today. It’s part of Psalm 139, and it reminds us of God’s loving presence with these words:

“If I ride the wings of the morning,
if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
Even there your hand will guide me,
And your strength will support me.”

These words assure us that God is with us in the midst of our most difficult times, as well as in our ordinary moments. God’s strength will carry us through, even when our own strength seems to fail us.

This passage reminds me of a poem with which I suspect you all are familiar. In fact, I think Rob French used it here one time when he delivered the message. I’m not going to share it in its entirety, but we will make sure all of you have a copy to take home with you.

The poem is entitled “Footprints in the Sand,” and it’s said to have been written by Mary Stevenson. The poet tells of walking along the beach with God, reflecting on scenes from her life. In each scene, there are footprints in the sands—most of the time two sets, but other times there was only one set. This bothered the writer, because it became apparent that, during some of the lowest periods of her life, when in her words, she was suffering from “anguish, sorrow or defeat,” there was only set of prints.

She repeated God’s promise to be with us always, but asked why, at some of her most trying times, there was only one set of footprints in the

sand. God answered her with these words: “The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand is when I carried you.”

That’s the most important reminder from the beach that I needed to have—the reminder that God is there, waiting for you and for me to connect. God’s there to walk beside us, or to carry us. That’s what I need to remember. How about you?

Closing:

Anne Frank, in her diary, wrote: “I don’t think of all the misery but of the beauty that still remains.” As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we’ll take her words to heart, and that we’ll stay connected with God.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.