

“Adjusting the Rear View Mirror,” 29 July 2007

Martha Beck told a story about her friend Deborah, who called her and said to her over the phone, “You know, it’s been 20 years since I was on an airplane.” Martha reported that she felt so bad for Deborah that she cashed in some frequent flyer miles and flew her friend from Los Angeles to her home for a visit.

The following week, Martha called to make sure that her friend had settled back into her normal routine at home, and Deborah assured her that she had. After a few minutes of conversation, Deborah, in a morose tone, said to Martha, “You know, it’s been 20 years since I was on an airplane.”

Somewhat stunned, Martha asked, “But, what about last week?” “Last week?” Deborah said. She thought for a moment, and then burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s right. I can’t believe I forgot!” Then her voice grew solemn again, and she said, “But you know, except for that, it’s been 20 years since I’ve been on an airplane.”

It seems pretty clear to me that Deborah was stuck in the past, and kept repeating the story she had told herself and others time and time again. It’s as though she was spending much of her time and energy looking in the rear view mirror.

I wonder how many of us do that? Oh, it may not be telling the same sad story about our lives, although it could be. It could also be things like beating ourselves up for some silly or stupid mistake we’ve made days, months, or even years ago. It could be something like mentally replaying embarrassing experiences, or silently lamenting the failure of a broken relationship.

Often we get bogged down in the things we didn’t do that we think we should have, or the things we did that we shouldn’t have. That seems to be a common human condition, and actually, it’s what one of our Bible passages for today is saying. Now, the writer is Paul, and it seems to me that these verses are some of the most honest and soul-searching ones he ever shares with his readers.

Here’s what Paul writes to the people in the church in Rome: **“I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t do it. I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.”** How many times have we berated ourselves in similar ways—wishing we had acted differently?

There’s a book that’s been around a long time, and it came to mind as I was working on this message. The title is *A Touch of Wonder*, by Arthur Gordon. Although I haven’t pulled it off my shelf for

eons, one particular story in that book has stayed with me, and I think it speaks to what we’re talking about this morning. After all, as Gordon noted in his introduction, **“It’s just a book that reflects one man’s way of looking at things. Simple things, mostly. Things that happen to all of us sooner or later.”**

One of the simple things he shared was about a time when he was meeting a cherished friend for dinner in a French restaurant. This meeting was on the heels of a significant failure in his life, and he was feeling quite frustrated and depressed. You see, because of some miscalculations on his part, “a project of considerable importance” had fallen through. Dejected, he stared at the tablecloth, sighing and going over and over the awareness that hindsight was bringing to him.

His friend, a therapist, arrived and quickly observed his demeanor, and asked what was going on. Gordon shared all the gory details, and as soon as dinner was over, the friend suggested they stop by his nearby office before parting to go home. When they arrived, the therapist pulled out some tapes—(remember I said this was a long time ago?)—and asked Gordon to listen to them.

Of course, no one was identified, but the friend asked Gordon to try to pick out the two-word phrase that was common to all three of the stories he was about to hear. The first was from a man who had suffered some kind of business loss or failure, who kept berating himself for not having worked harder, for not having looked ahead. The second was the story of a woman who recalled bitterly that she had allowed several opportunities at marriage pass by out of a sense of obligation to care for her widowed mother. And the third was the story of a mother whose teenage son was in trouble with the law, and she kept blaming herself endlessly.

When the stories were finished, the friend told Gordon that six times in those recordings a phrase was used that was full of subtle poison, and he asked Gordon if he could identify it. When Gordon shook his head no, the friend threw the box containing the tapes to him and said, “There they are, right on the label. The two saddest words in any language.” Printed neatly in red ink were the words, “If only.”

The therapist friend went on to tell Gordon how often he had heard those words. Sometimes it was “if only I’d done that differently,” or “if only I hadn’t lost my temper,” or “if only I had been wiser,” “if only I’d paid more attention.” The litany of “if only’s” was endless.

Finally, the friend revealed to Gordon why he had asked him to listen to those tapes. He said that as Gordon shared his story of disappointment and repeated mistakes, it became clear that he was stuck in the “if only’s” and he hadn’t yet learned anything from the experience. Gordon asked how he knew that, and he replied, “Your plans didn’t work out because you made certain mistakes. Everyone

makes mistakes. Mistakes are what we learn from. But when you were telling me about them, lamenting this, regretting that, you weren't really learning from them." He said, "You never got out of the past tense."

The old friend went on this way: **"The trouble with if only is that it doesn't change anything. It keeps the person facing the wrong way—backward instead of forward. It wastes time. In the end, if you let it become a habit, it can become a real roadblock—an excuse for not trying anymore."** In the language of today's theme, it's like constantly looking in the rear view mirror.

We all make mistakes, and like Paul, we say or do things we wish we hadn't, and we don't do things we know we should. That's the way it is. However, we don't have to live in the land of regret forever.

Certainly, it's appropriate to grieve our mistakes. When we feel regret, we begin to relive guilt, sadness or anger, and when we allow ourselves to experience the full impact of that pain, we take an essential step in moving forward. However, staying in our regrets can sink to the level of self-pity and fails to move us forward. As Alexander Graham Bell once said, **"When one door closes, another opens, but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us."**

So, how do we make sure that doesn't happen? What's the alternative? One piece of it has to do with forgiving ourselves. I'm aware that's much easier to say than it is to do, but it's an essential step to begin to look forward instead of backwards. After all, I don't believe that there's anything bad enough that we do or say that can't be forgiven by God, if we are truly sorry and seek forgiveness. While we may never totally forget the mistake or failure, over time, the pain will lessen as we learn to accept God's forgiveness and to forgive ourselves.

Then it gets to be time to shift our focus. Instead of staring in the rear view mirror, it's time to move our attention forward. Arthur Gordon asked his therapist friend what he would recommend to move away from his "if only's." The answer was this: **"Shift the focus. Change the key words and substitute a phrase that supplies lift instead of creating drag...Strike out the words 'if only,' and substitute the phrase next time."**

Gordon shared that the two friends finished their conversation and left the therapist's office. They exited the building into a rainy night in Manhattan, and saw a cab cruising by. They ran to try to catch it, but someone else got there first. The friend looked at Gordon and said slyly, "If only we had come down 10 seconds earlier, we'd have caught that cab, wouldn't we?" Gordon responded, "Next time, I'll run faster."

Well, where are we today? Are we in our "if only's" or are we ready to step toward our "next

times?" We'll each have to figure that out for ourselves.

The second Bible passage this morning is also from Paul, and I think it gives us a hint of how he came out of the dilemma he shared in the first passage we had. This is what he said, **"The one thing I do is to forget what is behind me, and do my best to reach what is ahead."**

How about us? While we may never totally forget what is past, we certainly can, with God's forgiveness and guidance, do our best to reach what is ahead." That's my prayer.