

In a Whirlpool?

7 January 2007

Bible passage: **Galatians 6:1-2, 4-5 (TEV)**

“My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help carry one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will obey the law of Christ... You should each judge your own conduct. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone else has done. For each of you have to carry your own load.”

Sermon nugget: How do we help others, and yet keep ourselves from falling into some of the same behaviors and traps? How do we avoid being pulled under?

I don’t know if any of you have ever gone whitewater rafting, or not. If not, I can only tell you that it’s quite an experience! On a few occasions, my family and friends have convinced me to join them on such an expedition, and I have somewhat reluctantly gone. I’m not a huge lover of that kind of water, because I’m not a very good swimmer. I like to look at bodies of water, but I’m typically quite content on the shore.

Nonetheless, there have been a few episodes of whitewater rafting in my life. One or two of them have been pretty serene, but there was one on the Arkansas River in Colorado that I’d call anything but serene! The worst part was this area of rapids. Our guide had us get out of the rubber raft and climb to the top of the hill to look down on what was called Siddel’s Suck Hole. It was a powerful whirlpool that could easily overturn a boat and pull its riders under the water! If there had been any other way to get to the end other than going through those rapids and whirlpools, I would have happily chosen it, but there was not. We made it through, but that’s about as close as I ever want to get to a suck hole like that!

I’m guessing that most of us know what a whirlpool is, and no, I’m not talking about the appliances made by a certain company. As defined by Wikipedia, a **whirlpool is a large, swirling body of water produced by ocean tides**. According to legend, some whirlpools have been so powerful that they swallowed ships and their sailors, but that’s more fiction than reality. Probably the closest any of us ever come to experiencing a whirlpool is when we let the water out of the bathtub or sink, or when we visit someplace like Niagara Falls, where whirlpools tend to form at the base of fast flowing falls.

Our purpose today is not to talk about whirlpools of that kind, but to think about them in a different way. I’d like us to consider the emotional whirlpools that sometimes exist around us, and that often seem to have the power to pull us under and sink us. It speaks to the all-too-often contagious nature of negativism, anger, discouragement, and depression. When we’re trying to be helpful to people going through difficult times, how do we keep ourselves on an even keel?

Probably most of us could name various situations in which we sometimes find ourselves caught in an emotional state where we don’t really want to be. We’ve simply been pulled into it by the words or actions of those around us. Sometimes it amounts to reverting to some of our childhood ways of coping with situations that we really didn’t know how to handle appropriately at the time, and never really learned.

There are a variety of places where we experience this issue. Say, for instance, that a friend is going through a divorce, and we want to be a friend, so we listen. Often we hear a lot more than we want to hear, and we find ourselves feeling angry or hurt, and wind up contributing way too much to the turmoil. Or perhaps we know someone who struggles with depression, and we want to help him or her feel better about things. All too often, we fail because we wind up feeling more discouraged and depressed than when we started.

I know that some of us have problems even being aware of how our emotional state has a way of affecting others. It only takes one negative comment to get the ball rolling and more negativism flows out. It only takes one outburst of unwarranted anger for trust to be broken, and all kinds of tumult ensue. Many of us don’t know that our emotions are so fragile until something unexpected happens, and we lose all semblance of control.

Sometimes anger is at the heart of our struggles. In fact, I read somewhere a good analogy of how many of us function. Something irritates us, and creates feelings of anger within us. We cast them aside, and assume we’ve gotten ride of them for good, but that may not be the case.

Peter Griffiths wrote that getting rid of our anger is like throwing a stick in a creek. The stick floats downstream, and is soon out of sight, but how far has it gone? To the pond where the creek empties? Or has it merely gone around a bend and gotten stuck somewhere in an eddy? If it’s caught in the swirling waters, it tends to grow as it collects other debris, and can get so big that it breaks loose, and when it breaks loose, it’s a big deal.

Our emotions can tend to be like that, too. If we haven’t really let go of a grudge, a hurt or an irritation, it may slip into an eddy and get caught in a crevice in our minds. When we experience what’s often called “the straw that broke the camel’s back,” all those negative, angry, frustrated feelings can come roaring back, and we get hooked in that downward spiral that’s all too much like a whirlpool.

How might we respond differently when we’re dealing with those kinds of emotions? How can we keep from getting caught in our own swirling turmoil?

The Bible passage may well be helpful. This is the writing of Paul, and he’s talking about how to help those who fall away from their faith in one way or another. That’s not exactly what we’re dealing with today, but I think what he has to say might give us some insights.

Our passages reads like this: "My friends, if someone is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too. Help carry one another's burdens, and in this way, you will obey the law of Christ... You should each judge your own conduct. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone else has done. For each of you have to carry your own load."

For our purposes, there are a couple of things that Paul says that seem more applicable. For instance, his advice is, "you who are spiritual should set him right; but you must do it in a gentle way. And keep an eye on yourselves, so that you will not be tempted, too," and he says, "Each of you have to carry your own load." In other words, we are to help others and help carry their burdens, but we are always to do it gently and lovingly. At the same time, we also have to be gentle and loving with ourselves. We are responsible for our own actions and our own emotional state, and we have to make sure that we are not sucked into a place where we will worsen the situation for others or for ourselves.

That means to me that we have to find a way to deal with any of our emotions that leave us so vulnerable to similar states in others. Sometimes this requires professional counseling, and that can be very helpful. Sometimes we need to look to a partner or friend who can offer the balancing factor that can help us put things in the right perspective.

It's important to say here that our feelings are valid because they are our feelings. We don't want to put ourselves in a place where someone tells us we're wrong for what we're feeling. We may not be in the best place, or it may not be the best emotion, but it's important to honor the validity of what we're feeling, and then strive to find a healthy way to deal with it.

Take, for example, a woman who returned home from the grocery store ranting and raving about the negligent bag boy who refused to double bag her groceries, even after a polite request. Her husband was understanding of her rants, and even helped clean up the eggs that broke when the single bag ripped.

However, after ample time to calm down and "get over it," if she started in again, her husband typically would suggest that maybe she should take a walk, or a nap, or soak in a warm tub to relax. While he usually wouldn't say it was time to put it behind her, he was aware that she was getting sucked into an emotional whirlpool, and that she needed to fight the negative pull. He never tells her she shouldn't feel that way or to stop complaining, but only that he is no longer interested in listening to the same thing. He has "kept an eye on himself" and taken responsibility that he not get sucked into the same whirlpool effect.

How did he, how do we, get to that point—where we can be of help, but keep ourselves so centered that we don't get sucked

in? In part, I think it has to do with expectations. We need to understand that a normal life is about ups and downs, frustrations and joys, and not expect that irritations are never going to occur.

When we change our mindset about what to expect from life, then we may want to equip ourselves with the tools we need to handle the frustrations that do come. If we prepare and anticipate, we just might handle things better and keep ourselves out of the suck hole.

It seems to me that a more positive place to be starts with being centered, and understanding that ultimately, most of the things we get so out of sorts about really aren't all that significant in the whole scheme of things. We might ask ourselves just how much this will matter a year from now. Will we even remember whatever it is tomorrow? When we can do that, we will probably operate in a more balanced way more of the time, and not be so fraught with emotional upheavals.

Another thing when we do get upset is to do the things that normally relax us. It can be taking a break, listening to music, reading a book, and taking a drive. We need to engage in those things that contribute to our well-being. Of course, proper diet, the right amounts of sleep, and exercise never hurt. It may take reorganizing our life to allow time for meditation or prayer, or having dinner with a friend, or getting a manicure—for anything that helps us be our best self.

As the bible passage has said, we're here to help one another, and to carry one another's burdens, but the best way for us to help others is to be as healthy and whole as we can be. I believe that's what God wants for our lives.

Closing:

Psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "There is far more right with us than wrong with us." I hope we remember that as we leave here, and keep ourselves out of the whirlpool effect.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen