

Sermon: The One Thing Needful--To Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing!

Scripture: John 12: 1-2; Luke 10: 38-42

Marble Collegiate Church (NYC) _____ Guest Preacher: Dr. Donald W. Haynes

The invitation from my friend, Dr. Michael Brown, to preach the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ from this pulpit is the highest honor of my sixtieth year as a preacher. I also thank the staff. Never again can I use the word "southern" to describe hospitality!!! They have been so gracious and helpful. Most importantly, I salute you as a church for remaining strong and enhancing your far-reaching, inclusive ministries when the lamp is flickering in so many of our churches across America. As was said of "Abou ben Adam," "may your tribe increase." Countless millions have experienced a "life change" because of the consistent messages of hope from this church. Of these, I was one.

When I was twenty five years old and pastor of four churches in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, I was so discouraged that I was about to leave the pastorate when one Sunday morning an elderly lady stuck a book in my hand and said with great authority, "**Read this.**" I did! It was the 1958 biography of Norman Vincent Peale. I read there about his own lowest hour; in 1934 he was depressed and about to resign. I was surprised. How could the man whom I knew as the author of *The Power of Positive Thinking* feel that he was a failure? How could his despondency in this church in Manhattan be so much like mine in four country churches in the south? Well, Ecclesiastes is right, "There is nothing new under the sun.

Ruth Peale's Redemptive Candor with Her Husband

The grace of God never gives up on us. As Dr. Peale poured out his feelings of failure to his wife, Ruth, she said to him what each of us needs someone who loves us to say to us:

"Yes dear, you are a failure! But not in the way you think! You are a failure because you have focused so much on the fear of failing. You are thinking too much of yourself and asking--Am I popular?, Am I successful?, Why doesn't everyone love me? Let that go! Think of God **in** you!"

The truth is, Norman, that for the first time in your life, you know the feeling others feel: failure, despair, depression. Now, Honey, for the first time in your life, you can be a wounded healer. God can use this mood of yours to help other despairing, despondent, frightened people. You can say to others that you know what they are experiencing."

What she said, by God's grace, completely changed him. **You know the rest of the story; he came home with a new lease on his life, a new vision for his ministry and a new accent for his message.** (So it was that though he never knew me, Norman Vincent Peale saved my ministry and moved me from a hammerer of guilt to a harbinger of grace.)

Jesus to Martha: "The One Thing Needful"

The Gospel of Luke tells about a poignant evening in Jesus' life when he visits two sisters, Mary and Martha. They were dear friends and he had visited them often, always enjoying Martha's wonderful cooking. On this evening, Martha is preparing one of her gourmet meals and needing help in the kitchen when she sees her sister, Mary, hanging out with Jesus. She chastises her sister for not helping with dinner when to Martha's dismay, Jesus said, **'Martha, Martha, you worry over many things; only one thing is needful and Mary and I are talking about it.'**

I think if we had the whole conversation, Jesus said, **"Martha, in the past I have enjoyed your delicious cuisine, but we cannot live by bread alone. If life has no meaning, why should one desire to live? Come sit with us, Martha. In the long run, meals won't matter but memories will. Tonight Mary knows the main thing, the one thing needful."**

As a philosophy of life for all of us, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. Christopher Fry has a poem that I rehearse in writing every sermon:

"Our time is now when wrong comes up to face us everywhere
'til we take the longest stride of soul we ever take.
Affairs are now soul size. The enterprise is exploration into God."

So Jesus said, in effect, "Martha, a search for God is a search for life. That is the one thing needful; that is the main thing."

Jesus, of course, is right. Do not see yourself as a ledger sheet of liabilities and assets, failures and successes, credits and debits! nor trivial pursuits. The essence of the Christian gospel is that the broken can be made whole, wounds can be healed, guilt can be purged, sins can be forgiven. **The one thing that is necessary is to exchange our bondage for freedom, our spiritual sickness for health, and our guilt for grace.** We read in Genesis that we are created in the image of God; the good news is that God's original image can be restored! **God has an indelible title for each of us--"A DAUGHTER OR SON OF THE MOST HIGH GOD."** God uses no adjectives; we are simply God's daughters and sons, whatever makes us unique.

<p>Now that is a game changer! We read of a similar title in St. Paul's letter to the Romans: "You do not have the spirit of fear but the spirit of adoption" St. Paul said that you are 'an heir of Almighty God and a joint heir with Jesus Christ'. Wow, what a family tree! God is my Father and Jesus is my brother! Now that is the main thing; that is the one thing that is needful. Really!</p>
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Moving from our "Cellar Life" to "Life with a View"

When Dr. Ian Maclaren was a preacher in Edinburgh in in the 1890's, there was a poor church member who made her living "taking in washing.": She lived in a musty basement flat. It was the custom of that church for the Deacons to make annual house calls to every member; so they visited this dear lady who at her cellar flat. Then one year they found she had moved; a neighbor

directed them to a garret that was painfully small but had a marvelous view of the Firth of Forth—that beautiful body of water just north of Edinburgh. They said to her, "*We see you have moved.*" **"Aye," she said, "you canna hear Ian Maclaren preach and live in a cellar."**

Her answer was classic and is befitting for everyone who internalizes the Gospel. God is calling each of us to move from our "cellars" to where we "have a view." Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith." YES!

When Trouble Comes

Does it seem like I am being a bit "Pollyannaish", and have childlike optimism? What if trouble comes? **...and trouble will come.** The shape and timing of trouble differs, but Charlie Brown of "Peanuts" was right: "Humans are born to trouble as sparks fly upward." In some form, "our hearts ache 'til they nearly break." The storms of life come. As the bumper stickers say, "Life happens." Sooner or later, **we are blasted out of our comfort zone by traumatic loss, or sickness, or a loved one's death or news of our own death, or simply the advancing seasons of life.** We are invaded by the tragic sense of life. Then we begin to ask questions, questions that make us stumble, or curse or pray. Life issues push us to the outer limits of our personal ego-centric resources. What do we do when life becomes what T. S. Eliot called a "wasteland"?

Let Paula's story speak to that. Paula joined the staff of this church in 1980 and remained until Dr. Peale's death in 1993. For her, tragedy came up like thunder on a midsummer day when in 1975 her husband and daughter were killed in a car wreck caused by a drunken driver. Paula was twenty-seven and pregnant. Some would have retreated in fear; others would have lashed out in bitterness. Paula, though, saw it differently. Her trouble made her become more sensitive to all human suffering. Paula says that "God comes to you disguised as life."

I saw the same amazing attitude in a young woman who lived in this city when two years ago she became near death with her chronic Crohn's Disease. Her fiancé was a corporate executive in Manhattan. At her bedside, the two of them took the "potent brew" of incurable Crohn's Disease, their love for each other, and a deepening faith in God to make a commitment. I married them on May 31. Like Norman Peale and Paula, this couple became wounded healers. They are trail blazer examples for all of us: "When life happens for the worst, look for God." God can enable us to weave our broken life threads into the tapestry of our lives with the result being a new and more beautiful pattern for living.

The genius of Biblical faith is that it does not promise us a rose garden; it **does not deny** the dark side of things. **Jesus was fully at home with this tragic dimension of life; he lived and died in it.** In Jesus' dying on a cross, he enables us to absorb the tragic dimension of life and live again. When we either **inherit** a mess or **make a mess** of our life, God does not throw us under the bus nor abandon us to our demons. God can take our **guilt and shame**, our **brokenness and pain** and transform them. Bill Gaither, the Gospel song writer, puts it well:

"All my confusion God understood.
My dreams turned to ashes, my castles all crumbled, my fortune turned to loss;

Then I wrapped up all the rags of my life and laid them at the cross.
All I had to offer him was brokenness and strife, but God made something beautiful of my life."

Change from Courtroom Language to Clinical Language

Too long we have portrayed salvation (or being saved) with a courtroom paradigm where God is the judge, we are the guilty plaintiff, and with Jesus as our defense attorney, we hope for a pardon by the judge. John Wesley insisted we should change the juridical language of the court to the healing language of the clinic. Before God the Counselor we are not sentenced but welcomed home and washed, and fed, and healed! **Jesus is the great physician** who came to rescue us, to heal our wounds, to make us whole. The essence of the Gospel is that the love of Jesus flows from Calvary's mountain to my little cup, enabling each of us to pray, "Fill my cup, Lord." God loves me; this I know because Jesus came to show me so. **If grace be true, God loves us both and calls you to love me and me to love you too.**

The church has too often portrayed the cross of Christ only for its pain and suffering. **The cross does demonstrate that we are not immunized from pain and suffering, but its eternal message is expressed in Jesus' famous "seven last words." He forgives, insisting that those who put him there did not really understand what they were doing. He also uses tragedy to a triumphant end. Officially, he said, "It is finished; in one sense he was saying, "Mission accomplished!" The cross did not impede the mission.**

That can be true of our crosses if our enterprise is "exploration into God." If we adopt the commitment that "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing," we will **NOT** mire into the sinking sand of "dangers, toils and snares" of our earthly sojourn. Rather, we can "renew our strength, mount up as eagles, run and not be weary...walk and faint not." ."(Isaiah 40:31)

Easter is not only a day in the Christian year. It is a transforming experience from "darkness to light", from depression to peace; from grief to joy, from hate to love, from addiction to sobriety." Every Sunday is Easter Sunday! Say it often! "Friday's here, but Sunday's coming!"

Metropolitan--the only place where people smile

A friend of mine was for many years pastor of the great Metropolitan Methodist Church on Woodward Avenue in Detroit. In 1968, that area of the city was burned and looked like a wasteland. Most people in the congregation had to make three public transportation transfers to get to the church from their homes; yet it was filled on Sunday mornings. The Official Board did a survey, asking people why they came. Dr. Quick thought surely it would be his sermons, but that was not why people came. **The overwhelming response was, "This is the only place in my life where people smile and hug me."** They recalled what it was to be shoved out of a subway or cursed or abused in their own home or put down at work. But in that church, they experienced the love of God, the security of a faith home, and the warmth of a human hug. Is that not why we are here? Is not that the fullest meaning of the term, "safe sanctuary"?

From Addiction to Counselor

Years ago one of my handsome and brilliant grandsons was addicted to drugs. On July 19, 2010, he called his younger brother to say, "I need help." For several years he was a counselor for

other young adults addicted to substance abuse. They represented Young People reaching sobriety through **the Twelve Steps which is the mantra for Alcoholics Anonymous.**

For many, substance abuse is **their** demon, **but everyone of us has demons.** The good news of the Gospel is that by the grace of God, **We can cage our demons; we can be forgiven!**

YES, WE CAN! We can say with an updated version of the great hymn, "Amazing Grace":

"My chains are gone; I've been set free; My God, my Savior's ransomed me;
And like a flood, his mercy reigns; unending love, amazing grace.

Painting called "Hope"



Whenever in London, don't miss this inspiring painting by George Frederick Watt in the Tate Gallery of Art. It is pictured here. He called his painting, "*Hope.*" Your first impression is to ask, "**Why did he call it *Hope*?**" Its colors reflect a rather desolate world in tones of green, brown, and grey. A woman is sitting upon the globe of planet earth, dressed in drab color, blindfolded, and hunched over a wooden harp. You notice that all the strings on the harp are broken except one, but **yet she plays that one string**, listening to the ever so faint music she can make on the one remaining string.

My friends, hope is not childlike optimism. Hope is not a strategy. Hope is not even a dream. No, **hope is the quiet confidence that beyond our present circumstances, beyond the cacophony of this world, there is a symphony, a music of the spheres, a whisper of God, the still small voice.** That is the essence of our hope. That is the one thing needful. That is the main thing and "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing."

Long ago, above the little town of Bethlehem, angels sang to shepherds the words God has for us. "Behold we bring you good tidings of great joy for all people." The baby born that night is inviting us now. Listen!

**"Come to me all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads,
and I will give you rest."**

"I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

"Learn from me; my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Pray with me now: "Dear Lord and Father of us all, forgive our foolish ways. re-clothe us in our rightful minds, reclothe us in our rightful minds, in deeper reverence, praise. Take from our souls the strain and stress and let our ordered lives profess the beauty of thy peace. Lead us to listen to the one thing needful --the silence of eternity, interpreted by love. Amen.

(adapted from poem by John Greenleaf Whittier)

Join me in a commitment

1. When I feel depressed, I will write on a reminder and keep on my mirror where I brush my teeth.

 (My name) . is the son/daughter of the most high God.

2. When I have sinned and feel guilty, I will turn to I John 1:9—
"If I confess my sins, he is faithful to always forgive me and make me clean, morally, emotionally, spiritually."

3. When someone has done me wrong, I will pray from the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass
against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen.*

This sermon was delivered at Marble Collegiate Sermon, one of the oldest Protestant congregations in North America, located at 5th Avenue in NYC in June 2015.