

TEXT: John 12:20-33
THEME: We live by dying to self for others
SUBJECT: Faith
TITLE: Happiness

Fifth Sunday in Lent
21 March 2021
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Robert Putnam is an American political scientist famous for his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. In a recent interview with Paul Solomon of PBS News Hour, he made a striking observation: “When the boomers came of age, they inherited a society that was moving in the right direction. It was very, very affluent. And they blew it.”

Paul Solomon responds: “So, rock ’n’ roll, never trust anybody over 30, down with authority, non-conformity, self-expression, that began the downswing?”

Putnam, “Yes.”

Solomon, “Which then expressed itself economically?”

Putnam, “Yes. If you think we’re not all in this together, it’s every man for himself.”

Employing charts, Putnam shows how, starting in the 60’s, America became less economically equal, less politically tolerant, less socially engaged, less altruistic, the era of me, myself and I.

The Nigram program can tell you how often a given word has appeared in any book published in that year. With the advent of the 20th century the word “we” increased in use until the 1960s. And then, in all the literature that’s assembled, it becomes more and more I, I, I again. The increase in the use of “I” correlates with the decrease in economic equality, tolerance, social engagement and altruism.

We all want to be happy. Many boomers believed the way to happiness ran through self-expression, self-aggrandizement, self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-. . . Putnam and his research partner, Shaylyn Romney Garrett, have shown that the happiness promised by the culture of me, myself and I, proved to be a mirage.

Jesus said, “Unless the grain of wheat falling to the ground dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears plenteous fruit.” (Hart’s translation)

The poet muses, “Does the seed resist? But something cracks the shell, breaks down the pod, explodes that dark enclosed life, safe, self-contained, pushes the frail root out, the fresh dangerous leaf.” (May Sarton)

I don't know if the seed resists, but I sure do. Letting go of the known for the unknown requires more trust and more vulnerability than I can often muster. I am reminded of "The Parable of the Trapeze" by Danaan Parry.

Sometimes, I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I'm either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along or, for a few moments, I'm hurdling across space between trapeze bars.

Mostly, I spend my time hanging on for dear life to the trapeze bar of the moment. It carries me along a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I'm in control. I know most of the right questions, and even some of the right answers. But once in a while, as I'm merrily, or not so merrily, swinging along, I look ahead of me into the distance, and what do I see?

I see another trapeze bar looking at me. It's empty. And I know, it that place in me that knows, that this new bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart of hearts, I know that for me to grow, I must release my grip on the present well-known bar to move to the new one.

Each time it happens, I hope—no, I pray—that I won't have grab the new one. But in my knowing place, I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar, and for some moments in time I must hurtle across space before I can grab the new bar. Each time I do this I am filled with terror. It doesn't matter that in all my previous hurdles I have always made it.

Each time I am afraid I will miss, that I will be crushed on unseen rocks in the bottomless basin between the bars.

Perhaps this is the essence of what mystics call faith. No guarantees, no net, no insurance, but we do it anyway because hanging on to that old bar is no longer an option. And so, for what seems to be an eternity but actually lasts a microsecond, I soar across the dark void called "the past is over, the future is not yet here." It's called a transition. I have come to believe that it is the only place that real change occurs.

I have a sneaking suspicion that the transition zone is the only real thing, and the bars are the illusions we dream up to not notice the void. Yes, with all the fear that can accompany transitions, they are still the most vibrant, growth-filled, passionate moments in our lives.

And so transformation of fear may have nothing to do with making fear go away, but rather with giving ourselves permission to "hang out" in the transition zone—between the trapeze bars—allowing ourselves to dwell in the only place where change really happens.

It can be terrifying. It can also be enlightening.

Hurdling through the void, we must learn to fly.

Unless the grain of wheat falling . . . Unless we let go the form of life we know, new forms of life cannot arise. The old forms have to die to liberate the energy they bear within so that with this energy new forms may be born and grow. We have to die, to let go of the trapeze bar, to liberate a tied up energy, in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things.

Hurdling through the void is essential to our spiritual life, because without this terrifying flight we remain comfortably at rest in more or less illusory ideas, cherished theories, doctrines, systems of knowledge, formulas of morality, modes of life, habits, predilections, preferences, indulgences.

We all want to be happy, but we don't always want to do what is necessary to obtain happiness. Something has to explode the dark enclosed life, safe, self-contained; something has to push out the frail root, the fresh dangerous leaf if happiness is to be reached. That something is faith.

Unless the grain of wheat falling to the ground dies, it remains alone. Alone, we cannot find happiness. But if the grain of wheat falling to the ground dies, it bears plenteous fruit. We will find happiness when lose ourselves in service to others, when we know we are all in this together.

PRAYER: J. Philip Newell

In the beginning O God
You shaped our souls and set their weave
You formed our bodies and gave them breath.
Renew us this day
 in the image of your love.
O great God, grant us your light
O great God, grant us your grace
O great God, grant us your joy this day
And let us be made whole
 in the well of your mercy.