

Life's Best: Tranquility

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“Be still, and know that I am God.” -- Psalm 46:10

Earlier this summer, I began preaching a series of sermons on best practices for living; I called them “life’s best.” I want to continue that series this morning by thinking with you and articulating for you some ideas about tranquility, another of those practices that make life not simply worth living but a great deal more than that. These “best practices for life” are based on Jesus’s promise to us in John 10:10, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Everyone on the planet gets life; that’s simple biological existence, and we share it with all living things, and it’s not to be despised, belittled, or taken for granted. But Christians have something more. We have the promise of abundant life – life with value added. We don’t have to go through life just getting by.

Lots of people do, and many people who claim to be Christian do, too. Life for so many people seems to be a struggle, and not just to put food on the table or clothes on their backs. The greater struggle seems to be internal -- the struggle for direction, for purpose, for meaning, for significance. Let’s face it. For most of us here in suburbia, we have the roof and four walls; we have food in the pantry or access to it. Our bodies won’t be left to lie in the street if we become ill or injured. Those basics are still in place.

But where is the abundant life that Jesus said he came to bring to his followers? Where is that “more” that Christians claim can be theirs as disciples of Jesus Christ?

“Rich in things and poor in soul” is the way Harry Emerson Fosdick put it in his famous hymn. We visited Fosdick’s church in upper Manhattan earlier this summer, and we saw that Fosdick knew a thing or two about material riches and spiritual poverty. The wealthiest man in the country, John David Rockefeller, sat in Fosdick’s congregation every Sunday; it was he, in fact, who built Riverside Church so that Fosdick would have a pulpit worthy of his preaching, and Fosdick was painfully aware of that fact for the rest of his life. Harry Emerson Fosdick, surrounded by the wealthiest people in the world, had the spiritual insight – the faith, if you will – to see that there is no material substitute for a spiritual reality. As someone else has put it, there is a God-shaped hole in all of us that nothing but God can fill. Or as St. Augustine said in his *Confessions* so many centuries ago, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

The text for this sermon on tranquility is the first half of the tenth verse of the forty-sixth psalm: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

Be still. Be quiet. Relax. Calm down. Stop trying to fill that God-shaped hole in the middle of yourself with television or the Internet or endless text messages or expensive vacations. Stop running around in circles thinking you’re a big wig. Stop worrying about the lives over which you have no control – which is everyone’s life except your own – and focus your energies and attentions on being the disciple of Jesus Christ you have been chosen to be. Let go, in other words, and let God.

But the first step in letting is listening, and the first step in listening is being still. Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth-century French philosopher and mathematician, said that all of a person's troubles can be attributed to that person's inability to sit still in a quiet room. Our inability to hear God's voice comes not from the weakness of God's voice, but from our unwillingness to still the clamor within us and around us.

Any of you who have tried to make meditation a regular part of your spiritual life know how hard it is to undertake the spiritual discipline of meditation. It's not easy at first. We're not used to clearing our minds of random and trivial thoughts and focusing the resulting space on God. Most of us are very bad at this. We position ourselves comfortably, we close our eyes, and for a few seconds we're the receptacles we're striving to be. But then, without warning, the shopping list appears in our thoughts. Or an errand we meant to run for mom. Or a phone call that went badly. And suddenly and unbidden "the world is too much with us," as Wordsworth put it.

Tranquility takes work and it takes practice. It's not something that you can snatch a few minutes of here and there throughout the day or week. True tranquility is a way of life based on a relationship, the relationship of knowing God: "Be still, and know that I am God." That's the great insight of the psalmist. Tranquility doesn't come from knowing nothing; tranquility isn't an obliviousness to the world and its needs. And it isn't a kind of spiritual nearsightedness, à la Mr. Magoo, who went merrily through life making one mistake after another. Christians, along with many religious people, are prone to that kind of spiritual nearsightedness, believing that if they're just earnest and sincere enough, whatever they do for Jesus will be all right. Sadly, that attitude has created a great deal of suffering.

True tranquility comes from being still before God so that we are aware of the height and depth and breadth of God's love for the world, including us, and the role that we have to play in responding to that love. True tranquility is "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding," as Paul wrote to the Philippians. That kind of tranquility doesn't ignore understanding, it surpasses it; it takes our understanding of the world's needs – our needs, our families' needs, our communities' needs – and offers that understanding to God in prayer.

And then it waits, in quietness and trust, and with the calm assurance that God's promises are true. That's tranquility. Tranquility is not a retreat from action; tranquility is the first step in taking action, and without it, so much of what we do is simple sound and fury.

Let me close with an admission. As all of you who know me know, I spent a lot of years of my life studying the Bible. I take it very seriously; so seriously, in fact, that nothing brings me more joy than teaching it, which I've done since I was a teenager. But with all of that study has come the realization that no amount of study and knowledge of the Bible – or of theology or ethics or church history or liturgy – can replace the honest and regular opening of the self to God that is unscripted, uncluttered, and unadorned. Bible study is important and wonderful, and we should not neglect it, but being still before God is more important and more wonderful, because finally, what God wants of all of us is not our knowledge but our lives, given in love to the one who is love. Each one of us will love the world differently, and no preacher can tell you how to do that for yourself; what I can tell you, however, is that the first step in loving is listening, and the first step in listening is being still.

"Be still, and know that I am God."