

Recollected: “Frozen Food”

Well, friends, I want to begin with prayer this morning.

So...I guess I will!

Prayer:

Well, friends, we’re still in this series of remixing, fixing, correcting older messages that we may or may not have heard before, but either way, probably don’t remember.

And today I want to talk about an itch we have, an uneasiness we have, that we don’t always name, but should.

Under Pressure:

Every time I talk with someone lately the conversation inevitably goes to how “weird” things are, how unusual, how far out of normal they’ve become. We’ll sometimes wonder about what the “new normal” might look like.

But what’s so easy to forget is that normal isn’t automatically good, even if we grieve its loss: It’s simply what’s familiar. And even what’s familiar, what’s persistent and pervasive, can sometimes trick us. Because we end up not seeing what’s familiar. Just ask whoever you’re video-calling to tell you how dusty your house is. Walk ‘em around a little.

What's familiar feels so reasonable, natural, and *given* that we don't even realize that what we consider "normal" may not fit so well with what God desires for his people.

We end up, in the face of these subtle things, as suckers, basically, without even knowing it. We end up being taken in, and without even knowing it, we end up promoting habits and ideas as normal that we should be thinking critically about.

Frozen Food:

I mean, we all probably sense this whenever we eat frozen food, right? I'm sure we do--I rarely make poor assumptions. I'm sure, whenever we're just really hungry, and we want to eat right now, and we grab our bagel bites (who doesn't want pizza anytime, right?) and pop them into the microwave because we're starving (even though they don't taste as good that way) we all know that there is something wrong with the value system we've immersed ourselves in!

We all realize that something about our faith nags at us when we eat frozen food, right? I mean, am I way off base here?

Off Base:

Maybe I am. Maybe there's nothing wrong with bagel bites in a microwave--although I'd bet anything they're gross that way. Maybe there's nothing wrong with

frozen food. Maybe eating frozen food hasn't subtly and persistently drawn us away from some Christian ideal. Especially in a season of weird exhausting quarantine.

What if?

But what if we were to talk about immediate gratification? What if we were to talk today about the fact that the reigning principle in the world is meet your needs...and not just meet them, but meet them as quickly as you can. Meet your needs as quickly as you can, gratify that desire, whatever it is, and do it fast. What if we were to talk about that?

Today we're not talking about bagel bites. We're not talking about frozen food or microwaves. We're talking about the fact that we followers of Jesus, live in a society that calls us to a thousand things, but one of its basic principles, a thing that undergirds and supports much of what it wants of us, is the idea that we had best look out for number one as quickly as we can. The world tells us to scratch our itch, meet our own needs, and do it fast, do it now, do it completely. Today what we're talking about is our world's call for immediate self-gratification; a subtle disease.

Problems!

And there are problems with this, you know, symptoms of this disease that I think we've caught a little bit, symptoms that some of us might recognize. So let's spend some time diagnosing ourselves, okay? Let's

spend some time figuring out if we've caught the world's concern for immediate self-gratification.

We become unable to interrupt ourselves.

When we're concerned about meeting our own needs, as quickly as possible, we're unable to meet other people's needs. This sounds basic, right? But more than this; we become unable to interrupt the process of meeting our own needs so that we can pay attention to something else that is needed. We become unable to interrupt ourselves.

Does this make sense? We become so focused on meeting our own needs, that we're unable to meet someone else's. This is at least partly what's happening with the well-enough known story Jesus told about the Levite and the Priest on their way to Jerusalem. They pass a guy in a ditch; alone and hurting. They were in a hurry, on their way to some religious thing at a religious place, and they were focused on the good goal of getting there without getting dirty, without becoming "unclean." And because of their hurry, because of their concern for their own state and their own concerns, they mistook their purposes in the world for God's purposes, they mistook their agenda for God's agenda, and they became in this story, as Jesus tells it in the gospels, the bad examples. And that's nice and religious; we're religious people, we can relate to having an agenda, wanting to do something for God, and being unable to interrupt our own attempt to meet our needs in order

to meet someone else's.

But there are other, not-so-religious-y sorts of examples we could think about, I bet. The times where we see someone on the side of the road, but we're sort of late for that one thing, so we don't really stop. The times where we're tired, and we just want to go to bed as soon as we can, so we don't really do the thing that so-and-so asks of us, or pretend not to hear it. We become unable to interrupt our own attempts at getting what we want. Sometimes we'll make excuses for this "Well, I was..." tired, in a hurry, angry... What we were, was busy meeting our own needs. Our faith has things to say about this.

We become impatient:

Or we become impatient, right? When we people are consumed with trying to meet our own needs, and that pursuit is interrupted by somebody, almost universally we respond with impatience. Think about how impatient you are for the person in front of you to turn when the gap in traffic happens, so you don't have to sit there for another 10 minutes! The person who pays for their groceries by check. Your minutes, your errand, your task or whatever. We have agendas, and we have concerns, and they need to get met, right? And we simply have no time for those who interrupt them. But our faith has things to say about this.

We displace:

Or there's displacement. We displace. If one need

can't be met, we'll meet a different one. How many of us who need reconciliation with someone decide, in our anger, to go have a microwave burrito? Or another drink? How many of us who need prayer and intimacy with God, decide to call a friend and catch a movie? How many of us who are tired decide to drink a cup of coffee? How many of us who realize that we are far away from where we could be, and have accomplished very little with the hours given to us, decide to take our credit cards and go buy shoes or tools or gadgets, so we can feel like we've done something worthwhile? Our faith has things to say about this.

We functionally kill people:

And I've wondered if what we're really doing when we do this whole "meet-our-own-needs-as-quickly-as-possible" thing, if what we're really doing with all the impatience, all the emphasis on our own agendas, all the everything is functionally--functionally, for all intents and purposes--killing people. We treat them as if they may as well be dead.

We functionally kill others. We silence them. Our default opinion becomes that other people's wants and desires cannot trump or be as important as our own; and so other people become objects for us to dismiss and disregard, walls for us to break through, things that need to get out of our way, rather than people Jesus died for and loves as much as he loves us.

It's not so much that we hate them; we just don't care about them, and so they may as well be dead. We forget that they are people, much less that they have needs. They are simply problems that life has blown around like plastic bags on the road, bugs we need to get out of our faces. They aren't people.

We lose control:

And sometimes who we truly are gets confused with the needs of the moment, and we forget ourselves. And the world, and the devil begin to whisper a thousand needs to us, and we end up trading away control over our lives, our emotions, our "selves," to things outside of us, instead of the Spirit inside us, and the things outside us say go here, go there, do this, do that all the time, faster and faster, meet whatever need you're told must be met, don't wake up to the fact that you are caught like a hamster trapped in a wheel that won't stop spinning. We end up immobilized, unfit for any good work.

And we could talk about so many other things that happen when we begin to be enticed by the world to meet our needs as quickly as we can, instead of remembering what our faith calls us to.

Our faith:

But our faith calls us to an entirely different way of living in the world, right? Christianity stands against this pull toward immediate self-gratification and simply says "No," to it.

Christianity says that patience is part of who we are: The entire narrative of the Bible is one in which God patiently worked and worked through history to bring humanity back to him after we'd broken our relationship with him, God worked patiently to deal with sin, free us from evil, through and with the broken people he had to draw us back to himself, and in the end gave us the Holy Spirit so we could live like God wanted us to live; and part of how we are supposed to live, one of the natural virtues that rises up inside us because of the Spirit God has filled us with is patience.

Christianity says that for us, our concern is always for the other: That coupled together, like spouses, are the two commandments to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We know this. Everything about who we are and who we're called to be is a concern not for our own immediate needs, but the needs around us, the interruptions of our own plans.

Interruptions that--Christianity says--are often God at work in our lives. Every biblical heroine and hero was a person who responded well to God's interruption of their lives, their pursuit of their own needs. From Abraham through the prophets to the ones Jesus called--and ourselves, very likely--the people of God have been people who are attentive to and respond well to God's interruptions of their own agendas and own self-gratifications.

We could talk about the forgiveness that defines us, and how if there is anything that doesn't meet our own immediate needs, it's forgiving people seven times a day, seventy times seven times. We could talk about how we are supposed to connect people to Jesus, "who is our life" as Paul says, the one who holds all things together, so that they can come alive; not ignore them and dismiss their needs so uncaringly that they functionally die to us. We could talk about how we of all people, with the Spirit inside us, with our identities more and more deeply tied to God's love for us, can say no to the loss of our souls in the world's call to rush here or there or anywhere.

We could talk about all sorts of things, all sorts of Christian principles that stand against this principle of the world that says meet your needs and do it now.

Particulars:

But remember the passage from Corinthians that was read to us today? This part?

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the

air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Cor 9:24-27 tniv)

It's a weird passage. There's something about Paul's choice of words here--"I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave" that, really, *is jarring*. It's ugly. Other translations put it even more dramatically: I punish my body and enslave it. Okay...I mean, that sounds unhealthy, right? This sort of stuff doesn't rate high on a personal wellness chart, you know? Pastorally, I'd invite Paul to tone it down and we'd explore where this attitude comes from.

But in this small passage, Paul is reminding us of all that we need to remember when we find ourselves longing to meet our own needs, *right now*. He presents us with this image of a race with many runners, but one winner, and tells us to engage with our lives of faith as though our chances of living it well are very, very slim.

And when we think of the tug of the world on us that we've talked about today, the continual pull to meet our own needs and meet them quickly, we realize that this metaphor isn't so bad. Because Christianity, although it's claimed a lot of things, has never claimed that following Jesus is easy.

Paul tells us in this passage to train well, train well to

get a crown that will last forever. And this crown that lasts forever, whatever else it might mean, points us at least to the resurrection body we talked about at Easter. In another of his passages, Paul talks about his own resurrection as a prize. He says

I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

The prize, the crown that will last forever, the resurrection of the dead that he wants to attain to: This is what Paul wants. And to ensure that he'll get there, he says he's not just metaphorically running aimlessly around, hoping he ends up at the finish line. He's not just metaphorically throwing his fists all around, hoping some punch lands. He is purposeful, he is intentional, he has a goal in mind--the prize, the lasting crown, the resurrection--and he acts accordingly.

And knowing this, Paul saying that he punishes his

body and makes it his slave, although jarring to our sensibilities, ugly to our ears--it makes sense, you know, in light of all he's said before this. Paul is unwilling to allow his own body to get in the way of his pursuit of the hope God has promised Jesus' followers.

He's just not willing to play Christian for fun. He's a driven guy, but he's not a fool. Life is hard and following Jesus isn't easy, and Paul does not want to have done all he's done for the Lord, and not finish well. He doesn't want to end up missing out on the thing that he's coaching everyone else to get.

A reminder for us:

And we could use reminding that we ourselves live in a world that is pulling at us, whose guiding principle, often, is meet your needs right now; but our faith cries out to us, to train our very lives for a prize that is years away.

Some of us are very good at training for things. We exercise well, we practice our instruments, we read helpful materials, and attend conferences, and keep up with the latest news about whatever it is we want to get better at. But we may be very poor at training ourselves to resist the world around us. And we have have, some of us, trained ourselves to meet our own needs instead of say "wait" to them, to think of ourselves before we think of others, or to dismiss the concerns of those who are unlike us or strangers to us.

Conclusion:

I guess this morning I just don't want to end on something practical. Practical is good, right? But, I'm resisting it for some reason, and am just going to pay attention to that.

I could offer us tips and tricks, ways to counteract the subtle formation of the world with the Spirit's intrusive re-creating power. We know the right things, of course: Fast, pray, read the Bible, practice generous giving. Give a tenth of the devotion you show to your careers or hobbies to those things that shape your soul and prepare for what Eugene Peterson calls a "long obedience in the same direction." Do the right things that we all know are the right things.

I'll give us one practical thing that's so broad as to be useless.

Notice what you're doing. Wake up to it. Pay attention to yourself, to your motivations.

What do you do when an interruption comes your way? Are you able to be interrupted? When do you find yourself impatient? What things do you do that you know--or could know--are simply displacing behaviors, quick-hitting, stimulating stand-ins for what's really needed in your life? Who really don't you care about, don't care if they live or die as long as they leave you alone? And when have you lost control recently, and why?

Not really practical, right? “Notice yourself.” But we can’t run a race if we haven’t yet learned to walk.

We can’t answer any of those things if we’ve become strangers to ourselves, so stop being a stranger to yourself. Discover yourself again, notice yourself again, and enjoy hanging out with yourself, because God thinks you’re amazing, and so should you.

I have met saints who are like Jesus in ways that I right now only wish I was. They are not uniquely gifted, they simply have taken the world seriously, and trained themselves, have cleansed themselves from the world, and just don’t give in too much anymore to its pressures. They don’t automatically meet their own needs as quickly as they can...but some of them have at times met mine, prepared as they are for the good work of God, and I wouldn’t be here right now without them. We need to watch the world and not give into it; and with each other, and the Spirit, and Paul’s words ringing in our ears we can remember to train for the life that we live, because what’s promised on the other side of it is worth training for.

Prayer:

Father, the world would train us to meet our own needs as quickly as we can. Don't let us be asleep to this. Wake us up to notice the ways we give into the world, the ways we turn away from what our faith calls us to: selflessness, love for others, and a life of long

discipline. Help us to take stock of our moments, and learn from them, to bring one another into our attempts to become more like you, and help us not give into what the world says is true. Father, you have always met our needs. You have always kept us safe; and for your glory. Help us to intentionally and purposefully train ourselves to live well while we are here, that we might attain that glory, might know your resurrection as our own, and might look like Jesus until it comes. It's in his name we pray. Amen.