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Sunday Sermon: “Facing Uncertainty”

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The 1st century Roman author and philosopher, Pliny the Elder said: “The only certainty is that nothing is certain”.

It was 1968 and I was in the kitchen helping Mom with the dishes. Calmly she stopped washing and turned to me and said “ I don’t know if Christ was the savior, but I’m too old to question it”.

Stunned, I stood there a few moments. Was there another conversation going on in the kitchen that I wasn’t hearing, because this certainly seemed like a random thought, but perhaps, not so for my 60 plus year old Mom.

Here, stood a woman, who religiously brought me to church every school day morning to attend Mass throughout my eight years at St. Thomas the Apostle School; who made certain I was baptized, received communion, and made my confirmation. A woman, who upon learning that my father’s ex-wife passed, made arrangements with the Monsignor to have him marry them in a religious ceremony so their union would be recognized by the Church...my brother was best man and I, maid of honor. So this was no passing thought, but it was filled with uncertainty, followed, most likely, by fear of final retribution.

Uncertainty is when we cannot look down Robert Frost’s road for it is barred from sight. We don’t know outcomes in advance, let alone their possibilities. They differ from risks, in which certain outcomes can be determined and weighed. These are the fodder of actuarial tables, the horse betting foundation...nothing guaranteed, but more solid than uncertainty.

In our present day society, we seek ordered lives with Pension Funds and 401k’s, Health, Life, and Longterm insurance...we do all that we can to reduce risk. We buy security and safety, we guard our futures with financial promises and rest assuring beliefs that we will receive the needed care and support as we age. This is not saying that planning is neither important nor preparing for the future foolish, when you are able, it is probably wise, but it does come with well intended promises which may or may not be fulfilled.

Numerous incidences have littered the roads of security, Bernie Madoff being one of the most recent and well known, with wars and environmental disasters part of our world history. On the other side, however, one could point out how these financial instruments have brought life saving support. Being optimistic and responsible, we choose our paths and trust that we have done our best, after all what else is there to do, we weigh the risks and walk forward.

The Buddhist, however, would caution us that in seeking certainty we delude ourselves in believing that we can totally control our lives. Uncertainty, however, is not covered with any savings or policies or guarantees. For most of us, living with it is not comfortable or reassuring. It is dealing with the unknown, undecided, and the unexplainable, but it is present in all of our lives.

As I traveled down this path, uncertainty was revealing itself to be multilayered. It held a depth of unexpected promises. One unanticipated source, a Business dictionary, shifted my attitude. It pointed out that "manageable uncertainties provide the freedom to make creative decisions". Of course, one could ask what is a manageable uncertainty. Regardless, I questioned that perhaps my vision over the years had been affected by the fear of the unknown. It had narrowed possibilities, hobbled creativity, and exciting expansion. I realized that investing in an outcome of a situation prevents options from becoming evident, stifles the creative thought process from even starting, and possibly results in a situation, which ultimately, may not be the best solution.

As I carried this thought out, it became evident that in the search for certainty, we can kill the spirit within us. Author Tony Schwartz said "Let go of certainty. The opposite isn't uncertainty. It's openness, curiosity and a willingness to embrace paradox, rather than choose up sides. The ultimate challenge is to accept ourselves exactly as we are, but never stop trying to learn and to grow."

So it is part of all our repertoires called experiencing life. How we face and deal with uncertainties has much to do with our values, our sense of who we are. The economics of a situation, physical and mental circumstances, societal constraints, etc. color our decisions, but values seemed to frame so many of these other qualities. They define and guide us. They are the outline which give us a perspective when facing the unknown.

How many of us, have over the years, heard people say such words after making a decision, “that I don’t know how my decision will turn out, but I feel good that I did the right thing and I can live with the results because of that”. Is it not a reflective thought revealing a balance within the person, a commitment to their values, and a level of courage?

Stretching out into the unknown gives us huge opportunities to learn about ourselves. Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”, which was read earlier, addresses this. There is no map, no guarantee but taking ownership of your path gives you both reward and heartache. Only by doing that can you succeed or deal with the benefits or failures. Life is more than just sitting at the separation in the road, frozen with fear, it is being alive, it is expansion, adventure, creativity, and embracing the unknown.

Robert Feynman, a leading theoretical physicist, said “I can live with doubt and uncertainty and not knowing. I think it is much more interesting to live not knowing than to have answers that might be wrong. If we will only allow that we remain unsure, we will leave opportunities for alternatives. We will not become enthusiastic for the fact, the knowledge, the absolute truth of the day, but remain always uncertain. In order to make progress, one must leave the door to the unknown ajar.”

“Everything you’ve learned in school as “obvious” becomes less and less obvious as you begin to study the universe. For example, there are no solids in the universe. There’s not even a suggestion of a solid. There are no absolute continues. There are no surfaces. There are no straight lines.” said R. Buckminster Fuller

For the Buddhists, in seeking certainty they believe that we delude ourselves into believing that we can totally control our lives. For them, managing our lives bring suffering not joy....the suffering is in the clinging and aversion. When we view the topology of our paths, we may see that we have had limited to no control over many events. For most of us, it is our response to the circumstances we face, which may be all we can manage. Our responses have much to do with our values.

So what about values....our principles, our standards, the qualities we consider worthwhile or desirable. Your values form the foundation of your life. They dictate the choices you make and determine the direction that your lives take.

We start forming values in our childhood. First we learn to appreciate things that fulfill our basic needs, but we value especially those people who provide them to us. Their behavior towards us becomes the main reference of what is valuable. Thus, our character and personality are molded through the attitudes and behavior of the people who raise us. Their behaviors determine in large part what will subsequently become our most important beliefs and principles. Each gesture or comment affects how we learn to make choices. We also learn to differentiate between the theory and practice of values. The latter, the practice, is what marks us the most.

As we mature, however, we start to feel social pressures and the pressure of values that are different from ours. By discarding our fear and opening ourselves up, we can reevaluate, reestablish, rework, basically question what we have learned and lived in the past. New experiences and relationships place a spotlight on the values we hold.

Why is it so difficult to form values? Because, unlike norms, values are convictions; they are behaviors we gladly decide to follow and they produce satisfaction. We can follow norms against our will, but values have the support of our will. We have learned their importance due to the benefits they produce, individually and collectively.

Values are only conveyed through the example of our daily attitudes and behaviors. They can seldom be formed by explaining them or through a list of what is considered correct or incorrect. They are inside us....they are something we control.

Personally, I come to this church to examine what I believe, to find support in my search for that which guides my attitudes and behaviors, to hear and to try to understand the values of others, to gain compassion for the paths others take and for the misguided ones I have taken. Pema Chodron, a Buddhist Nun, reminds us to have compassion. It is part of the formula, to be compassionate with ourselves and others. To understand that this is a journey. It is how we meet our uncertainties,

hopefully remaining true to our values and ourselves, that give us satisfied lives and a sense of fulfillment.

When we come into this church, we share in the journey of Facing Uncertainty. Our minister does not outline what we should and should not believe, which is a stark difference from my Catholic upbringing. We are asked to remain open and to listen to the lessons of life and the voices of wise people. We are given the tools, exposed to that which we know not, and allowed to question in a safe and supportive environment.

Each of us seek connection to our values in our own way. Perhaps it is through prayer, others may meditate or walk in nature, some share with a friend, read a poem, dance or sing a song, it is a personal journey....one, all of us have taken at some point, however you find your voice, as Rainer Maria Rilke said, remember "Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart....live in the question." So uncertainties are part of foundation of life, always there, always changing, it is how we meet and greet them, that is important and personal....the one part of the equation over which we have some control.

We are all on the journey. As Gilda Radner said:

"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. (Delicious Ambiguity)."

Amen