

“Following Directions”

II Kings 5.1–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 15 February 2009

I don't know about you, but sometimes I'm not very good at following directions. I open a new piece of software to load onto my Mac, and I'm lucky if I manage to read the “Quick Start” pamphlet. (After all, I'll learn more and better if I tackle it on my own.) Sometimes, it's just that I'm in a bit of a hurry to get cracking, and other times it's a matter of pride...and it's a bit like solving a puzzle to get everything working right.

Those are just *little* directions. Sometimes I'm not so good at following *big* directions either. “Eat foods low in saturated fat. Get plenty of fruits and vegetables in your diet. Exercise five times a week. Reduce the stress in your work life.” I can see my internist saying these things to me, and I'd like to do them, really I would, but sometime the busyness of life gets the best of me, and I devolve into eating Kung Pao chicken and considering my 15-minute morning walk with my dog, Chumley, as real exercise. Unfortunately, the *formerly unused* holes in my belt don't lie.

Are you under the same illusion that I am that if I start flossing my teeth a week before my dental check-up that my gums will be in great shape? I had a great really funny hygienist when I lived in Connecticut. She used to grill me and ask, “So, Reverend Hal, when was the last time you *really* flossed regularly?” I knew she was a lapsed Catholic, so I told her that if she stopped asking me when the last time I flossed, I wouldn't ask her how long it had been since she'd attended church or since her last confession. (It worked, by the way!)

Fundamentally, I think we all know what we should do. We should honor our bodies, and take good care of them. Not obsess about them, mind you, but take care of them. And I think most of us have a pretty good idea of how we should take care of our souls, as well. We know that we should attend worship (though only about half of us do on a given Sunday), pray, and work for God's intention for the world. Jesus set a pretty amazing example that still works after two millennia.

So, why don't we do it? Sure, some of us are frightfully fit and others of us are “prayer warriors,” but none of us has the balance just right, do we? And that sense of balance is what we're after, isn't it? The balance between physical and mental exercise, between spiritual life and social action, between work and family. The hard part is that much of what we strive for in our spiritual lives is unseen by others...its interiority enables us to hide it far better than a few extra pounds.

We all want to have a sense of wholeness and happiness in our lives. Jesus preached extensively about this in the Beatitudes. Our translations typically say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the peacemakers ... blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” The Greek word, *makarios*, which we translate as “blessed” can also be translated as “happy.” So, even though it sounds a little trite, Robert Schuler was accurate when he called this section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, “The Be Happy Attitudes.” They are instructive on ways we can find a deep sense of happiness, even if it means delaying our sense of gratification.

Somehow, at least since the end of World War II, we Americans seem to have been steadily losing our way toward what makes us truly happy and whole. Frankly, I think that television and the empire of entertainment and advertising gets the blame. After all, will deodorant make us more socially popular? Will a new flat-screen television make life more enjoyable? Is that new car really going to help us feel better about ourselves and our family?

Last year in the journal, *Science*, a team of researchers from the University of British Columbia and Harvard Business School reported the findings of their study on happiness. They wanted to know if money really could make you happier, and their answer was yes ... if you spend it on other people. According to a newspaper article about the study, the findings fit “in neatly with a growing body of research that finds that helping others is the best way to help yourself, that people who give more and are more socially connected are happier.”¹

That shouldn't be big news to anyone here, but it runs counter to the American consumerist ethic. (Perhaps that's not good news for economic stimulus ... unless we all spend a lot more on the nonprofit sector, which would be okay, given our capital campaign!) We know what to do, we just don't like to follow the directions.

As the saying from Ecclesiastes goes, “There is nothing new under the sun.” The story of Naaman the Syrian general has been around for awhile. Naaman is an exceedingly powerful man who has one little problem: a skin ailment that just won't heal. He goes abroad seeking a cure and when the prophet Elisha (who was kind of like a cross between the Mayo Clinic and Billy Graham) tells him to jump into the River Jordan seven times, Naaman is outraged and scoffs, “What? Is washing in your muddy Israelite river better than the crystal clear waters of the rivers back home in Syria?” (Naaman was like us: he just doesn't like to follow directions.) But, one of Naaman's canny servants gets him to settle down and give it a try. *And this is where the story shifts.* You'd expect this larger-than-life, Norman Schwarzkopfesque character to walk away in a huff. But, something happens to change the plot. There is a moment of grace when old Naaman swallows his pride and gives the waters of the Jordan a try. And wouldn't you know ... it works. And then there is another twist in the story. Naaman's reverses his haughty attitude of superiority by affirming his faith in the God of Elisha. (That happens later in the story.)

So, what is it that keeps us from following directions? Sometimes, I think it's having someone who is willing to coach and encourage us. One of the things we do within the church is hold each other accountable. (You may not be aware of that function of our common life, but think of the famous line in Matthew's gospel, “When two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”² The situation isn't a few people gathering for worship, rather it's two or three people getting together to discipline another member! We are called to hold each other accountable, even if it is sometimes awkward or uncomfortable.

One of the things our Living Celtic Christianity small group does is that we've pledged to live by the four-fold rule of the Iona Community, which involves be accountable to one another in following these directions:

1. Daily prayer and reading the Bible
2. Mutual sharing and accountability for our use of time and money
3. Regular meeting together
4. Action and reflection for justice, peace and the integrity of creation

So, we have to be accountable to each other as we try to do what Naaman did and follow the directions. (Maybe the directions you choose aren't the rule of the Iona Community, but perhaps the Beatitudes or Micah 6.8.)

Sometimes, our lack of humility gets in the way when we are attempting to find wholeness. Like Naaman, we think we know better. Naaman has a turn of heart that enables

¹ “Money Makes You Happier – If You Spend It on Others” in *The Boston Globe*, March 21, 2008.

² Matthew 18.19

this mighty soldier to sink into the Jordan and wash himself seven times. The root of the word, humility, is *humus* or earth. Humility doesn't consist primarily as seeing yourself as essentially sinful and unworthy, but rather seeing yourself as grounded...in true perspective...seeing yourself as God sees you, warts and all.

Did you see the incredible story on the cover of this morning's Coloradoan about the teenage girl who was able to see for the first time after having stem-cell therapy in China? The development of an optic nerve in a 16-year-old is miraculous! Today, we don't typically find medical cures in church, though many search at places like Lourdes and Chimayo as a last resort. And we don't typically find wholeness at the hospital. But, as people who believe that science and religion can and should join hands (and as Christians who celebrate Charles Darwin's birth and his amazing discoveries), we can acknowledge that healing the soul and finding wholeness are a part of our mission. Some things medical science still can't do; both science and religion are indispensable.



We know the basic instructions, and we have a community of support and accountability around us. May we find the humility and pray for the grace to be changed, and may we find the wholeness for which we long so deeply.

Amen.