

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
Luke 16:19-31
September 29, 2013

“Regrets, I’ve had a few/But then again, too few to mention...”

*May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.*

This past week I had the opportunity to take a walk with my friend Karen who I had not seen in a long time. As we walked through the meadows near my house and caught up on life, I was struck by a story she told me about a dramatic interaction she had with her father this summer.

I had already known that most weekends Karen drives a couple of hours south to visit her 91 year old father in Connecticut. Her dad had lost his wife five years ago and Karen, his only offspring, visits him regularly.

On previous walks, Karen had told me about how, as a young girl, she witnessed her father bullying her mother. She had told me how unkind and unsupportive her father was, and how painful this was for her.

In July, Karen’s father experienced symptoms that appeared to be a heart attack. He called her in a panic. She told him to call 911 and said she would jump in her car and meet in at the hospital.

When Karen got to the emergency room of the hospital near her dad, the nurse took her to a little room where her dad was in a hospital bed. When she entered the room, Karen found her dad there in bed, crying alone. She thought he must have been given terrible news about his heart or some awful prognosis. She said, “Dad, what is it?”

Her father said that he was thinking about all the times his wife had landed in the emergency room, that very emergency room, during the year before she died. How many times she had been in little rooms like this. And how he had not been kind or supportive to her during those times. He said he felt awful about it.

As Karen and I continued on our walk, we talked about the feeling of regret and what a powerful emotion it is.

The song “My Way,” written by Paul Anka and made popular by Frank Sinatra, has this famous line that many of us of a certain age know by heart:
“Regrets, I’ve had a few/But then again, too few to mention...”

How many of us will come into old age and be able to say,
“Regrets, I’ve had a few/But then again, too few to mention...”

That is a gift, if in old age the regrets are few, too few to mention.
That is a RARE gift. Research shows that the elderly and those who are dying often express big regrets about their life.

An article published in the Guardian in February 2012 summarized the findings of a nurse named Bronnie Ware who specializes in the care of the terminally ill. This nurse conducted interviews with those who were dying, asking them direct questions about their regrets.

Nurse Ware reported that she encountered a distinct pattern with those who are terminally ill... apparently, there is remarkable consistency in what people say are their top five regrets.

The 5th most common regret expressed by the dying is this:

I wish that I had let myself be happier.

People admit that they feared change in their lives, so they pretended that they were content. People said they wished they had laughed more and allowed themselves to be sillier.

The 4th most common regret:

I wish that I had stayed in touch with my friends.

People feel badly that they were so caught up in their own lives that they let important friendships slip away.

The 3rd most common regret:

I wish I had had the courage to express my feelings.

Many people said they had suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others.

The 2nd most common regret:

I wish I had not worked so hard.

This regret was expressed by every single male patient that Ware interviewed.

And, finally, the #1 big regret that people spoke of most often:

I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

“Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams,” Ware wrote, “and had to die knowing that this was due to choices they had made, or not made.”

Do these big regrets ring true for you? What would you regret if today was your last day on earth?

Ware's research made me think about the 2013 Commencement address given by George Saunders at Syracuse University containing another perspective on regret. Here is an excerpt:

Down through the ages, a traditional form has evolved for this type of speech, which is: Some old foggie, his best years behind him, who, over the course of his life, has made a series of dreadful mistakes (that would be me), gives heartfelt advice to a group of shining, energetic young people, with all of their best years ahead of them (that would be you). And I intend to respect that tradition.

One useful thing you can do with an old person, in addition to borrowing money from them, or asking them to do one of their old-time “dances,” so you can watch, while laughing, is ask: “Looking back, what do you regret?” And they'll tell you. Sometimes, as you know, they'll tell you even if you haven't asked. Sometimes, even when you've specifically requested they not tell you, they'll tell you.

So: What do I regret? Being poor from time to time? Not really. Working terrible jobs, like “knuckle-puller in a slaughterhouse?” No. I don't regret that. Skinny-dipping in a river in Sumatra, a little buzzed, and looking up and seeing like 300 monkeys sitting on a pipeline, pooping down into the river, the river in which I was swimming, with my mouth open, naked? And getting deathly ill afterwards, and staying sick for the next seven months? Not so much.

But here's something I do regret:

What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.

Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded...sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth?

Those who were kindest to you, I bet.

It's a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I'd say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder.

George Saunders' "failure of kindness" has stayed with me since I read his Commencement address in the New York Times. I think it is such a powerful statement and one that also applies to me...like Saunders, I regret my failures of kindness. AND I think Saunders' failure of kindness applies to the rich man in today's Gospel reading.

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table... ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." ²⁵But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." ²⁷He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." ²⁹Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." ³⁰He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." ³¹He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

The rich man died, was buried, and in Hades we get a sense of his big regrets. It seems to me he regrets his "failure of kindness." The rich man would have done well to hear George Saunder's Commencement speech, and to follow Saunder's simple advice, "Try to be kinder."

What specifically does the reading tell us about the rich man's big regrets? I would say these are the rich man's top three:

Regret number 1: *I wish that I had cared for the people around me.*

Poor Lazarus was lying at his gate, covered with sores and the rich man stepped over or around him each time he left his home. Every single day, the rich man missed a chance to help Lazarus by simply giving him the leftovers from this table.

Regret number 2: *I wish that I had listened to Moses and the prophets.*

The rich man realizes in death that he had not paid attention to the word of God as it came through Moses, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). He had also failed to heed the prophet Isaiah who commanded, “Share your bread with the hungry...bring the homeless poor into your house” (Isaiah 58:7).

Regret number 3: *I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.*

Every day, the rich man ignored Lazarus, fully aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets. But he did not have the courage to live a life of integrity, one in which his actions were in line with what he observed and what he believed.

I don't think the rich man could sing the “My Way” lyrics and mean them...

“Regrets, I've had a few/But then again, too few to mention...”

Now, let us be clear...

None of us is perfect. We will all come to the end of life feeling that we have made mistakes along the way. There are choices we feel badly about, alongside opportunities we wish we had seized. But what would it mean for us to die with no big regrets? What would it mean if we could say, *“Regrets, I've had a few/But then again, too few to mention...”*

Friends, we are not yet in the afterlife, calling out to Father Abraham. We are not stuck in a place of regretting that we did not do enough, that we did not do more, that we did not choose wisely, that we did not have enough time. As long as we are breathing, we can choose to care for the people around us, listen to the teachings of the Bible, and live a life that is true to our deepest convictions. If we do, we will come to our final days without big regrets.

Choices do not have to be large to be life-changing. The rich man could have simply shared some of his food with Lazarus in order to be caring for the people around him.

Let me close with this story.

After church last Sunday, I spoke with Stephanie, a newer member of our church family, and confided in her that someone in the congregation was losing his housing and about to move into a homeless shelter. I knew, from an earlier conversation with Stephanie, that she lived alone in a fairly large house. I asked her straight out if she had a room in her house that this man could move into temporarily, while he searched for permanent housing.

Stephanie did not pause. She did not ask about the man. She did not weigh the pros and cons. She simply said, “Sure, when can I meet him?”

Stephanie’s immediate response made me realize that putting our actions in line with our beliefs—living a life of integrity—is a conscious way of living that is made one choice at a time. As distinct from Saunders “failure of kindness,” Stephanie had succeeded in kindness—she was kind immediately, genuinely, and completely.

We can do this. You and I can do this.

We can make good and caring decisions one choice at a time.

And if we do, we will not greet our final days carrying a heavy burden of regret.

We will not face our death weighed down by regret.

Instead, our final hours will be just as theologian Stephen Mitchell describes the person at peace with themselves and the world:

“...in dying, you will leave your body as effortlessly as a sigh.”

Amen.