

“Are you trying too hard?”

August 12, 2007

Text: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11, Luke 12:22-31

I.

Are you trying too hard?

At home, trying to make all the relationships work; trying to make sure your kids are on track ... doing what they need to be doing ... making reasonably good choices ... well on their way to becoming young adults we can be proud of ...

Or trying to make sure all the inter-family relationships are working out. That everybody is talking to everybody ... being reasonably considerate or at least civil to one another. Sometimes, it's hard to keep our families together ... on the same wavelength ... talking to one another.

I know families where family members, living in the same house, haven't spoken to one another for years ... to where it's *like* a way of life.

Trying to make our family systems work can be more than a little stressful. Are you trying too hard?

Trying to make your marriage work and feeling like you're not getting enough back ... *like* it's not a 50 – 50 thing; the commitment is not sufficiently shared. That's a tough situation to be in. We've all known people who have gone the second mile, again and again, to keep their marriage together ... to the point where, over time, it wears them out.

- Aren't there limits to our worrying, to our stress?
- Don't we all only have so much stress capacity—at home or at work?
- Isn't there a point where we have to say: enough is enough ... and step back from it all ... and let the spirit move, placing our trust in God that somehow it will all resolve?

Certainly there's a place in life for making an effort ... for doing our best ... for trying to do whatever we do as well as we can. The pursuit of excellence can be a good thing. It can help call the best out of us and lead us to heights of achievements and self fulfillment that we never anticipated.

II.

Many of us grew up in homes where *trying hard* was taken for granted. It was assumed. In whatever we did, we were supposed to give it our best shot.

Sometimes we succeeded; but other we didn't.

- Trying hard to get good grades in school.
- Trying hard to excel in sports.
- Trying hard, too, to be a good person, a good Christian ... to live up to certain standards ...
- Trying hard to not disappoint mom or dad or the extended family.

Sometimes we can get so caught up in our trying, in our *striving*, that we lose sight of the big picture. It's like we're always trying to get somewhere, but we never enjoy the ride along the way ... to the point where the ceaseless *striving* overcomes us.

Our lives become one worrisome moment after another.

III.

The Bible understands the anxiety of the human condition. Certainly, God knows the restlessness that overflows in the human spirit. Often times, this restlessness takes the form of greed ... or a hunger for power. Again, God knows.

The 4th Commandment addresses this very condition: ***Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.***

- This Commandment for Sabbath rest is all about taking care of the spirit ...
- it's about quieting the greedy impulses from within that want to be out there—rushing, pushing, rushing, pushing—to make more money ... acquire more possessions ... to somehow get ahead ...

Sabbath rest is the invitation, from the heart of God, to step back for a time from all our busyness, all our craziness ... from the mindlessness of our schedules and busy days to *look at the world from God's point of view.*

If we assume that God wants the best for any human being ... for any culture or ethnic group ... for any nation or religion ... again for any human person in whom God has breathed the breath of life. If we assume this, then taking pause to *look at the world (and along with it, our lives) from God's point of view,* is something we ought to do.

As the Commandment implies, on the 7th day, *even God took time for recovery.*

IV.

I like the quote from Old Testament scholar and fellow UCC member, **Walter Brueggemann** who in his book, ***Finally Comes the Poet***, says: *Sabbath is recognized as decisive in that moment of reconstruction (in our community or personal lives), because Sabbath means desisting from the frantic pursuit of securing the world on our own terms.*

At the end of the day, the Sabbath was made (created) for us; we weren't created for the Sabbath.

1. You see, friends, what God knows about us is that when we try too hard and get all caught up in our striving, our lives don't work.
2. We become over-burdened, stressed out and, if we're not careful, neurotic.
3. Our lives end up being, not *life-giving* or *life-affirming*, but *life-denying*.

As the revered St. Augustine once said, *Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.*

V.

Reading **Ecclesiastes** (Ecclesiastes, in the twilight years of his life, is a *sort of* existential poet and philosopher.), we can't help but wonder what he would think of all this ... of our incurable restlessness ... our incurable penchant for busyness ...

A serious reflection on **Ecclesiastes** forces us to take measure of our ceaseless striving.

*A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down ... the wind blows south, and the wind blows north.*

And then, *All things are wearisome. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.*

Are we trying too hard, friends?

Ecclesiastes reminds us that no matter what we do ... no matter how much we worry ... no matter to what extent we preoccupy ourselves with every detail of

our lives and the lives of our family members, almost anything that we choose to do has been done before.

Which is to suggest that often times we make too much of the moment. We give the things we do a sense of finality to them, a sense of importance, that is waaaaay over the top. Again, *There's nothing new under the sun.*

Connecting these *meanings* to the *meanings* of the words of Jesus from Luke, we're led to ask ourselves: *why all the fussing and worrying?* When the sun sets each day, we can only do what we can do. And not only can we NOT make every detail of our lives work out perfectly, but that's not our purpose anyway. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (for Luke, it's the Sermon on the Plain), Jesus says, very simply, *don't worry so much ... about your life ... about what you will eat, what you will wear ... about your body.*

What he's saying, essentially, is *Hey, you're over doing it. You're trying too hard ... striving too much after everything.* What Jesus wants to say to us is: ***let go ... trust the spirit ... let life come to you!***

VI.

Again, as I noted earlier, there's a time for trying hard. We all know that. There's a time and place for striving.

- When we're trying to perform a task relative to a healthy goal.
- When we're trying to make a healthy relationship work, or to make an unhealthy relationship healthy.
- When we're doing constructive things consistent with the realization of God's purposes for our lives.

But there's a time, too, for letting go ... for stepping back ... for taking a deep breath and trusting the spirit; for finding balance ... gaining perspective on things; again, for letting life come to us.

Like **Ecclesiastes 3** which says ...

For everything there is a season, a time for everything under the sun ...

A time to be born and a time to die ...

A time to plant and a time to pluck up what has been planted ...

A time to break down and a time to build up ...

A time to weep and a time to laugh ...

A time to speak and a time for silence ...

VII.

So much of our lives is about timing. But our lives are also about limits ... and domain.

1. The truth of our lives is that there are times when we strive too much.
2. To the point where we become almost obsessive-compulsive about our striving.
3. Whether it's trying to make money ... or trying to take care of an aging parent ... or trying to diet or exercise.

I know guys in the health club who have had relapses in their rehab or their training because they've over done it. Too much exercise ... and too strenuous. Friends, don't we all need to know our limits?

At what point in our lives are we willing to *let go and let God*? At what point can we come to terms with our need to control everything and give ourselves to the spirit?

To all of us worriers, Jesus says, *Consider the ravens ... they have neither storehouse or barn, yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than birds?*

And then Jesus says, strengthening his argument, *Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin ... and even Solomon in all his glory is not clothed like one of these. If God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and gone tomorrow, how much more will God clothe you—O you of little faith?*

So quit trying so hard, says Jesus, to the point where you're always anxious and restless. Don't keep striving and striving for things you really don't need. And stop worrying.

Instead, strive for God's kingdom, and all things will be yours; that God's kingdom come ... and God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Work hard ... do your best ... then, turn it over to God!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com

