

September 11, 2022 Rev. Ryan Althaus

So, I usually try to start my sermons on a happy note; however, today... well, today is a no good, very bad day. Yeah yeah, I know what you are thinking... "Geez, Pastor Ryan! We showed up to church this morning seeking encouragement and hope, not heavy heartedness. What happened to our smily sailing substitute minister?"

True, looking outside it isn't all too horrible a September Sunday. 70 degrees under partly cloudy skies. With palm trees swaying, and children playing, amidst a gentle breeze, right outside our door, in good old surf city, Santa Cruz, CA.

But don't let the pleasant weather fool you, because, I assure you, today is indeed a no good, very bad day. Nationally, today is the 21st anniversary of one of the most monumental terrorist attacks our country has ever experienced. It was an attack that transformed and traumatized the world for decades to follow.

And living right outside Washington, DC at the time, I still remember gathering in our high school's gymnasium in confusion, shock and fear. Yep, Sept 11th, 2001 was certainly a no good, very bad day. But, for me, the true trauma this specific Sunday morning is actually associated with the triathlon currently taking place, in the west end of our city — The Santa Cruz Ironman.

You see, 7 years ago this month I hung up my running shoes after competing in my last ever Ironman competition back in Louisville, KY.

A 140.6 mile race that served as the not so good, very bad finale to a decade-long professional marathon running and triathlon career. In all honestly my athletic career had ended a few years before when a minivan t-boned me during a training ride and landed me in the trauma unit of the U of L hospital with a brain injury and broken neck. But I was in denial and my sponsors were supportive enough to play along out of pity while I pushed through physical therapy, stubbornly clinging to the past while crawling my way back onto the course, despite my pathetic finishing times and the surges of pain that I felt with every footfall.

However, when heat exhaustion struck me at mile 135 of that fateful 140.6 mile race, and left me inching my way across the steaming concrete all the way to the finish, I couldn't deny reality any longer. An era had passed and I knew that I was going to have to find a new source of fulfillment. Something that fed my soul instead of my ego.

So what did I do? Well, I moved to Santa Cruz, CA, traded my racing bike for a surfboard, and hoped my ministerial pursuits could take the place of my marathon running. And, to a degree, they have.

Unfortunately, every September I am reminded of what was... of how much I miss the exhausted-induced euphoria of crossing a finish line .

And this year, in specific, there was a little extra salt thrown in the wound. "Failure to Thrive." That is what the medical report read following a week-long retreat in Stanford hospital this past month. I had gone to the emergency room after 7 months of unexplained weight loss following a seemingly mild case of Covid 19 that had lingered and left me weakened, worried, and waving the white flag of surrender. I hadn't planned on staying in the hospital, I had simply

grown exhausted of dead-end doctor referrals and zoom appointments, and hoped that an in-person appearance might expedite the evaluation process.

And it sure did! Upon taking one look at my vitals, the medical team stuck me in a bed where they repeatedly poked me with an array of needles and pumped me full of iv infused neon green I-don't-know-what for a week. This vip treatment is actually a part of a rather convenient little trick of mine that helps speed up the process if ever I am in need of medical treatment.

You see, as a result of a long career in endurance athletics and a strict yoga practice, I can meditate my heart rate low enough to set off a few alarms whenever I ever I need to jump up the wait list at an urgent care facility. As for my diagnosis... Turns out my seemingly insignificant encounter with the corona virus this past December had triggered an autoimmune response in my intestines that, as the doctors described, made me allergic to most every food I ate - thus sending my body went into a malnourished meltdown.

Well, I am happy to say that I am finally feeling human again. And that the arm on the scale, my energy level, and overall outlook on life are all on the up and up!

However, the experience of being sick for over half a year, and then lying around in a hospital gown reflecting on it for a week, was pretty intense. Unpleasant, yet enlightening! (Ever notice how those two seem to travel together?)

But this morning, as I reminisced about cartwheeling over the finish line a decade ago, while taking a slow stroll alongside the Santa Cruz ironman course with my dog... those three slightly demoralizing words didn't have the depressive effect I'd expected. "Failure to Thrive."

Raise your hand if there has been a period over the past few months during which those words may have gotten personal. We all experience times in of which this phrase might be fitting, but, with a little intention, a little bit of work, and the support of our community — it never has to be a lifelong label!

So, what if today, we took those words, not as a description of our state being, but, rather, an invitation to change direction? We might just find, in such, that today is not a no good, very bad day at all — it is actually a very good and exciting day... And it is!!! Why? Well, for one, it is the 1st annual disability inclusion Sunday for the National Presbyterian Church! And I would like to add the words empowerment as well as awareness to that.

An awareness that we are each dis-abled and diversely-abled in our own unique, God-gifted ways. And though our varying ability levels could be inhibitive in isolation, they are empowering in inclusion. For we are one body of many members. And it is in this oneness that we thrive. Let it be known, I, personally, am not a particular fan of the word Dis-ability. Literally defined as something that inhibits one's ability to thrive. And, often times, that label alone is enough to keep someone from 'thriving' at life. With that in mind, I'd like you each to take a second and ponder how you may be handicapping yourself or another's ability to thrive and prosper while I turn to today's OT reading: ... the first three verses of the book of Psalms: "Blessed are they who walk not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers; but delight in the way of the Lord, and meditate on it day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water that yield it fruit in season, and whose leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they thrive."

So what does it mean to be blessed, to thrive?

Yaş-lî-ah in Hebrew.: To prosper in pursuit of one's purpose. No wonder it hurt so bad to read those three words on the top of my medical report — those doctors were stating that I was failing to fulfill my purpose. I think we can all say that in some form or fashion.

But how do we get back into the “blessed” category that king David spoke of in that opening psalm? By avoiding labels that limit. And instead, recognizing, or helping others embrace and impart their gifts. Throughout my years in grad school and for some time thereafter, I payed my bills via a job as a personal trainer at the local YMCA. And every Tuesday and Thursday, I had the thrill of training several “dis-abled” neighbors, my favorite of whom was a 300lb African American young man with down syndrome named Derek. Every Tuesday Derek would parade up to my desk with a sub in one hand, soda in the other, and smile. “I’m ready to get strong, Coach Ryan.” “Great! Lets get going then” After a little convincing, Derek would take one last swig of soda, set his lunch aside, and proudly parade over to the weight rack to where he would grab the five pound dumbbells and proceed to growl and groan his way through a set of 15 bicep curls. It was a sight to see. A 300 pound, 29 year old guy, grunting like a vine popping powerlifter while lifting, what to him was nothing more than an iron paperweight. Ugh, 13... ugg, 14... Ugh, 15.... Clank.

“Whoa, I'm exhausted,” he'd exclaim... “that was a good workout coach! Can I finish my lunch now?” “You know, Derek. You've been lifting those same 5lb dumbbells since we first met... What do you say we try something a little heavier?” “Oh no, Coach Ryan, Grandma only uses these ones. She says everything else is too heavy.” Derek's parents died when he was young, and left him living alone with his grandmother (who used to come to the YMCA herself) and whose petite 95 lb frame could get a pretty good workout with five pound weights. “I know, Derek... but you are quite a bit younger and a whole lot stronger than Grandma. I really think you could lift something heavier.”

Well, I failed, and the only thing that Derek would agree to curl for the rest of our session was his sub — of which, I must add, looked to weigh at least 6lbs! Needless to say, next Tuesday, Derek came parading up the stairs, into the weight room, Sub and Soda in hand, and strutted over to my desk. “I’m ready to get strong, Coach Ryan!” “Great! Why don't you set down your lunch so that we can get going then?”

One more swig of soda, and we made our way over to the weight rack — but to Derek's dismay, the 5lbs dumbbells were missing. As were the 10's, 20's, 30's and 40's. I had put them all in our storage closet preceding Derek's appointment, and left only the 50 lbs weights on the rack.

“Coach Ryan, I can't find my dumbbells?” “They are right there,” I said, pointing to the weights. “We got new weights, but they just look a little different. See, it says 5.0 right on the side.” “Oh. Cool...” Derek then grabbed the dumbbells and started effortlessly curling them as if they were hollowed out and full of helium. “One, two, three.... Grunt... 14, 15.” He then held the weights lightly at his side and looked up at me for approval. “Wow, good job, Derek! Guess what!?” “What Coach?” “You just curled 50 lbs without any help!” “Ouch” he yelled as the weights dropped to the floor and he grabbed his arms. “I hurt myself!” “No, Derek, you proved to yourself how strong you are!” Really?

Many have not been given an equal chance to thrive in this world. Not because they are disabled, but because society makes them believe that they are. Because society told them they were only capable of curling 5 pounds... that they couldn't work, walk, or worship in the same way as everyone else. That they were limited in their ability to thrive.

I turn now to the New Testament reading for the day: Matthew 21:18-22 : In the morning, as Jesus was returning to the city, he became hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing but leaves. He said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" The fig tree withered at once, and when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Friends, we are powerful beyond belief — and only limited by a lack of belief. Belief in ourselves, belief in others, and/or belief in our maker. In such, we have the power to either wither away, or to flourish in fig and fruit. Just the same, the way that we treat others is equally as impactful. By making another believe that they are disabled, we strip them of their power, their gifts, and their ability to thrive. We have a role to play in whether our fellow fig trees flower, or fade, based on the messages that we send and the limitations that we set.

Derek would have spent his life lifting 5lbs dumbbells alongside 85 year old ladies, had no one ever helped him see his strength. Instead, he ended up competing in a special olympics weight lifting contest several months later (of which he won!) Much the same, Christ's assurance to the disciples as they stared at that 'non-thriving' fig tree was monumental. Literally, because it helped them realize they could move mountains. Note Jesus' words to the disciples: not, "if you have faith in me I'll move mountains", but "if you have faith and YOU tell the mountain to move, it will happen.

It's easy to play into our weaknesses... to claim victimhood, and focus on our disabilities rather than our miraculous abilities. Safe even... after all, thriving can be scary! "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' The real question is, 'who are you not to be?' You are a child of God.

You're playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."— Marianne Williamson

Thrive on my friends, and make today a super good, very great day for you and everyone you meet.