

Homily for 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time

October 22 -23, 2016

Sirach 35:12–14, 16–18

Psalm 34:2–3, 17–19, 23

2 Timothy 4:6–8, 16–18

Luke 18:9–14

“When you know the why, you can face almost any how”

Viktor E. Frankl was Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School. He spent three years during World War II in concentration camps, including Auschwitz, and Dachau, where he formulated many of his key ideas. Frankl’s best-known book is entitled *Man’s Search for Meaning*. It gives a firsthand account of his experiences during the Holocaust and the psychological and spiritual insights that formed the basis of his psychotherapeutic method as a psychiatrist after the War.

At the heart of this book is the idea that true meaning in life is found when we realize the following:

“Everything can be taken from a person but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”¹

What Frankl discovered, while facing the horrors of the Nazi death camps first hand, was that interior freedom is not primarily dependent on exterior circumstances. Rather as we learn to choose one’s way by looking deep within, we experience a kind of meaning that is not available to the person who primarily focuses on the externals. Reflecting on those who were able to find meaning in the hell hole of Auschwitz and Dachau Frankl comments:

Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp. Dostoevski said once, “There is only one thing that I dread: not to be worthy of my sufferings.”²

Reflecting on these words from the Russian novelist Frankl went on to write:

These words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in camp, whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that the last inner freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings; the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom— cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.³

¹ See Frankl Viktor: *Man’s Search for Meaning* at <https://www.sonoma.edu/users/s/shawth/mans%20Search> (page 75)

² Ibid page 75

³ Ibid Page 75-76

This insight into the interior spiritual dimension of one's existence is what Frankl realized gives ultimate meaning to life. This is one of the ways to read the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

Think of the Pharisee in the Gospel. His was a life of comparison, whereby he compared himself to others – especially to the tax collector. He was self-satisfied because he did not look within his own soul. Rather he looked to the circumstances of that tax collector and concluded that compared to him, I am doing okay! Such a life is shallow and will be stunted.

On the other hand, there was the tax collector. He realized that he was not living his life with the kind of purpose that God intended. He was able to look deep within and cried out to God, "Be merciful to me a sinner". Jesus tells us that this man went home vindicated that day. Here was a man whose attitude allowed recognize his need to change. The circumstances of his life, a Jewish tax collector in the pay of the Romans, hated by his countrymen, could no longer dictate how he would live. He was discovering that the deeper meaning of his life was not tied to what was out there, but rather what is in here. His life was now intricately connected with his need to appropriate the mercy of God and this made all the difference.

The Tax Collector found meaning in his life that was lost to the Pharisee. Frankl said that when a person has a "why" to live for they can bear with almost any "how"⁴. This was the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee made the how the priority of his life. How can I be spiritually better than others? How can I justify myself before God and before people? How can I be religiously successful? Contrast this with the tax collector. He was asking the question, how can I go on living like this? My life is devoid of purpose and meaning. That was until he reversed the order of these words. Discovering the "why" of his life allowed him to reorientate the "how" of his life.

Here we see outlined two attitudes. The Pharisees attitude resulted in pride and self-preoccupation. The tax collector's attitude resulted in humility and a God-preoccupation.

St. Paul moved from having an attitude like that of the Pharisee – where the "how" to live question was primary, to discovering the interior attitude of the tax collector, where the fundamental question was the "why" question. Discovering that Jesus Christ was the "why" of his life allowed him to face the most challenging environments in discovering "how do I live?"

See how this perspective plays out in Paul's life, as expressed in today's reading from Timothy. Remember these were the last words Paul ever wrote. Very soon he would be martyred at the hands of the megalomaniac Nero.

First, Paul says, I have fought the good fight. Why would he say that? Why didn't he say, for example, life has been a breeze? I have had my share of the good times. Instead, Paul implies that life has been a struggle.

Think of your life's battles. From the beginning to the end, we are all involved in the struggle. A newborn struggles to be born. A child struggles to learn. The teenager struggles under peer pressure.

⁴ Ibid page 110

Young adults have to struggle to find their niche, keep marriages together, and raise children. And no one has to struggle more than older adults, who fight health problems and financial problems, widowhood and their own death. The truth is that from the beginning of life to the end, we are all in a battle. Paul was right on target when he described life as a fight.

But of all the battles that we must fight, Jesus taught that the most difficult one is the inner battle. It is the fight within us. It is the fight for self-surrender against self-seeking. This is the theme at the heart of today's Gospel parable.

When we come to the end of our struggle, will we be able to say "I have fought the good fight"? Can we affirm in good faith that we have given the last ounce of energy? Can we look back upon life with a sense of satisfaction, rather than regrets? It was a fight, says Paul, but it was a good fight.

Because Paul understood what it was to choose his response to his circumstances from the inside out, he knew the why of his life and so could face the how of his imprisonment and impending death.

Second, Paul says, loneliness does not mean defeat. Paul was brought before the Roman Emperor to defend the charges brought against him. It was in essence, a one-man jury. The life of Paul in the hands of Caesar. At this crucial time, the Apostle needed his friends. But to a man they deserted him.

The famous author Thomas Wolfe came to this conclusion:

"The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence."⁵

Think about the deployed soldier as well as his family at home. The loneliness of separation. The grieving widow or widower knows the haunting silence of every day, but especially during the holidays and at birthdays. The little child sitting by herself in the school cafeteria or playing by himself on the playground knows the sadness of it. The single mom trying to make a life for herself and her children in a little apartment feels keenly the void of loneliness deep in her heart.

Examine your own heart and you may say, yes I know about loneliness.

So what are we to do? Here is the secret. Here is how you handle those times when you have been abandoned. Listen to the words of Paul once again and then I want to break it down for you. Paul says,

¹⁶ At my first defense, no one took my part; all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! ¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the Gentiles might hear it.⁶

⁵ Blair, Brett: Homily entitled Secrets of a Life Well Lived: <https://sermons.com/sermon/three-secrets-of-a-life-well-lived/1341240>

⁶ *The Holy Bible*. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 2 Ti 4:16–17). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

Did you catch the three secrets: He forgives those who deserted him. He draws his strength from the Lord who does not abandon us. And, he continued to proclaim the gospel. To help people and lift them out of their sins.

Here was a man who because he knew the why of his life could face the how of loneliness and desertion.

The first secret of a life well lived is to fight the good fight for while life us a struggle it is worth fighting for. The second, desertion does not mean defeat when we know what it means to draw our strength from God. The third is that our faith must not be lost when we face challenging circumstances. Paul says, "I have kept the faith." What an incredible declaration when you look back on the reasons Paul had to renounce his faith and give it all up. From a human perspective, all looked lost. Based on his circumstances it appeared that Nero was the victor and he Paul was the loser.

18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Clearly to be rescued from every evil did not mean Paul believed his life would be spared. But even in the light of martyrdom he understood that Jesus would rescue him for that kingdom where he would be no longer confined to the evil machinations of the Roman juggernaut. He believed in the goodness of Jesus Christ even though surrounded by such calculating and barbaric evil.

And this was St. Paul's fundamental why. Why do I live?" For Jesus and his heavenly kingdom. And because of this he could face any how.

May we reflect this week on the examples of two prisoners and their discovery that meaning is found in life when we realize that my attitude need not be determined by the how of my circumstances but by the why am I here.