

“CHOOSING GRATITUDE CON MUCHO GUSTO”

A Sermon Delivered by
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You’ve certainly heard people define what a valuable life goal might be--to do what we can, with each day, to make the world a better place. *Even if just a little!* This is the Jewish *tikkun olam* we’ve heard of from Betty . . . repairing the world, a never-ending but absolutely necessary task.

Having a goal can be a way of being for us. It can orient us, it can give us direction. We can at least be *pointed* in the right direction! But, moving forward from there, *that* can be tough. Especially the everyday part . . . meaning or no meaning, we struggle.

What I want to say today is that you can step back from your everyday repairing the world, and see that we all struggle, because we are all doing something incredibly difficult. We *can* find meaning even when we *don’t* seem to have it in us to make the world a better place. Here’s the way.

Katy and I saw a movie sometime back entitled “The Way.” It’s about a man who’s in his sixties, an ophthalmologist, divorced, who searches for meaning in life by playing golf with some buddies, apparently for the sake of making lame jokes and even lamer shots. He’s Tom, played by Martin Sheen.

Tom has a 39-year-old son, Daniel, who's played by Martin Sheen's son in real life, Emilio Estevez. Emilio wrote and directed the movie, so he got to direct his father. That's one inversion here. There will be another. [foreshadowing chord from Martha here]

The movie is mostly about Tom, the father. Early on, Tom and Daniel talk as Tom is driving Daniel to the airport. Daniel's going to France, to walk the pathway from France, south over the Pyrenees to Santiago, Spain—El Camino de Santiago, a distance of about 500 miles. Tom, the father, obviously thinks Daniel's wasting his life, and in the car, on the way to the airport, Tom laments that Daniel has had so many times *to choose to do something*, and Daniel responds, a bit wearily, but with much self-possession, that one doesn't choose a life, one lives it. They lapse into silence--they've done this before, and there's nothing more to be said on it.

Next we see Tom playing golf, going round and round in his life, I suppose the point is (to make a pun of it), and Tom gets a call on his cell, while on the green, from a policeman in France who tells Tom that Daniel has been killed, that he has died in a storm.

Tom goes to France, identifies his son's body, receives his belongings, and retreats to his hotel room. He's beside himself with grief, he doesn't know where to turn. Here then is the second inversion: the father who

must grieve his son's death. That it is unnatural only amplifies, and makes more poignant, what follows. Tom looks through Daniel's hiking gear, his large backpack, his tent, his clothing, anything to hang onto, anything to get closer to him . . . Daniel's dead, and Tom wants to get closer! . . . He looks at the guidebook Daniel had bought, about the *way*, the path to Santiago he had planned to walk, about what it means to become a *pellgrino* . . . a pilgrim.

His son is gone, and *Tom's* life, its future, swings before him as from a thread. It is one of those moments we have all had, one where we are indeed faced with pushing ahead into scary, unknown territory, if only because the life we do know, where we've been for so long, is irreversibly and completely closed off to us. It's not a choice.

There is a sort of leap here, a seismic shift from Tom's old life--one where the rules of how he had lived, one where the formalities that he had used to form a sort of makeshift shelter for himself, fell away, and one where it seems that the rest of the movie can now be seen. We, we who have been through such things, we who are sitting in the theater, know what Tom will do even before he does.

And more importantly, I think we know why he will do it, long before he does. He is reacting now, to his grief, he is doing what he can, he is doing *all that is left to him to do*, and in doing that he is taking a chance on having a life that he can live.

We know this because we have done it in our lives. We have been there, and we have seen who we were, and are, and we have seen who we would become, and now we watch Tom--a man in his sixties--finally do the same thing.

He will become a pilgrim.

He will see what has always been there to be seen--that we are all pilgrims, in all the times of our lives, that we all suffer, that our fellow walkers are all we have, that the journey we are on is what gives our lives meaning, and that, if we pay attention, we can find many reasons to be grateful to be along, to be taking the walk. Our gratitude for these simple things can overwhelm our regrets.

This is not easy for Tom. He's too focused on his regret. There is his grief, front and center. *And* the walk is arduous, there is boredom, doubt, companionship . . . *and* there is conversation, with the three other pilgrims he ultimately falls in with, people who come together primarily because they happen to be there . . . not chosen, but just living their lives, close in time, close on the way to where Tom happens to be.

They make the best of all the messiness that goes with being human, and what they make is good, what they make is genuine. It is not spiritual, in the sense that they are moved by solitude or sunsets. What they make is a religion: they find meaning in their being together, in the sacred conversation that moves them along, in the presence of the relics of others' having passed the same way.

On this, let me say just a bit more.

Tom leaves some of his son's ashes here and there, along the way, and it occurs to me, as I'm writing this sermon, why he sprinkled them where he did: he sprinkled them on the artifacts, the human-made tracery and icons and crosses and piles of stones put up by other pilgrims and necklaces hung by other pilgrims over fence posts . . . *he sprinkled them where he saw that others had come along before*, feeling as he did now, feeling his way along, being human, stopping, frustrated, but always getting back up, encouraged again to be able to keep on going from where he had stopped, being grateful to stay on the way, not having to deal with rules or formalities about how fast he must travel or whether stopping was unfair to others or whether he might have to go back and start all over again.

He sprinkled the ashes so his son could live the life others had lived, and in doing that we see Tom living the life he had never seen *himself* living. It takes him a while to get there. But when he does, it is this stepping back and seeing himself as a fellow pilgrim that is the beginning for Tom of religion.

The Latin roots of the word "religion" tell us that it means to bind up again, to tie things together again, as one might join things together engaged common purpose, in common work . . . in community.

The pilgrims discuss why they are on the walk, and their reasons--the ones they are willing or able to share--are surprisingly mundane: to overcome writer's block, to lose weight, to quit smoking.

Tom finally sees--indeed, all in his group finally see--that a real community is there for them, that their "religion" is *not* about the various ways that people describe their own particular religious affections.

Tom recognizes that each pilgrim has left behind something that says, I came by here too, just before you, you are on the same road I was on, you and I--*we*--are bound together in this same-ness, and our realizing this identity--between you and me--ties our lives together. *Our lives have meaning precisely because we know the journey ends at Santiago.*

Let me finish this way. The movie "The Way" came out perhaps seven years ago. What it means to me now is . . . well, is suggested in a scene from another movie: Mel Brooks' "Young Frankenstein," a scene where Gene Wilder, as Dr. Frankenstein, and Marty Feldman, as Igor, are unearthing a coffin. They are (somehow!) under it, lifting it up out of the hole they've just dug, and Gene Wilder laments, "What a filthy job!" Igor says, "I don't know, could be worse!" . . . "How?" . . . Igor says, as if to give a real answer, "It could be raining!" And of course it begins to pour.

This is the problem with looking back, with a too-great focus on regret. The more we look back, the more it pours. One can see how what you did wrong has led so inevitably (you think) to where you are now--to being drenched, less secure, less happy than you would otherwise have been.

Wherever this “inevitability” comes from, let’s put it to some better use. If you hadn’t made the mistake, would your life then have moved forward, in time, to now, in your new life, a life without downpours? You are a free-will being, you make choices, they can’t all be right. You would later have *inevitably* made a new mistake, one to *now* be regretted. The right word here is *unavoidability*! Mistakes are unavoidable. What can be avoided is giving them too much rein.

So, don’t rue your regrets. Learn from them, sure, but when you--like Tom . . . probably *not* like Dr. Frankenstein--look back, do this: *Amplify* your gratitude. Make a list, each day if you must, of all the simple things for which you are grateful...and then [drumroll here, Martha]--*choose* to give them, inside you, A REALLY BIG VOICE! Let that voice be your new attitude, let it vote for your gratitudes, and let it overwhelm your regrets.

With Katy’s help, I want you to know I’ve road-tested this idea. “It really works!” And so what I’ve said today has been said to you, from my heart.

Go in peace!

[END]