

I remember when I was a teenager and was upset about something that seemed important at the time and my mother, wanting me to put things in perspective, told me how lucky I was to be alive. Did your parents ever say that to you? You'd be irritated, all worked up about something, and your mom or dad would say, "You ought to be thankful you're alive. Some people aren't alive, and you are."

So my mom told me that. I would say, "I didn't ask to be born," then told her she and my father should have asked, before having me, whether I actually wanted to be born.

Logic has never played all that great a role in my life.

But boy, now I am so glad they didn't ask my permission before deciding to have me, because I was such a knucklehead kid, I probably would have said no, then where would I have been?

I was thinking about this not long ago when we were over at my parent's house watching *Forrest Gump*, the all-time best movie in the world after *Shane*. How many of you have seen *Forrest Gump*? Remember Lieutenant Dan? His squad comes under attack in Vietnam and Lieutenant Dan gets shot in the legs and Forrest saves his life, which makes Lieutenant Dan furious, because instead of dying in war as his ancestors had done, he'd become a double amputee in a wheelchair.

After the war, Forrest is working on a shrimp boat and Lieutenant Dan shows up and begins working for Forrest, but he's angry, resentful, and bitter. During a terrific storm, he climbs the rigging and curses God. But the years pass, and as he and Forrest work together, Lieutenant Dan begins to appreciate life, and one morning on the bayou, as the sun is rising, he turns to Forrest and says, "Forrest, I never thanked you for saving my life." Then he lifts himself out of his wheelchair, sits on the side of the ship, pushes himself off into the water, and backstrokes away. It's one of my favorite moments in the movie, Lieutenant Dan's transition from bitterness *with life* to appreciation *for life*.

We've been talking about growing old, about growing as we age, and the qualities we need to cultivate now if we're going to age well. We've talked about the importance of *adaptability*, of being able to adjust one's self to different conditions and circumstances or a new environment. We've thought about the *value of work*, of engaging in meaningful labor that blesses us and blesses others. We've discussed the importance of *knowing the date*, of not living in the past or fearing the future. We've reflected upon the importance of *humor*, the ability to keep matters in perspective. We've talked about *learnability*, the capacity to learn from and grow in every situation, be it good or bad. The last time we were together, we thought about *interdependence*, the awareness that we are mutually reliant upon another.

Today, I would like for us to think about our *appreciation for life*. Last week, I was in Oklahoma City speaking at two churches. Spoke at an African-American at 8:30, then was driven across town to speak at a Congregationalist church. Very interesting, eclectic morning. So I'm at the Congregationalist church and they have me seated next to the choir, next to the sopranos. In the chair beside me is this beautiful woman, dark hair, very Mid-Eastern looking, with a voice that is out of this world. It is rising above all the other voices, just a gorgeous voice.

I was speaking with the pastor afterwards and said, "What a gift she is to your church."

He said, "Oh, yeah." Then he said, "She was adopted from Iran. Her biological parents traded her to her adoptive parents for a bicycle."

I said, "What a great deal!"

So I go speak with her, to tell her how much I appreciated her music, and I asked her about her adoptive parents, and she just beamed. She wasn't bitter. She didn't complain about her biological parents in Iran. She was just deeply grateful and loved life and was full of joy and when she sang, all that came out.

You know, I'm not sure I would have that attitude. I mean, geez, you're traded for a bicycle. How could that not do a number on your head? But there she was, singing her heart out, making the most of her life. Appreciating life.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John. Good workers, bright future. James and John are working with their father, being groomed for the family business, but Jesus invites them to come with him, so they leave their nets and their father, and follow Jesus. We've churched that up a bit over the centuries. Made it seem like it was the first altar call and James and John were going forward to get saved. But I don't think that was it at all. They weren't Southern Baptists, after all. I think Jesus was reminding them they had one life, that they should appreciate it, be grateful for it, and fully engage it.

What a gift life is! I was walking the other day in the woods beside our home and came upon a field of horses, so I went to the fence and a beautiful white horse came right up to me and started sniffing around my pockets. I looked at the horse and scratched behind its ears and for the first time in my life really engaged a horse. I'd been beaten up by a horse when I was little, so had avoided them every since. But this was just a gorgeous animal. What a gift life is!

What a gift life is. Do you appreciate it? This week will you pause and think how wonderful and amazing it is to live on this planet at this time in history and give thanks for your life? Will you thank your parents? Even if they didn't fully appreciate you. That's their deficiency; don't make it yours. Life is still a gift!

I had lunch this week with the mother and father of four children, two sons and two daughters. The daughters are healthy and well, but the sons are severely, dramatically disabled, unable even to control basic bodily functions. The parents are aging, their sons require their constant attention, and will for the rest of their lives. I hadn't seen the mother and father in years. I thought they would be beaten down with stress and worry, but instead there was a lightness about them, a radiance. They said, "Our sons have taught us so much. We are so much better people because of our sons. Their lives have been a gift to us."

Isn't it funny, you go visit someone hoping to encourage them, and you're the one who leaves inspired. You're the one who learns what a gift it is to be alive.

You know the exact moment joy begins? I can tell you precisely when it happens. *Joy begins the exact moment we stop lamenting what we don't have, and start cherishing what we do have.* So there's Lieutenant Dan, he's looking out across the water, the sun is rising, a faithful friend is by his side, he's not the brightest guy, but he is faithful and dependable and good things just kind of happen when he's around, and right then Lieutenant Dan stops thinking about this missing legs and realizes just how wonderful it is to be alive, what a gift life is.

*Joy begins the exact moment we stop lamenting what we don't have, and start cherishing what we do have.* There's a woman in a church in Oklahoma City, traded for a bicycle when she was a baby. She could have sang the blues, but chose to sing her gratitude instead.

The life Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to is the same life each great spiritual leader has called others to—a life of gratitude and appreciation. We talk about the differences between religions, as if the differences are so vast, the chasms so wide, they can never be bridged. But when you study the great teachers, you see the same themes repeating themselves, and you begin to realize some truths are so obvious and universal they transcend religions and cultures. One such truth is this: We've all been given a gift we didn't ask for, the gift of life. If we spend our lives lamenting what we don't have, we will be the most miserable of beings. But when we start cherishing what we do have, when we start appreciating life, God's joy will be in us, and our joy will be full.