Book 24

Sunday February 2, 1992

HOW TO BE PERFECTLY MISERABLE Luke 4:21-30

Last week, when some of the church staff members heard me talking about the sermon title for today, "How To Be Perfectly Miserable," they said, "There are many people who do not need any help in that department, they already know how to do that." Perhaps that true. Yet I believe that even when we are miserable and judgemental, we have the best of intentions. That's because many of us have been systematically taught to use being miserable as a strategy of protecting and taking care of ourselves.

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However I also believe that by looking at some of the ways in which we make ourselves perfectly miserable we'll recognize that whether we are miserable or happy is not inevitable, it is a choice for each one of us and knowing that, we'll choose happiness instead of misery.

1. The first path many have been taught to follow in order to make themselves perfectly miserable is to believe and give in to their circumstances. Have you ever done that? Tell yourself that life is unfair and there's nothing you can do about it. You have been dealt a lousy hand in the card game of life so you might as well accept it. All that is bad that has ever happened to you is the result of your circumstances so that you have every right to be miserable.

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Certainly we can all admit that there is a randomness in life. And that means there's some unfairness and unevenness. All we can do is admit that and come to terms with it.

Rabbi Kushner said that when he and his wife learned that their three-year old son had progeria and would not have a normal life, and would die in his early teens as he did, they knew they could not trade him in for a healthier child.

The first thing they tried to do was to make sense if it. They felt guilty and miserable. What had they done that they were being punished for? They were angry with God. Why did God do this to a family that deserved better? But then they discovered they didn't like feeling guilty and miserable and didn't like feeling estranged from God. They couldn't change the circumstances of their

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son's illness, but they could change their attitude toward it.

They discovered that the key to saving them was to first admit that there is a lot in this life that doesn't make any sense. Bad things happen to good people--tragic deaths, accidents, fires, shootings, hijackings, terminal illnesses in children and more. The longer one insists on perfection, the longer one insists on every ending being a happy one, the longer one insists on things always coming out even, the more one is going to be miserable. Thus, one of the keys to living in a world of unfairness is to admit that life is unfair, and to find the hand of God not solely in the precision and evenness and the goodness of life, but also in the resiliency of the human spirit--the ability of people to go on living joyfully in spite of

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the unfairness. Someone said, "Expecting the world to treat you fairly because you are a good person is like expecting the bull not to attack you because you are a vegetarian."

However if you want to continue to be perfectly miserable, then in the midst of your suffering you'll continue to ask, "Why does it happen?" or "Why did it happen to me?" That can be a good question to keep something from happening again. But if that's the only question you continue to ask, it won't get you out of your misery. That question focuses only on the past. Another equally important question is, "Now that it has happened, what are you going to do about it? How will you respond?"

There are some things that happen to us that

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cannot be changed. Life is unfair. But if we cannot always change the circumstances, we do have the choice and the ability to change our attitude, or to use the circumstances for a higher good. How we respond or whether we transcend the circumtances instead of giving in to them is up to us.

Dr. Rollo May, the psychotherapist wrote: "Most people shrink when in despair or depression, but it can also be used constructively, as an opportunity. The despair can then act upon the person like the flood in Genesis; it can clear away the vast debris--the false answers, superficial principles-- and leave the way open for new possibilities, that is, for new freedoms."

There's an old story about a man who wrote to

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the department of agriculture in his state to find out how to cope with the crabgrass that was spoiling his lawn. The department responded with a number of suggestions. The man tried them all, but he could not completely eliminate the crabgrass. Exasperated, he wrote the department again, noting that every method they had suggested had failed. His yard was still riddled with crabgrass. He got back a short reply. "We suggest you learn to love it."

In his book, HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE, Barry Neil Kaufman tells this true story. During a question--and-answer segment immediately following a class he was conducting on developing attitudes of self-trust, a participant cautiously asked this question: "I'm having so much trouble with my asthma. I've gone from doctor to doctor. I take all the medication they've prescribed, but nothing

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really helps. I can't stand it. I wonder if you could say something, well, anything, that might be useful?"

Kaufman hesitated for a moment. The class had only a few minutes left. Then he said, "This may sound silly or crazy or both, but I'll do my best to give you a useful response. Be happy with your asthma. Love it like a good friend. If you change your attitude about it, you'll change the chemistry of your body. Every thought we have is a physical event. Neurotransmitters and neuropeptides pop into existence throughout the body each time we activate a belief. Change the belief (the thought, the perspective, the judgment) and we change or, at the very least, influence the physical event we call the bodymind. Your attitude and intelligence exist everywhere in the 50 trillion

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cells of your body. This is a marvelous and concrete opportunity for you, not just a pie-in-the-sky game. Give yourself and your asthma a different message and see what happens. So when you have the tightness in your chest, the shortness of breath, the wheezing or coughing, you could first welcome it, talk to it, even play with it. Then open yourself, ultimately, to loving it...really loving it."

The man with the asthma seemed amused, intrigued and skeptical. But he said that he would try it.

The next day, he came to the morning session of the program visibly rested and alert. "I had a special experience last night," he told the group. "I greeted my nightly wheezing with a smile instead of my usual annoyance or depression. I

actually did say hello out loud and laughed. I talked to my asthma like a friend. Wow, we sure have a lot of history together." He smiled shyly, then continued, "I even thanked my bronchial tubes each time I coughed. At first I felt, well, absolutely ridiculous, but soon something magically freed up inside and I really felt loving and loved." His eyes filled with tears. "You know, in no time at all, I fell asleep. Right now I feel more comfortable and peaceful in my body than I have in months."

2. The second way to be perfectly miserable, in addition to believing and giving in to your circumstances, is to doubt your dreams and refuse to consider any new possibilities.

When Jesus finished preaching his first sermon in

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his home synagogue in Nazareth, Luke tells us the people were amazed.

They couldn't believe it. They said, "Is this not the son of Mary and Joseph?" And when Jesus began to apply the sermon to them, instead of considering new possibilities, they got mad and threw him out. What made the hometown folks so angry was that Jesus began to talk about God's love not having any limits. Jesus knew that like many of us, the people of his home town had fallen victim to a common human malady. They had tried to build fences around God's love. They did not see themselves simply as the recipients of God's love; they made the spiritually dangerous mistake of assuming they were controllers of God's love and could determine who would be the objects of such love. They thought they had a corner on the market, a monopoly.

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Jesus directly challenged that assumption. He said that neither he or anyone else has monopoly or franchise on it. Rather he announced that God's love is permanently available to anyone and everyone, everywhere.

Not only did the people in Jesus' hometown have trouble considering any new possibilities for themselves, they also could not consider any new possibilities for God or for their hometown young man, Jesus. They could think of him only as the son of Mary and Joseph. If Jesus had listened to them and said to himself, "I'm only the son of Mary and Joseph, nothing more," he probably would not have gone on with his public ministry and would've been miserable for the rest of his life. It would also have been the easy way out.

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Do you want to be perfectly miserable? Doubt your dreams.

Refuse to consider any new possibilities for yourself and for others and continue to believe that you can limit God's love.

The parents of a child were somewhat mismatched. The child's father was unemployed with no formal schooling. The child's mother was a teacher. This child, born in Port Huron, Michigan, was estimated to have an IQ of 81. He was withdrawn from school after three months--and was considered backward by school officials.

The child enrolled in school two years late due to scarlet fever and respiratory infections. And he was going deaf. His emotional health was poor. He was stubborn, aloof, and showed very little

emotion. He liked mechanics. He also liked to play with fire and burned down his father's barn. He showed some manual dexterity, but used very poor grammar. But he did have a dream. He wanted to be a scientist or a railroad mechanic.

This young man from Port Huron, Michigan become one of the world's greatest inventors, Thomas A. Edison.

Another story of a young woman is similar. She didn't show much promise either. She was born of an alcoholic father and as a child was sickly, bedridden, and often hospitalized. She was considered erratic and withdrawn. She would bit her nails and had numerous phobias. She wore a backbrace from a spinal defect and would constantly seek attention. She was a daydreamer

with no specific vocational goals, although she expressed a desire to help the elderly and the poor.

This awkward and sickly young woman became a champion of the oppressed--Eleanor Roosevelt.

Both of these individuals could've stayed perfectly miserable by doubting their dreams and refusing to consider any new possibilities. Or you can choose not to be miserable and remember that God is in the dream business and that you can be anything God calls you to be. You can claim happiness anytime as your birthright and not be limited by the condemning evidence of your own personal history and the past.

3. The third way to be perfectly miserable is to

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trust your worst instincts. And your worst instincts tell you not to try anything new, not to take any risks, not to reach out to others, not to dream dreams. After all, you might fail. Better to play it safe and remain miserable. Your worst instincts also tell you to be stingy, to put yourself first in everything. Be careful. Someone might take advantage of you. A miser is a stingy person and the word miserable comes from the the word miser. The most miserable people I know are stingy.

To live only for yourself will bring you nothing in the end but sadness and misery. A self-centered life is an unhappy life. What we forget is that our feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem cause us to be "takers" rather than "givers." Our selfishness is often a mask for fear.

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Dramatic action is called for if you want to overcome being perfectly miserable. It means giving yourself for something greater than yourself. It means taking a new attitude toward your worst circumstances, and it means trusting God and your best dreams and best instincts. The choice is up to you. Amen.