



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Your Legacy
Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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You will know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:20).

My son is getting married this Saturday. Gwenn and I are very happy about that. We love our soon-to-be-daughter-in-law and look forward to celebrating the start of their new life together.

At the same time, and for related reasons, I'm acutely aware of getting older myself—part of this big bunch of Baby Boomers entering the age of retirement. When we were young there was a lot of talk about “the older generation,” and some things we thought they had left undone and it was up to us to change. Now we *are* the older generation, or one of the older generations, and some of us see the things we've left undone—things our children and grandchildren will have to fix and change.

All our talk of generations is a bit misleading, though, because it almost sounds as if every twenty-five years or so there's some big meeting where a whole generation sits down and decides how things are going to be, now that they are the people in charge. But that's not the way the world works, is it? You can distinguish generations easily enough for any given family, and for those who started their families around the same time, but people keep having babies year after year, and the truth is, generations overlap and flow rather seamlessly from one into another.

There's no such thing as a generational caucus that determines how things will be for the next couple of decades. There's only the steady flow of time—60 minutes an hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year—and each one of us has to decide how we're going to use the time we've been given. Often we just seem to put one foot in front of the

other, doing whatever concrete thing comes next: preparing the next meal, performing the next job, taking the kids to their next activity, playing or watching the next game. All those activities make up so much of the *content* of our lives that it's easy to forget about the larger *purpose* of what we're doing.

What is the point after all? Is there any overarching goal to frame what we do day by day? And more than that, what is our personal legacy likely to be? What influence will we have had on the people closest to us, and all the others around us? What will we leave behind when our little boat comes to dock and we climb ashore from this world's river of time?

I find myself thinking about those questions a lot these days. Maybe you do too.

Some of us attended the opening of Town Hall South last week, where Mitch Albom told how he came to write the book *Tuesdays with Morrie*. You may know that the book is about Mitch's favorite college professor, with whom he promised to stay in touch but never did for 16 years, while his own career was taking off. Then one night he was flipping through the television remote when he came across Ted Koppel's *Nightline* and saw his professor, Morrie Schwartz, talking about the process of dying with ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease. Mitch felt guilty for not having kept in touch, and so he called his professor after all those years. Then he went to see him in Boston, and that turned into weekly visits, Tuesdays with Morrie, for several months until his old professor finally died.

It's a wonderful story, with lots of good insights and more than a little good humor, since Morrie saw himself as a

teacher and knew that there's some redeeming joy to be found in doing what you were made to do, even in the midst of the most terrible circumstances. People would ask Morrie what they could do for him, but he wanted to be able to help others as long as he could, if only by having them learn from his experience. Morrie wanted his tombstone to read "A Teacher to the Last." "Taking feels like I'm dying," Morrie said, "but giving is living."

And that was the main point of Mitch Albom's talk: Giving is living. The rest of his speech had to do largely with the orphanage he took over in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake—around the same time, incidentally, that some of our own Westminster folk went again to help with Pastor Pierre's mission in La Croix, Haiti.

Mitch spends a few days each month at the orphanage, and he's brought to live with him and his wife in Detroit a little girl, now six, who has a rare kind of brain tumor. Little Chika can't walk and needs to be carried around while the doctors continue to perform various surgeries and other treatments. One time, Mitch says, he was telling Chika that he needed to go to work because he had a job to do, but she said with a smile, "No, Mr. Mitch. Your job is to carry me." He said he never feels more alive than when he's carrying that little girl around.

Giving is living after all. But what kind of giving? It matters a great deal what we give to people, and one way we can tell the value of our giving is by watching the effect it has on those who receive it.

We all know that cultivating dependency is an unhelpful form of giving—as when we enable people to persist in destructive habits and addictions by shielding them

from the consequences of their actions. Giving people opportunities to learn and grow and provide for themselves and others is helpful. Giving in ways that undermine initiative or personal responsibility is not so helpful.

Parents can spoil their children with the wrong kind of giving. Some parents, generously but unwisely, shower their kids with all kinds of gifts, from material things to constant efforts to entertain them and shelter them from the results of their own actions, but then the legacy may turn out to be smaller, more self-centered souls rather than larger, more loving ones. If giving really is living, we might even deprive our children of a principal source of joy by teaching them to be acquisitive and self-absorbed rather than generous and caring for others.

Giving needs to be guided by wisdom, focusing on what's good for others in the long run, and not just what feels good to us at the moment. Among the wisest gifts are those that help people through challenging times while also contributing to habits of the heart that make us all wiser, more thoughtful, more loving and generous human beings.

I'm reading a new book by and about two good friends, who happen to be the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It's called *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, and it's full of practical wisdom from two of the greatest spiritual leaders of our day. The Dalai Lama is a Buddhist, of course, Archbishop Tutu is a Christian, and Douglas Abrams, who tells the story of their five-day visit last year in India, is a Jew.

Three things are striking about the book: first, that these two men are such good friends, though they come from different countries, races, and religions; second, that

it's all about joy, from men who share a deep and abiding sense of humor; and third, that each of them, now in their eighties, has lived through some very hard times, both personally and in their nations. The Dalai Lama has been in exile since 1959, after China took over his native Tibet, and Archbishop Tutu came of age as a black man during the apartheid regime in South Africa, eventually leading his country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission after the end of apartheid. This is just the kind of book our world needs these days, when so many people are polarized and angry, stuck in their divisions over race and nation and religion and class.

The Dalai Lama and the archbishop are thinking about their legacies too, since they're getting on in years, and especially now that Archbishop Tutu's cancer has come back. They see this book as part of their legacy. It's mainly about joy, but as they say, joy is a by-product of other things. If you set out to find joy directly, you're likely to be anxious about where to get it and how to hold onto it. But if you pursue the right things first, joy just follows naturally as a result.

Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama talk about what they call "eight pillars of joy," eight qualities of the heart and mind upon which joy comes to rest. The qualities of mind include perspective, humility, humor, and acceptance; those of the heart are forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. Bishop Tutu says, "it is in giving that we receive," but "it is when we are closed in on ourselves that we tend to be miserable." Here he sounds like Mitch Albom's professor: "Taking feels like dying. Giving is living."

Buddhist compassion and Christian charity both point in the direction of forgiveness, just as they converge on all

the other pillars of joy. So the Dalai Lama tells of a Buddhist monk who was tortured by the Chinese and said afterwards that he thought he had been in real danger at the time. The Dalai Lama thought he meant the danger of losing his life, but the monk said, no, he was in danger of losing compassion for his Chinese guards. And Bishop Tutu recounts how Nelson Mandela went to prison an angry young man, filled with bitterness and hatred over the racism of apartheid, but through 27 long years in prison he learned to let go of his anger and even find compassion for his jailers, until he came out of his ordeal uniquely qualified to lead South Africa through a peaceful transition to majority rule.

In a similar way, Mitch Albom describes Morrie's greatest regret as not having reconciled with his friend Norman before Norman passed away. "Forgive everyone," Morrie told Mitch. "Forgive everything. It doesn't matter in the end." And Mitch went on to note that the voice recordings of people who died on 9/11, in the World Trade Center and on Flight 93, were all about telling their families and friends that they loved them. They weren't calling to hear reassurances that they themselves were loved. They just wanted others to know that in the last moments of their lives they were thinking of them and loved them. That's a powerful legacy.

Much of this sounds like an echo of Jesus, when he says, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you as well"—things like contentment and peace and joy. Do to others as you would have them do to you, since everything else depends on that, Jesus says. Give to everyone who needs your help, in ways that will lift them up and make them strong. Build your house on a rock, on the strong pillars that sustain true joy, not on the shifting

sands of self-absorption. Enter through the narrow gate, for the road to get there may be hard, but it is the way that leads to life.

And teach your children to do the same. Give good gifts to the people you love, but give them wisely. Heaping material gifts and piles of money on your children, young or old, may only serve to turn their attention inward and help to shrink their souls. Instead, show your children and everyone else what life looks like when adversity is borne with patience and acceptance; when offenses are met with forgiveness rather than retaliation; when humor bubbles up from humility and a broader perspective on life; and when gratitude, compassion, and generosity become the habits of a well-formed heart.

“By their fruits you will know them,” Jesus says. We may not always know how our lives affect the people around us, but every one of us will leave some sort of legacy through the way we live. The question is, what kind of legacy will it be? Now is the time to ask that question. And now is the time to practice living in such a way that our legacy will turn out to be a gift worth giving.



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