

SAUNTERING TOWARD SALVATION

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Although many of you perhaps think of me as “the inveterate cycling parson” – because I am on my bike spinning my way through town each and every day – I actually come from a family of inveterate and enthusiastic walkers. Whenever any of us Alexanders are together (regardless of the nature of the family occasion) one of the favorite and most frequently asked questions – asked regardless of our location, the time of day, season or weather – is, “Who’s up for a walk?”

Some of my fondest life memories are, in fact, of simple walks I have taken – some unforgettable solitary jaunts all by myself, to be sure, but the most memorable walks are those taken with dear family and friends. I recall walks through sun-dappled suburban neighborhoods...walks along sun-bathed-or-moonlit beaches...walks through winter woods at sunset...walks through hushed cemeteries and golf courses...walks along the ocean just before dawn. My family walks through summer downpours...walks into the teeth of winter snowstorms...walks in 100-degree summer heat...and even walks when the weather is downright pleasant! Spring walks ...winter walks...autumn walks...summer walks...the season never matters, each time of year is perfect for walking! Walks taken morning, noon and night – and every time imaginable in-between ... it’s never too early – or too late – for a good walk.

Some walks with loved ones have been silly, playful affairs that are filled with nothing but light-heartedness and fun...others have been brisk, largely silent walks when words would have only distracted us from simply sharing the magical moment and the beauty of the natural world around us...and still others have serious, weighty – even tearful – walks when we have tried to cope at times of conflict, pain, death or illness – some of the most serious life issues and crises imaginable. The simple act of walking in the wide-open outdoors with people close to me has played a significant and treasured role in my life, and I pray that for as long as I live I will be able to engage in the holy simplicity of walking with – and, yes, being with – people I love as I do.

Indeed, it was a major loss and upset in my life – before I had knee replacement surgery a year ago May – when I found my ability to walk profoundly curtailed by the severe pain and limping caused by a totally worn-out knee. The ability to walk, which many of us foolishly take for granted, is one of life’s simplest – yet most precious – gifts.

Now...please let me offer a simple but important reassurance and caveat right off the bat this morning. Although I am going to spend much of this sermon talking about the joy and liberty of walking – and the somewhat-more-intentional spiritual practice of sauntering – those of you for whom walking is now difficult, painful or impossible, and that applies to any number of persons in this room right now – let me reassure you that you will not be left out of the message of this sermon! Hang in here with me, for I promise what I have to spiritually say this morning about sauntering will apply to everyone, no matter how well or poorly your legs might (or might not) work!

So, back to the gift and habit of walking. For me, walking is all about having healthy relationships with three terribly important things: 1) first, my relationship with my body (which always enjoys and benefits from the exercise and invigoration a good walk brings...more on that in just a moment), 2) second, my relationship with the natural world (the intricate and beautiful web of nature which walking allows me to notice and appreciate “up close and personal”), and,

finally, as I have already eluded to, 3) my relationship with people close to me, with whom I interact and converse as we together enjoy the simple process of walking side-by-side.

When you think about it, walking is such a simple, everyday miracle... and is, of course, one of the first and most fundamental skills we learn as infants. Oh, how thrilled parents are when their toddlers take their first tentative steps...and how excited the infants are (you can see it in their surprised eyes) to feel this newborn power, mobility and freedom. And – on the sadder side of life – anybody unfortunate enough to lose the ability to walk later in life (as many of us unfortunately face when, for any number of reasons, our legs are either temporarily or permanently disabled), as anyone who loses the ability to walk will tell you, we must never take this simple, physical ability for granted.

But yet that is precisely what most of us do, isn't it? When was the last time you spiritually stopped in your tracks and "thanked your lucky stars" that you have the everyday miracle of two working legs – those common-yet-remarkable appendages with the muscles and reflex to carry you forward in life, one step at a time? Theologian Matthew Fox tells a very personal story which is just to this point. He writes:

"Gratitude changes our lives. It fills us with energy and vitality. When I was 12 years old, I had polio and could not walk for six months. The doctors could not reassure me that I would ever walk again. As it turned out, I did get my legs back. But I learned a lesson in the process I have never forgotten: don't take anything for granted! I had taken my legs for granted: legs that work, legs that run and play ball, legs that take me exactly where I want to go. When my legs returned to me, I was filled with gratitude – not gratitude for having the 'miracle' of my legs being healed, but rather gratitude for having legs at all, legs that work. I was filled with energy, and promised myself that I would not waste my legs for as long as I lived."

Walking – the ability to put one foot in front of the other, again and again – is almost too simple and basic a life activity for us to wildly appreciate it. But when you think about it, that is what the ability to walk deserves...our wild appreciation.

It turns out that I'm not the only one who thinks so! Back when I was still living in Washington, DC, *The Washington Post*, one of the most widely-respected and prestigious newspapers in the country, ran an entire special section – 10 full pages, no less! – devoted to the importance, wisdom and glory of regular walking! They began – as you might expect – by reminding the reader of the spectacular health benefits of regular walking. In the lead article, Sue Redfearn wrote:

"If a pill could significantly lower the risk of heart attack, diabetes, [high-blood pressure], stroke, osteoporosis, and breast and colon cancer – while reducing weight, cholesterol levels, constipation, depression, impotence, and [the likelihood of age-related dementia], and also increase muscle mass, fat-burning metabolism, and mental acuity, [improve your circulation and your digestion], flatten your belly, reshape [your] thighs, [elevate your mood and sense of well-being in the world], even as it made you better looking [and had no negative side effects] – there would be [appreciative] panic in the streets. [There is, of course,] no such pill. But a large and growing body of credible research demonstrates that taking a good walk most days of the week can deliver all of these health benefits cited above and more (although we admit the "better looking" part is harder to prove)...For the vast majority of Americans who are not faced with a prohibitive disability, walking is the best choice as a regular form of physical activity [and exercise]."

And then quoting Susan Johnson, an expert on physical fitness: *“Accepting that an activity as basic as walking can have powerful benefits may require updating your thinking about exercise. We used to think that exercise had to hurt, and you had to bleed and throw up to accomplish anything.”* But a gentle, non-stressful walk is all you need to work miracles with your mind and body.

So the scientific proof is in, folks: the discipline of regular, simple, everyday walking does you a world of good! And so the first thing this admittedly fanatical physical fitness buff wants to say to you this morning is obvious, get out there whenever you can and strut your stuff! Walking regularly is clearly one of the best and simplest ways to keep your body fit and your mind healthy.

But this room is not a health club locker room or physical education lecture hall...it's rather a religious sanctuary...and our primary focus here, of course, is always on the more spiritual dimensions of life. So I really want to go somewhere deeper with the topic of walking this morning than merely enumerating its obvious and rather astounding health benefits for your mind and body. You will notice that my sermon title this morning is “sauntering toward salvation,” and it is sauntering, which is a certain kind of walking and a certain way of “being,” that I really want to talk to you about this morning. Sauntering is walking as a spiritual practice...a spiritual practice of mindfulness...a spiritual practice of being fully awake to, and engaged in, our world.

Now this is not the first thing that comes to most people's minds when they hear the word “saunter.” The big dictionary in my office gives the common, modern and somewhat derogatory view. To “saunter,” it says, is *“to walk about idly in a leisurely manner, not knowing where to go or what to do...to travel around aimlessly from place to place...to dawdle.”* This definition treats sauntering then as a kind of “pointless” moping about with your feet, which is something far different from its original spiritual meaning.

As far as I know from my research in preparing this sermon, it was the Unitarian Transcendentalists of 19th Century New England – Emerson, Channing, Alcott, Thoreau, to name a few – who both defined and practiced sauntering not as walking in a lazy, diffident manner, but rather as an intentional spiritual practice that puts our feet on the path toward greater mindfulness and joy in living. As Thoreau put it in his classic, *Walden Pond*:

“We must live in the present, launch ourselves on every wave, find our eternity in each moment...only that day dawns to which we are awake...we must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake.” And “sauntering” was the term he gave to walking as a spiritual discipline of everyday mindfulness...again his words, *“I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least sauntering through the woods and over the hills, absolutely free from all worldly engagements....The walking of which I speak has nothing in it akin to the taking of exercise...but is itself the enterprise and adventure of the day.”*

William Ellery Channing, another great Unitarian writer and leader of that day, similarly defines sauntering in saving spiritual terms: *“No wealth,”* he said, *“can buy the requisite leisure, freedom, and independence which are the capital in this profession. It comes only from the grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker.”*

You may be interested to know that these transcendentalists derived the term “saunterer” *“from the vagabonds who roamed the medieval English countryside begging for money on the pretext of going to the Holy Land.”* Again Thoreau, *“I have met with one or two persons in the course of*

my life who understand the art of walking, that is, of talking walks – who had a genius for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived from idle people who roved about the country in the Middle Ages and asked charity, under pretense of going...to the Holy Land. They who never go to the Holy Land in their walks, as they pretend, are indeed mere idlers and vagabonds, but they who do go there are saunterers in a good sense....For every walk is a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer our Holy Land.”

So for Thoreau and the other early transcendentalists, who are clearly the spiritual forbears of our modern Unitarian Universalist tradition, sauntering was the practice of moving through the world in a relaxed but keenly mindful and attentive way...a spiritual way that enabled them to arrive at the sacred depths of life – at the “Holy Land,” if you will, that lies all around us. *The Gospel According to Thomas* is a fascinating and ancient book about the life of Jesus that unfortunately was not included in the official, sanctioned collection of writings about Jesus that is called the New Testament. In *The Gospel According to Thomas*, it is reported that Jesus was asked by his followers:

“When will the Kingdom [of God] come?”...and he is said to have responded, “It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, ‘Look, here it is,’ or ‘Look, there it is.’ Rather the [Kingdom of God] is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.” The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.

If this is, in fact, something which Jesus said -- and God only knows the ancient and oral tradition of these texts makes it impossible to know what Jesus actually taught – but if Jesus in fact said this, then he was calling us spiritually to simple, everyday mindfulness...calling us to notice – truly notice! – the everyday miracle and beauty of life around us.

Sauntering – which again was promoted by our transcendentalist forbears – is a spiritual tradition that continues today. For example, the famous Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches this special kind of walking to his students. Listen to his words from his classic book, *Peace Is Every Step*: *“I like to walk alone on country paths, the plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in this air, but to walk on earth.*

“Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don’t even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child – [indeed] our own two eyes. All is miracle!”

And then he describes how one can make the simple act of walking a meditation. *“We walk slowly, alone or with friends, if possible in some beautiful place. Walking meditation is really to enjoy the walking – walking not in order to arrive, but just to walk. The purpose is to be in the present moment, and aware of our breathing and our walking, to enjoy each step...not thinking of the future, not thinking of the past, just enjoying the present moment.”*

In a similar spiritual vein, my colleague the Rev. Tom Owen-Towle writes in his 1996 book entitled *Sauntering*, *“The saunterer is one who strolls in a measured manner, with one eye on nature, the other on soul, treating the land, and all therein as holy. The saunterer is on a sacred quest – not exercise, but exploration... not recreation but re-creation. Sauntering is a mystical adventure. True saunterers stride in reverent, appreciative gait, treating the land, every piece of it, as hallowed, touching the earth with deft hands and with tender feet.”*

And then Owen-Towle arrives at the spiritual benefit of any such mindfulness practice: *“The point of life is primarily to show up, take our seats and pay attention. The fundamental religious act is astonishment.”*

So...I hope all of you can see how regular sauntering...which can be defined as the simple art of walking in a mindful and spiritual way...would benefit not only our bodies, which are always grateful for exercise, but also our souls...to help us to open ourselves fully to the rich dance of life around us.”

And I hope that each of you will soon try to enter into an “attitude of sauntering” on some walk you are taking soon...when you are alone, or with companions.

Here is the universal good news for those of you for whom actual walking – that is, physically putting one foot in front of the other – is impossible, challenging or painful. You don’t actually have to walk to successfully saunter! Sauntering is the simple-yet-purposeful act of intentionally slowing yourself down so that you can mindfully take in the world around you. So, you see, you can saunter through your world while being stationary in a wheelchair sitting on your backyard patio or while seated in a familiar old chair at your kitchen table...or while reclining on a sofa near your living room window...or from the passenger seat of a speeding automobile...or even from a hospital bed. All that is required for successful sauntering is a mind and a heart willing to notice...to pay attention...to slow down and come fully awake...and truly take in the world and persons around you...and thus be quietly blessed.

Ah...but just like most good things in life, there is a hitch, isn’t there? Surely sauntering in this fast-paced culture of ours is easier said than done! I imagine that more-than-a-few-of-you are saying to yourself right now, “All right, Scott, I think it’s wonderful that in 1845 – before television, computers, cell phones and Facebook – Unitarian saint Henry David Thoreau was able to retreat to his sparse little cabin on Walden Pond, and spend four hours a day sauntering around the woods in mystical engagement and deep appreciation. Or that Buddhist monks today have the time and patience to move leisurely through their worlds in such a deliberate and focused manner. But who of us – living as we do within this frenetic, fast-paced American culture – who in God’s name has time for such relaxed, time-consuming mindfulness practice?”

Sure, every once in a rare while I am able to take a leisurely walk along the beach or the Lagoon or some other beautiful natural spot here on the Treasure Coast, and I suppose I can even (every once in awhile) feel some of this deep and holy connection to the earth all these mystical writers talk about. But what does this spiritual practice of regularly sauntering amidst the daily round have to do with the hectic and demanding life I actually have to live here in 21st Century America? What does sauntering have to do with shopping in a crowded Publix...or coping with the craziness of Interstate 95 on the way to the Orlando Airport to pick up my grandkids? There’s no way I can “saunter” my way through the frenetic world I inhabit on a regular basis. I always have too much to do, with too much distraction, in too few hours. Scott, I guess it’s nice to know about such wonderful and healing spiritual practices, but who’s got the time or the patience for any of it, anyway?”

Look...I’m a practical man, and I understand the real, hectic world you and I are obliged to live in...and obviously few if any of us are going to be able, like Thoreau, to regularly spend half the day sauntering, focused and serene, through our worlds. But sauntering – in the broadest spiritual sense, which, again, transcends actually walking, and applies to all of us no matter how well our feet actually work – sauntering is about choosing to control life’s many distractions, truly

opening and tuning your senses to what is immediately around you, and moving through your days in calm and measured focus.

So...no matter where you are – whether you are driving to work on Route 1...or watching your kids or grandkids playing soccer...or conducting a staff meeting at the office...or paying your bills in front of your home computer...or preparing dinner...or pulling weeds out in the garden at your condo complex – no matter where you are...you are free – in the midst of all these places or activities to “saunter” deep to your soul. Again...sauntering is the spiritual practice and discipline of focusing yourself fully on the present moment...on the truly astounding people and things that are in your path...literally right in your path...right where you live...right now!

Look...here in a few sentences is everything I so desperately want to communicate to each and every one of you this quiet July morning here on the Treasure Coast of Florida. Life conspires in so many subtle and seductive ways to distract us away from the wondrous, simple essentials of our lives...from the glories of nature...from the intricacies and intrigues of the inner self...and from the unending charm and complexity of the amazing people who live and breathe and find their being in our proximity. Without really meaning to, we go faster and faster...do more and more...and have less and less to spiritually and emotionally show for it.

But the “good news” – the holy news, really – is that we are each of us free and capable of calling ourselves back to full and saving mindfulness. All we have to do is teach ourselves disciplines of focus...like regular sauntering...or sitting yoga...or purposeful prayer...or meditation...or just plain old paying attention to everything that is at hand! Of course, we all know that it takes practice and discipline to be truly attentive to the depths and intricacies of the world that has been set before us, but these spiritual practices and emotional disciplines are truly worth it. They are worth it because Jesus all those many centuries ago had it right: *“The Kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth.”* The kingdom of God is spread out upon the earth, and we are free to see it...and savor it...and be saved by it.

So slow down, dear friends. Today...and tomorrow...and the next day...go sauntering along the beach or the Jungle Trail...or sit very still in some calm and beautiful place, either indoors or out, familiar or new...and drink in the holy, amazing glories that lie all around you. Drink in... and be blessed.

AMEN.