

ENTHUSIASM!

Sermon I in the Year-Long Sermon Series ***“12 Gates to the City: Spiritual Pathways to Enter the Holy City of Your Own Life”***

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VIDEO MEDITATION BEFORE THE SERMON (*Introduction by Rev. Alexander*):

This morning, my topic is “enthusiasm,” and I thought to get us started considering this precious human attribute, I would show you a 6-minute video which was produced by my sister-in-law’s students at Grand Valley State University, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she (Dr. Deanna Morse) is an internationally known professor in the school of communications, specializing in videography and animation. This piece is called a “Lip Dub,” a form of video which is really popular right now on college campuses across the nation. Here, then, is a “lip dub” from the enthusiastic folks of the Clark Retirement Community of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

[Clark Retirement Community “LipDub” -- which shows an entire community of feisty, enthusiastic seniors from Grand Rapids, Michigan, moving through an elaborate song routine together is projected on the chancel screens. This can be viewed on YouTube.com by going to the website and searching for: “Clark Retirement community Lip Dub.”]

THE SERMON:

This morning -- as I begin my yearlong sermon series on “12 Gates to the City: Spiritual Pathways for Entering the Holy City of Your Own Life” -- I want to talk to you about one of the most important spiritual qualities (I think) any human person can possess – namely enthusiasm! The simple truth, dear friends, is that pure and simple enthusiasm for life is something we are all born with...but often lose along the way. To prove my point about the natural enthusiasm that is our human birthright, I want you to watch this brief video clip, – which I am sure some of you have seen, for this has widely made the rounds on the internet – of two twin brothers having a simple conversation in their family kitchen one day...Jon, roll the videotape:

[The congregation is shown 2-3 minutes of the YouTube video of the “Talking Babies,” which shows two year-old twins in diapers, wildly excited as they talk gibberish to one another.]

Now I realize this is hopelessly cute, but it makes a serious point about enthusiasm we disregard at our peril. We human beings are all, more or less, born into this world with nearly unbridled enthusiasm for this thing called life...an energy and eagerness for life which, under the press and problems of life, we all too often lose later in life. What I am going to suggest to you this morning is that, if we are to lead lives of fullness and joy in this creation, we must – as we get older and life loses some of its luster here and there – all learn how to cultivate and keep our enthusiasm for the mere gift of human being....for the gift of life itself, regardless of how complicated and difficult it can at times be.

When I began preparing this sermon, I immediately thought about my dear old friend David Boynton Parke, a ministerial colleague of mine who has never lost his enthusiasm for life.

I recently found this picture of him on the internet – looking, at the moment this photograph was taken -- very serious, intellectual and intent...all of which, I remind you, can be signs of “a certain kind of enthusiasm” for life. But David, who is now almost 80 years old, is a ministerial colleague of mine, and has a nearly boundless, and I might add infectious, enthusiasm for life, ideas, and persons around him. When DNA was passed out, my friend David got the zest gene...pure and simple! There is nothing mild about the salsa that flows through this guy’s veins! Whenever he greets me he always cheerfully bellows, “Brother Scott!”...and he approaches everything in life with an open and eager and enthusiastic spirit. His favorite expression – whether we are talking about the first touchdown of a football game we are

watching, some new book project I am undertaking, the alfredo sauce at his favorite Italian restaurant, or what he did with one of his six grown children on vacation – his favorite expression is always and enthusiastic...“Great!,” sort of a UU ministerial version of “*Tony the Tiger.*”

I have many wonderful memories of time spent with this effervescent soul, but one particular moment I will never forget was a summer morning in extreme Northern Maine, when David and his wife, Marta, were visiting Collins and me at a little wilderness lake cottage we owned in those days. It was a beautiful and languid morning on the lake – with the gentle sun quietly peeking its way over the nearby hills, loons off in the distance mystically chortling to the dawn, and steam rising from the still lake waters in response to the warming air. David’s wife and I were down on the dock, feet dangling in the cool waters, quietly sharing an early cup of coffee and conversation about our lives, when suddenly David – bony knees sticking out from beneath his bright blue nightshirt, with his hair all askew from a night on the pillow, still lacking the dentures he took out of his mouth the night before – enthusiastically bounded out of the screened in porch, looked around for a moment at the beautiful morning...and began pounding hands to his chest, and bellowed for all the loons and humans on the lake to hear, “*BRA-HAA... MORNING!*”

It was a moment of unbridled human enthusiasm for life I shall never forget. Here was a scrawny old guy – who happens, by the way, to be a scholar, author and public intellectual of note, a brilliant man with all kinds of complexities and challenges in his life at that moment, fully aware, he, of how difficult and tragic life can be – yet there he was, in almost child-like exuberance, utterly unable to contain his enthusiasm for the simple ecstasy and exquisiteness of the fresh new day before him. His wife and I found David’s unexpected and unbridled early morning enthusiasm charming, perplexing, and infectious (as enthusiasm so often is), and all we could do was laugh out loud...and agree that he had it absolutely right – it was a stunningly beautiful morning!

Contrast my friend David’s infectious enthusiasm with that of another character, one from children’s literature...namely Eyore from A.A.Milne’s famous book “*Winnie the Pooh.*”

Eyore, as you will all remember from your *Winnie The Pooh* days, is the listless, laconic, down-at-the-mouth donkey who spends his whole life barely managing to even mope his way through; his days. Eyore as a character is defined by a total lack of enthusiasm...he is almost dead to the world he is in, barely aware of creation’s energy, and hardly contributing any energy back to life around him. Now Eyore may be endearing and non-threatening to kids, but there is also, I think, something profoundly sad about his total lack of enthusiasm for life. Eyore, is, by any measure, a tragic figure.

Now...enthusiasm may strike some of you as a curious topic to explore on a Sunday morning in a religious service. But as I began to build my 12-part sermon series on “*Spiritual Pathways for Entering the Holy City of Your Own Life,*” I realized that enthusiasm is without doubt one of those crucial qualities of human being...one of those key possessions of the human heart and soul...which is a precious gateway to full and joyous living.

The etymology – the origins -- of the word “enthusiasm” tells you where I am going spiritually this morning. Its origins come from two Greek words: “Theos,” which means “God,” and “En,” which means “in.” Put together you get “En-theos-ism...and it literally means “to be filled with God,” or “having God within.”

Enthusiasm, then, in the original Greek sense, is much more than simply getting really excited about something – like being an enthusiastic Miami Dolphins fan, or being an enthusiast of the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle, for example. Enthusiasm, it seems to me, is a deeper, longer-lasting spiritual quality of being filled with “great spirit”...it’s having within you “the highest life and most sustaining energy of the universe,” and – and this is the crucial piece

of the equation – it means that you are spiritually able to vibrantly live your life out from that sacred source. Having enthusiasm in the deepest spiritual sense, then – and now I’m talking to both those of you who comfortably use “God language” in your spiritual life and those of you who do not – having enthusiasm is to have within you – because you have allowed it in! – an abundance of the life-sustaining and life-enhancing energy of the universe...and to naturally share that energy with life and persons around you.

Enthusiasm...is first to be open to the “divine traffic” that wants to come into your life...and second to live a life back out which reflects and returns that energy to all that is around you. When my friend David burst out of that lake cottage on that beautiful summer and joyfully bellowed “*BRA-HAA...MORNING!*” he had spirit-filled enthusiasm! He was – in that unguarded, energetic moment – filled with the sacred energy of the divine day that he had welcomed into his soul...and it almost immediately zestfully spilled back out of him, and uplifted and energized everyone who was there to witness it. David was, in that enthusiastic moment, fully and gratefully alive, and with his thunderous declaration of joy entered the holy city of his own life and the sacred moment of the day that was his...and he helped to open my heart to the sacredness that was mine in the self-same moment.

Let me try to put this all in one simple sentence. We have life-saving enthusiasm when we open ourselves to life’s abundant divine traffic, and thus become one with the highest and most healing energy of the universe. Enthusiasm – taking life energy in and in turn letting it out – allows us to be fully engaged participants in the precious life that is ours, whether it is enthusiasm for a beautiful sunrise...a walk in a quiet woods...a hug shared with a child...or a moment spent with a wonderful new idea discovered in a book. Enthusiasm is a spiritual quality that allows us to live fully and richly in the days that are ours.

But enthusiasm, as you all know, is not always easy to have, find or sustain. I have another old friend who is going through a really hard spiritual and emotional time right now. He recently lost one of his beloved, grown children to cancer, and is having a hard time bouncing back from his grief and sorrow that filled his soul during his son’s long struggle for life. This friend is usually a pretty enthusiastic and up-beat person, but he reports to me that for the last few months, he just hasn’t been able to find his characteristic enthusiasm in his daily rounds. He often feels lethargic and empty. Things that used to bring pleasure into his life just feel flat...and he just can’t find the zest and energy with which he usually lives his life. This often happens to us as human beings, of course, when life’s difficulties or tragedies occur. There are inevitably hard times in all our lives when we are just not able to receive “The Divine Traffic and Energy” that wants to flow in and through and (finally) out of us in this rich creation of ours. I have encouraged my friend to be patient with this largely listless spiritual and emotional state that he is in. I trust that, as his grief and sorrow fade, energy and enthusiasm will slowly return, but one cannot expect that one’s life will on cue always brim with enthusiasm and joy...one must be patient with each season of the soul that breaks over us.

So enthusiasm is sometimes terribly elusive for all of us. And yet I am spiritually convinced – and take it as a matter of personal faith about this life I find myself in – that despite these times when we do not feel “filled with a great spirit,” that we were made for an abundance of divine traffic flowing freely in and out of our lives. We were not put on this earth to drag our sorry, lackluster selves (and rear-ends!) from one day to the next, cut off from the amazing energy of creation, without zest, energy, enthusiasm and joy. We are human beings designed, from the first day of our making, to live with the spirit and with the energy that is so profligate and ready in this creation. We were made to be participants in the divine traffic of this world, and nothing less.

All right...so now you know what I mean when I say that enthusiasm is a spiritual quality that enables us to live fully and well...and why it is – to use the organizing image of my year-long sermon series – *A Pathway to the Divine in Your Own Life*. All this may be well and good, but the question quickly and importantly becomes, “Is enthusiasm for and in life something we can

create or cultivate in our own lives, or is it rather something innate...which some lucky, optimistic people are simply born with?" I think the answer is frankly "Yes" to both statements...yes, it is innate for a lucky few...and yes, it can be cultivated.

Let me first talk about the "Genetic" part of enthusiasm. In my experience, some individuals (like my friend David) are simply born with zestful and enthusiastic personalities and predilections. My friend David couldn't mope his way through life for long if he tried!

And neither, frankly, can I. Let me speak personally for a moment. I have often been described (for better, and occasionally perhaps for worse) as a rather enthusiastic person, and I would not deny that zest and energy for many things in my life come naturally and easily for me. In my case, I think this quality came to me both by nature and by nurture. First, I come from decidedly enthusiastic Scottish stock. My extended family (there is no other way to put it) is a pretty exuberant and enthusiastic bunch. When Collins, my partner, first met my raucous, loud family, he didn't quite know what to do with all that energy. When my Ewing/Alexander clan gets together, it's not a calm or quiet thing! We play bagpipes, and do sword dancing, singing, storytelling, exercise and eating...and yes, we drink a beer or two!...it all just comes naturally to us. So like my friend David, I'm pretty sure I was born with the zest gene.

But I also think – and thus we move to the question as to whether or not enthusiasm can be nurtured or cultivated – I also think I learned how to be enthusiastic, primarily from my enthusiastic parents. My Dad was a pretty energetic and engaged guy with a great sense of humor, but my Mother especially was an especially enthusiastic soul. My mother Marcia did just about everything in her life with pluck, passion, purpose, and panache. She knew how to take in the abundant energy of the universe, and she sure knew how to put it right back out there again! And so as I grew up, I think I naturally picked up a lot of her energetic style and enthusiastic ways. Simply put: I learned to be enthusiastic. And thus we arrive at a very important thing, I think, about enthusiasm. Enthusiasm – whenever we encounter it in another person, especially those closest to us – is a positively infectious thing! When somebody near you is filled with enthusiasm – again...for a morning sunrise over a tranquil lake, or a down-to-the-wire ballgame, or an intricate, intimate conversation, or even a passionate kiss! – it's pretty hard not to get swept up in the positive energy yourself.

So...each of us (I think) is variously born with a certain measure of enthusiasm – and I would have each of you pause now and ask yourself, how much natural enthusiasm for life do you think is in your particular genes? [And a quick but important aside here...as you think about yourself in this regard...how enthusiastic you are has little to do with where you fall on the introversion/extroversion continuum. Both introverts, who tend to be quiet, and extroverts, who tend to be louder, can be enthusiastic. It just looks and feels differently across that continuum.

So we're all born with some measure of enthusiasm. But I think it's also true that we can also pick up enthusiasm from other human beings around us – and so I would similarly have you pause now and ask yourself, who in your life from your birth families on has taught or infected or inspired you with their enthusiasm?

So what seems obvious to me is that regardless of how much enthusiasm comes naturally to your soul, if you want more energizing, en-spiriting enthusiasm in your life, it can't hurt to hang around as much as you are able with enthusiastic souls, for they do have good, positive, life-giving energy to share.

But that affirmation aside, the last important question for the morning still remains. Is enthusiasm – this positive, spiritual quality of human being, that opens us to more divine traffic in our lives – is it something we ourselves, independent of the influences of birth and the energy of others, can create or cultivate within our own lives? I think the answer to this final, important question is also "yes."

I believe that each of us can make choices – everyday spiritual and emotional choices – in our lives which open us more deeply to the energy, grace, spirit and charm of this creation. We can each of us, by heart choice, increase the “Divine Traffic” in and out of our lives, engaging ourselves with the world, and working to enhance and strengthen the quality and depth of our relationships with life, nature and other persons. I take it on faith that every last person in this room right now can intentionally open him or herself more freely to the richness of this world we have around us...and as a result have more enthusiasm to share with others.

Indeed, recent studies on what makes for human happiness and “success in living” point to the possibility of just such heart choices. For the last 6 years, Dr. Martin Seligman and his colleagues at the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania have interviewed and studied thousands of individuals, and have found that the key to happiness appears to lie not in eternal events (like having good luck with personal health or economic wealth) but in the cultivation of character qualities they call “*Heart Strengths*” – things like gratitude, hope, zest, forgiveness and the ability to love and be loved.

And the good news is that they have found that people who identify these heart strengths in their own lives and then use them in new ways in their every day lives, report themselves as happier and more satisfied. They have also found that the more people “engage” themselves in the flow of their own lives, the happier they feel. What I think these studies suggest is that we human beings – regardless of how much of the “zest gene” we were given at birth, and regardless of how much enthusiasm our parents and others passed on to us – we are all free to live with greater zest, greater engagement, and greater joy.

Perhaps it is a sign of our cynical times, but there is a popular TV sitcom (now in eternal re-runs!) called “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” which one newspaper reviewer called “painfully funny.” I haven’t seen it, and I frankly don’t intend to, because I don’t believe in “curbing” enthusiasm. I’m here this morning, in fact, to tell you not to curb, but to cultivate your enthusiasm!

Wake up to the fascinating, beckoning flow of the life that is yours. Open yourself up to the “divine traffic” that is so eager to flow in and through and around your life. Deepen your relationships with life and persons around you in all the small, everyday ways that can make such a difference to our hearts. And don’t be afraid of a little zest here and there! Enthusiasm – simple, common, every day enthusiasm in your daily rounds – is a gateway that leads to the Holy City of the life that is already yours. And please don’t ever forget

Tomorrow morning...you are free to wake up...get out of bed...go to the front door...open it...look around...and if you feel like it...cry out for the whole world to hear, “*BRA-HAA... MORNING!*”

Amen!