

WHAT'S IN YOUR BACKPACK?

You Need a Rule of Life

Text: Psalm 16:11; John 15:1-8

The Great Adventure (Part 6)

I

In his book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, Parker Palmer tells of a time when farmers on the Great Plains would spot the signs of a coming blizzard and immediately go out and string a rope from their back door out to the door of the barn. They all knew they'd need to make the journey between those two locations. But they also all knew tales of people who had wandered off in a whiteout and frozen to death, having lost sight of home while still in their own backyards.

Today we live in a blizzard of another sort," writes Palmer. "We all know stories of people who have wandered off... and been separated from their own souls, losing their moral bearings and even their mortal lives" – and sometimes taking innocents down with them. "The lost ones come from every walk of life... Some are lost at this moment and are trying to find the way home. Some are lost without knowing it." (Mark 8:36)

How about you? Do you feel the blizzard around you today? In his book, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, Pete Scazzero names the weather through which many of us routinely walk: "Many of us are overscheduled, tense, addicted to hurry, frantic, preoccupied, fatigued, and starved for time. Cramming as much as possible into our [handheld brains, day planners and to-do lists, we battle life to make the best use of every spare minute we have. Yet... our over-productivity becomes counterproductive. We end our days exhausted from work and raising children. And then our 'free time' on weekends becomes filled with more demands and an already overburdened life... But we can't stop. If we aren't busy, we feel guilty that we waste time and are not productive... Any sense of rhythm in our daily, weekly, and yearly lives has been swallowed up in the blizzard of our lives."

Add to this the unexpected tempests and trials that blow into our lives, or the winds of pop culture and temptation that constantly buffet us, and it becomes easier and easier to see why so many of us become disoriented and lost. What we desperately need is to string a rope that leads us home.

II

For centuries before the modern era, followers of Jesus made a special point of traveling through life hanging on to just such a rope, figuratively speaking. They called this rope their "Rule of Life." When we hear the word "Rule" today

we may immediately think of "rules and regulations" or "rules at school" and tend to say "No, thanks!" But the word "rule" originally had a much more benevolent connotation. The English word "rule" comes from the Greek word for "trellis" "rule" (Greek) = "trellis" -- that structure made of rope, wire, or wood that a gardener employs to support the upward growth and greater fruitfulness of the branches of a vine.

Jesus said: **"My father is the gardener... I am the vine and you are the branches... This is to my father's glory, that you bear much fruit"** (John 15:1, 5, 8). God intends us to be wonderfully healthy, fruitful people. But, in fostering that life, we need a rope that provides structure for our growth and a way back home in times of storm. This is what a Rule of Life is all about.

I like the way Pete Scazzero puts it in our bulletin quote for today: "A Rule of Life is an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do. It provides guidelines to help us continually remember God as the Source of our lives. It includes a unique combination of spiritual practices that provide structure and direction for us to pay attention and remember God in everything we do."

Over these past several weeks, we've been laying out some of the key elements that make up a good Rule of Life.

We've said that to STEP forward on the Great Adventure Christ, first of all, you need **S**ight for the Pathway. You need to be stopping periodically to examine where you are today when it comes to your spiritual and relational health and to scope out where you want to go.

Secondly, you will benefit greatly from some regular **T**rainning for the Soul. You need some specific spiritual disciplines you are putting on daily to keep walking with God when you're not around a church building.

Thirdly, you need **E**quipment for Life. You will want to equip yourself with books and classes and other forms of content that point the way to living beyond the cultural or familial "systems" you've been raised on and into the far healthier way of the kingdom of God.

And, finally, you need **P**artners for the Journey. You will travel so much further and faster, if you have some companions committed to helping you move ahead, especially when you reach the rivers of life.

This is what you need to STEP forward on the Great Adventure with Christ and your Rule of Life is what ties it all together. Your Rule of Life is the particular set of practices, relationships, and experiences you choose to be your trellis for continued growth, or the rope you hang onto so you don't get lost in life's storm.

III

Chances are you already have some strands of a Rule of Life working for you.

For example, you come to church. You might use a devotional guide. You may pray before meals or bedtime. This is all good. The pressing question each of us needs to ask ourselves, however, is this: "Is my present Rule of Life strong enough, given the forces I am facing?" Am I more faithful and fruitful than I was last year at this time? Would the people who know me best say that I am spiritually and relationally healthier than I was a few years ago? Or is the blizzard beating me? Am I so blown about or buried by the forces of sin or society that I frequently lose my way?

There is no shame in admitting as rock star, Leonard Cohen, does in one of his songs, that: "The blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold and it has overturned the order of the soul." But it is crucial to take some STEPs to recover that order. We can build a better trellis. We can weave ourselves a stronger rope. In the Adventure Guide that accompanies this message, we've provided you with a place to further define your own Rule of Life.

Sometime this week, write down there or someplace else a list of the health-producing practices you've already put in place in your life. Then, sit quietly somewhere and ask God to guide you to one or two new practices that stir a desire in you. You'll find a rich list of Ideas for Strengthening Your Rule of Life on the supplemental resource we've given you.

Add them to your written Rule of Life and practice them regularly for awhile.

After giving them a good run, set aside whatever practices don't yield benefit.

Move on and experiment with another practice.

Review and revise your Rule of Life often.

Learn as you go and enjoy the adventure!

IV

As I look back, I marvel sometimes at the great adventures God has led me on through the years. He has let me parachute out of an airplane, and scuba-dive through a sunken ship, and ride bareback over the continental divide. God has let me ski the Alps of Austria, and ride a camel in Jericho, and win a race before the royalty of England. He's led me to jobs on an offshore oil-rig and on a farm, in a maximum security prison and in the corporate headquarters of IBM. He's taken me to the refugee camps of Thailand and the skyscrapers of Hong Kong and the Forbidden City of Beijing.

I've eaten bugs in a South American jungle, and shaken hands with a U.S. president, and barely missed being blown up by a bomb in Belfast. God has led me by the Sea of Galilee at sunrise and through the bazaars of Istanbul in the noisy noonday. He's let me see the Taj Mahal at sunset and the pyramids of Egypt by moonlight. He has left me with vivid memories of the great cities of

Europe, and of the slums of Nairobi, and of the long lost view from the top of the World Trade Center.

Yet of all the adventures on which God has led me, none has been as fulfilling or important as the one on which He has also been calling YOU – the journey toward becoming just like Christ (John 10:10). This is the great goal of your life and mine: not just to survive but to thrive, not just to be momentarily happy but to be as magnificently healthy as Jesus is.

If you never travel as far as the state line but you manage to find your way close to that state of health, then your life's journey will have been a fabulous success. Conversely, if your passport is stamped with all kinds of exotic places, but you haven't grown the kind of spiritual and relational health Jesus makes possible, then your life will have been a dead end.

The Psalmist once rejoiced before God: **"You have made known to me the path of life"** (Psalm 16:11). The good news is that Jesus is still making that path known to people. He is still issuing the invitation: **"Follow Me"** to a greater life.

The question I want to ask in closing is: What Rule, what rope, are you planning to hold onto as you take steps toward that life? Make sure you've got a good one in your backpack. Make certain its got enough strands and add a few more if it doesn't. Hold on tight to it, because there's a blizzard out there. But if you do, there is a good and gracious God who is going to use the STEPS you take along it to help you get healthier than you are today and to make sure that you find your way Home.

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