

## Befriending Life Through Sponge Cake

### Fresh Perspectives:

I want to tell you a story about Jesus. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, we see Jesus breaking several rules about who supposedly good people were allowed to eat and drink with, and about what you can do on the Sabbath

Now, I'm not telling you this to encourage you to break rules, by the way, but I will say that, sometimes, when we focus on all the "should" of our lives, we end up missing some really important things...now, back to the story

So, first, Jesus has a meal with tax collectors and sinners, and religious law taught that he shouldn't do that if he wanted to stay religiously clean. Then, he let his disciples pick some grain and eat it on the Sabbath, which was also against the rules. Then, he healed a person on a Sabbath, which was totally against the rules because no one was supposed to work on that day.

Can you imagine if that were a rule today? Hospitals would be closed on Sundays!

Jesus' answer to the guys who really liked the rules was to point out that it was good to celebrate while he was around—when God shows up, it makes sense to have a party! And he also asked them if it was really wrong to save a life on the Sabbath...or ever.

When I read these chapters, I think that Jesus is trying to say that life is worth celebrating, enjoying, sharing, and saving...that we need to take the time, when life is good, to enjoy it, and that we need to do what we can to preserve it.

This is partially where our theme for this Sunday comes from: Befriending Life. The author we've been reading, Dr. Remen, provides a cool twist on what Jesus seems to be saying in those chapters.

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She tells the story of how her grandmother never wasted anything, ever. Her grandmother grew up very poor, so every single food item was precious. But when she got older, she was able to buy more food and her fridge was usually stuffed full. Inevitably, once in a while, a grandchild would open the fridge and an egg would fall out and splat on the floor.

Now what would happen in your house if you broke an egg on your floor? In mine, we'd probably clean it up and then wash the floor. In others, the child might be yelled at for breaking an egg. In hers, the grandmother would smile and say, "today we get to have spongecake!"—meaning that she would scoop up that egg off the floor and cook it into a cake

Why? Because some things are too precious, says Dr. Remen, to lose. When you grow up not having a lot of food, you appreciate and use every single thing you have—even an egg that has splattered all over the floor. In fact, you see the broken egg as a gift, since now you get to have cake!

I think that this is what Jesus was trying to get at: Our job is to befriend life, to see it as too wonderful and precious to lose any part of it. If we focus too much on all of the "shoulds" in our lives, we might miss our chance to help others who need it, and we might miss out on good cake!

So when you go home this week, I'd like you to notice ways you are invited to befriend life—are there lonely people at your lunch table who need a friend? Is there someone on the playground who got hurt and needs a hand? Do you have the opportunity to enjoy life through laughter or a nice meal? Or, if something breaks, can you maybe turn it into something life giving—like art, or cake?

And now, let us pray: Dear God, thank you for helping us to befriend life. Please help us to make life more fulfilling for others, too. Amen.

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

In our sermon series, we have arrived at the section in Remen's book called, "Befriending Life." The story I told the children about the sponge cake is from that section, but it's only half of the story. In the second half, she tells us that, when she was very young, she was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease, an autoimmune intestinal disorder that can be incredibly serious, even life-threatening, and that requires massive life changes.

Remen tells us that when she heard this news, she turned to her mother in horror but, instead of hugging her or telling her that everything would be okay, her mother looked her in the eyes and said, "we will make a sponge cake."

This turned out to be exactly what Remen needed to hear. Comfort didn't come from an untruth—that everything would be okay. Everything would not be okay, not in the way that a young woman would have imagined or wanted. Most of us want what we consider a normal life, which seems to mean that we can be relatively self-reliant with a job and income that makes us happy, with family and friends who support and love us, and with few setbacks or real difficulties in our lives.

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But the truth is that for very many of us, life is full of struggles and ups and downs. Life might mean that we deal with chronic illnesses like autoimmune diseases, long covid, Parkinson's, addiction, or depression. Or it could mean that we have to struggle with an injury or a sudden illness like a stroke, nerve damage, or cancer. This is true for so many of us that I often wonder if our common understanding of "normal" is actually far from normal, but more like a fantasy.

In that case, Remen's mother's words—"we'll make a sponge cake"—are critical for all of us to hear. They are an expression of radical acceptance—the acceptance of reality as it is and the desire to not let even the negative experiences of life be wasted.

This is not always an easy message to accept or to hold onto. Remen tells us that it has taken years to figure out how to make sponge cake out of such a diagnosis. Moreover, I would say that radical acceptance is something we have to choose to do on our own. Many of us will balk against it as a platitude if someone else prescribes it. And I recognize the irony of me preaching about it, then. So, to me, radical acceptance might better be something that we each choose to tell ourselves to do, rather than to tell others to do it, unless you know the people you're recommending it to very well.

As individuals talking to ourselves, we can remind ourselves the message we hear from Galatians, that the fruits of the spirit

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include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. How do we find peace and faithfulness in the midst of a personal or world crisis? How do we find the patience to wait through it? Where do we find joy in it? Those things are what radical acceptance calls us to do—to find those fruits of the spirit in the midst of struggle.

As I was re-reading these chapters from Remen's book this week, I was reminded of a conversation I had with a middle-aged man who has long covid. He was relatively healthy before he got it, but now he suffers from serious chronic fatigue. He can only work part-time because he has to spend hours every day in bed, letting his body recover its energy so that he can spend the rest of the day with his family.

He told me that when he had recovered from the initial symptoms of Covid, but realized that this fatigue was lingering, he was really angry at life, at God, at his body. He would spend those hours in bed fighting it, praying that he would recover faster, shouting at God that it wasn't fair, he should be able to get up and be like a "normal" person. The anxiety and depression this caused sent him to a therapist who taught him about radical acceptance.

When he told her that he kept grieving about everything he had lost, she told him to try to stop thinking about it as a loss, but instead to think of how he might use what was happening to him. Grief was necessary and okay for a time but, eventually, he had to

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accept his new reality and find a way to live and thrive within it. Without using these words, she basically asked him to make sponge cake.

He told me that, at first, he was really angry about this advice. He literally *had* lost something—his ability to work, his ability to move, his ability to even care for himself fully—so telling himself that he could gain something from this experience or that it wasn't a loss would be a form of lying to himself. "But do you know what, Pastor Laura," he said. "It turns out that two things can be true at once. As my therapist says, there is a both/and here. I did lose something, but I can also have gained something at the same time. And focusing on what I am gaining helps me to live a better life with the life that I have."

And so he stopped fighting his rest times and allowed himself to relax into them. Almost immediately, he found that his body felt so relieved. "It was like when you go to bed at night after a long day of working in the yard, you know?" he said. "That comfortable feeling when you get to let your body rest. I GOT to let my body rest," he said, putting an emphasis on the word "got"—as if it were a gift to be able to let his tired body rest. And it was a gift because that was what his body needed.

He started practicing meditation as he rested which, he tells me, both helped his body to recover more quickly and helped his entire psychological and emotional self to just feel better. His rest

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times have gotten a little shorter because he has been able to fully relax and heal during those times. More importantly, on most days, he said that he started to really be able to feel God's presence there with him, as he closed his eyes and rested away from the world. After a while, he started to look forward to those times of the day when he needed to rest. It became a time when he was allowed to just care for himself, show some love to his body, and to feel God's presence in his life, caring for him.

There is a way to live well, coming away with God to enjoy the beauties that life has to offer, even when it feels like life is no longer normal. Even in our most difficult times when it seems that God is not there, God calls to us, runs to us, leaping over hills like a stag, calling to us through our windows because God loves us deeply and profoundly. Radical acceptance is accepting the difficulties of life, while looking for the way that God is loving us, calling to us, and even dancing along-side us through those difficulties. Radical acceptance is about reaching back to God, jumping up and following God into the adventure. So let us consider if we want to answer that call during these pandemic times. What kind of sponge cake might you bake this week? Amen.