

4.8.2018 Sermon

I have a friend who told me that, when her father was very sick, in his last illness, she went to him and unloaded all the mistakes that she regretted--growing up, marriage, raising kids, jobs, everything. When she was finished with this long confession, he paused a moment and said, "Regrets; everybody has 'em."

The title of this service is "I Got No Regrets." And I don't regret things I've done. Not that I haven't done things to regret--I've done a lot of regrettable things: Stupid things, foolish things, careless things, insensitive things, hostile things--but I try not to regret them. Because, as the prince told his father the king, regret is bogus. And here's why.

In 1588, Spain determined to invade England. The queen of England was Elizabeth I, and her father was Henry VIII, who had broken away from the Catholic Church. Spain was the champion of Catholicism and the Pope. So Spain decided to invade England, depose the heretic queen, and replace her with a Catholic king or queen who would bring the country back to the true faith.

At the time, Spain owned the Netherlands. They had acquired it through a series of marriages. The plan was to build up a big army in the Netherlands, put the soldiers on boats and barges, and cross the English Channel to invade England. If you're going to invade an island nation, you have to take care of their navy first. You can't have the English navy sinking your boats and barges when you're trying to invade. So Spain decided to build the Armada--the biggest navy in the world. The Armada would take care of the English navy, then protect the boats and barges as they crossed the English Channel.

You can't build the biggest navy in the world without all of Europe knowing what you're up to, and England and Spain were in a kind of a cold war, so in 1587, a year before the Armada sailed, England sent a small fleet down toward Spain, to poke around and generally make trouble. So the English fleet gets down to Spain and they find a cargo fleet full of barrel staves.

Staves are the wooden slats that they make barrels out of. You can't make barrel staves with green wood--fresh wood. Wood shrinks as it dries, and if you make barrels out of green wood, as the wood shrinks, spaces will open up between the staves, and what's in the barrel will pour out--especially water, which you need a lot of on a long sea voyage. So barrel staves have to cure for up to a year. The English found the fleet carrying the barrel staves from the barrel-stave-curing-place to the cooperage--a cooperage is a barrel factory--and burned and sank all the ships. As a consequence, when the Armada sailed the next year, they were short of barrels, and short of supplies--especially food and water.

In 1588, the Armada sailed around Spain, up past France, and into the English Channel, where the English navy was waiting for them. The two fleets worked their way up the English Channel for a while, and then the Armada started running out of supplies. They had to anchor near the French coast to take on food and water.

Then the English send fireships toward the Armada.

To make a fireship, you take some of your ships, remove all the supplies, get all the guys off, and load the decks with lots of barrels of tar, and set them on fire, then let the tide and current take them toward your enemy. Sailing ships were made of wood, canvas, and rope--and the ropes were covered with tar so they didn't rot--so the last thing they want around sailing ships is open fire. The way to take care of fireships--the English didn't invent fireships, they had been used for a long time--was to get some of your smaller ships, row over to the fireships, throw grappling hooks over, and tow them to the side so they would run aground. But the English had

put loaded cannons on the decks of the fireships, so when the small Spanish ships came over to tow them away, the cannons started firing at random. The Spanish sailors said Forget this; no way, Jose (literally; the Spanish captain was named Jose). So the Armada had to scatter, and since they were no longer in a tight defensive formation, the English were able to attack some of the ships and do serious damage. The Armada had to leave and try to regroup at a rendezvous point, but then a big storm came up. The Spanish ships were scattered over the ocean, and all they could do was go home. In the end only about half of the ships of the Armada made it home. The invasion was off and Spain never threatened England again.

Almost 400 years later, in 1981, also in Spain, the military decided to stage a coup--a military takeover of the government. They planned their coup for the day of the meeting of parliament to choose a new prime minister.

The way it would proceed, first the army would march into Valencia--the second biggest city in the country--and declare martial law. Then the Civil Guard, a kind of national police force, would take over the parliament building. Then the tank brigade stationed outside of Madrid would march into the capital. Then a general, named General Armada, would go to see the king and say, Your majesty, you can see what's going on. Why don't you appoint me as prime minister for an interim government, and once we restore order, we can hold new elections. (Well, of course, once the military takes over, you can forget about elections.)

So the day of, everything went according to plan. The army marched into Valencia; the Civil Guard took over parliament; then they called the commander of the tank brigade outside of Madrid and said, "The army is in Valencia, the Civil Guard is in the parliament building, and General Armada is meeting with the king, and it looks like the king is on our side. So you can move your tanks into position." But the tank commander decides to check. So he calls over to the palace, and gets the king's private secretary, and says, "Let me talk with General Armada." And the private secretary says, General Armada isn't here. The tank commander says "They told me he was meeting with the king." And the private secretary says, "I don't know who THEY are, or what they told you, but General Armada is not here." And he hangs up and runs into the king's office.

At that moment, the king is on the phone with General Armada, and General Armada is saying, "Well, your majesty, you can see what's happening. Why don't I come over and we can talk." And the private secretary come running in, waving his arms. The king puts his hand over the phone and says, "What, what." The private secretary says, "The tank commander just called and asked to speak with General Armada. He said that they told him that the general was here already." With this the king figures out immediately that General Armada is way more involved than he's letting on. Why would anyone know that General Armada is supposed to be meeting with the king unless it was part of a plan? So the king gets back on the phone, and General Armada is saying, "Your majesty, let me just clear a few papers off my desk and I'll be right over." And the king says, "No, General, you stay there. We'll let you know if we need you." And at that moment the coup starts to fall apart. The king gets on the phone with all the units he knows are loyal, and tells them to get suited up and wait for his orders. Then he communicates with all the military and says, "This coup is not in support of the monarchy, it is against the monarchy. I order all units to stand down, stay in your barracks, and await orders from me, your king, your commander in chief. Then he goes on TV and tells the country, we've just been through 40 years in the wilderness, and we've rejoined the community of nations. We are not going backward. Viva democracy, viva Espana. By the middle of the night the Civil Guard has

bailed out of the parliament building--climbing out the windows--and by the end of the week the arrests have begun.

We had our own civil war, in the 1860s. In 1863, General Robert E. Lee led the major part of his army north, out of Virginia, through Maryland, and into Pennsylvania. The idea was that they could strike north toward Harrisburg, the state capital; or east toward Philadelphia; or south toward Baltimore or Washington. Or maybe just hang around and make trouble: Destroy Northern houses and barns, burn Northern crops, steal Northern cattle, or maybe terrorize Northern women and children--make the people of the North know what war was like.

As the Confederate army moved north, the Union army had to shadow them, on their right--to the east--between the Confederate army and the capital in Washington. The Confederate army was moving faster than the Union army--the army was smaller, they had less stuff, and they had a greater spirit--they were moving into enemy territory, fighting for their freedom; so every day they moved a little farther ahead of the Union army. At one point, the lead element of the Confederate army--out in front of everybody else--saw an advertising flyer for a new shipment of shoes. Shoes for men, women, and children. Dress shoes, casual shoes, work boots. The Confederate army was always short of supplies, and the one thing that an army on the march needs most--what it wears out the most--is shoes. So the Confederate soldiers decided to turn right and go into town, and get those shoes.

Of course the town they arrived at was Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. the Confederates ran into some Union cavalry, some more soldiers arrived from both sides, and soon the Battle of Gettysburg had started. The battle went on for three days, ending with the Confederates losing and having to retreat back through Maryland and into Virginia. The Confederates never won another major battle after that.

What if those soldiers had not seen that advertising flyer for shoes? What if their commander had said, "I know, boys, but we've got a job to do; let's keep moving." There wouldn't have been a Battle of Gettysburg. There might have been a battle, but maybe it would have been in a place that was more favorable to the Confederates. Maybe there wouldn't have been a battle at all. Maybe the Confederate army would have just raided and plundered the countryside, then turned around and gone home, leaving the people up north hurting and frustrated. The South could have won their independence, and they wouldn't be part of the country today. Now some say that might not be such a bad thing...but everything would have been different.

Or what if the English fleet hadn't found the ships full of barrel staves? If the Spanish Armada had had enough barrels, and enough supplies, they could have sailed all the way to the Netherlands without having to stop for supplies. No fire ships, no storm, maybe the invasion would have landed in England. The Spanish army was big enough to defeat the English army., and maybe Spain would have placed a Catholic king or queen on the throne as a Spanish puppet. There would have been no Jamestown, no pilgrims at Plymouth Rock; maybe no Shakespeare. Shakespeare's career started just a few years after the Armada, and if there had been an invasion and war, people wouldn't have been going to the theaters--and Shakespeare could have been in the army.

And what if the tank commander had called five minutes later--or General Armada had called five minutes earlier. The king could well have agreed to have General Armada come over and talk, and when the tank commander called and asked to talk with General Armada, the private secretary would have said "He's not here YET." It wouldn't have seemed odd that the

tank commander was calling for General Armada, because of course as soon as the king had said come on over, the general would have told his entire staff that he was on the way to see the king, and the word would have spread instantly through the whole military. Spain could have fallen back into military dictatorship.

There are a million examples of how minor accidents have made a huge difference in history; these are just a few of my favorites. No matter what the actions of great leaders--kings, queens, generals--and no matter what the great forces of history--Socialism, Capitalism, Nationalism, Religion, Democracy--small accidents cause great effects.

And that's why regret is bogus. Regret is based on magical thinking—the idea that, if you had just done that one thing, the entire universe would be the same, except that you would have made that one thing better. But the entire universe is connected, and minor little actions can change everything. In my own life, in the 1990s I was looking for work, and I had an interview, and they made me an offer. But it seemed like a really low offer. I thought about it for a while and decided that, no, the pay was just too low, and I didn't take the job. Six months later, I'm still unemployed, and that low pay is starting to look real attractive, compared to the zero dollars an hour I was making.

But if I had taken that job, my whole employment history would have been different, and I wouldn't have the job I have now, working for myself. And if I hadn't been unemployed that summer, I wouldn't have gotten so involved in a volunteer project, and wouldn't have gone to that event in the northwest suburbs, and I wouldn't have been standing around the keg of beer after the event, and I wouldn't have met that girl. And now that girl's my wife.

I was married before. I was married at age 22—way too early to get married, and not a good choice. The marriage ended in divorce. There was a lot of pain and heartache before the marriage finally ended. But if I hadn't made that choice and gotten married, I wouldn't have the son I have, I wouldn't have the house, and in the course of the marriage falling apart I wouldn't have gotten counseling, which led me to major discoveries about myself, my upbringing, and my thinking, and has led me to avoid some of the mistakes of the past. And if I hadn't been in that marriage, that one Christmas I wouldn't have gotten those paints and art supplies, and I never would have painted that picture of a single yellow tulip. Everything would have been different.

What do you do about regret? What do you do about those memories, about bad actions, stupid and foolish actions, that your mind recoils from? You need to open them up, look at them, acknowledge them. Put them into categories. Maybe you did something stupid or foolish. What were you thinking?! Well, what WERE you thinking? Maybe you were young and ignorant. Well, maybe you learned something. See what you learned and how you're not making that mistake again. Maybe you were distracted. Maybe you were hungry, or angry, or lonely, or tired. You've learned not to make decisions under stress. Maybe you truly made the best decision with the facts at hand, and the parts you couldn't predict just turned out wrong. It wasn't a mistake, it was just a chance that didn't pay off.

And if you've done something hurtful to someone, it's never too late to apologize. Maybe it wasn't even that hurtful. We're so conscious of the effects of what we do—which is a good thing, but maybe what we do isn't so terrible after all. And even if you've really hurt someone, see if you can apologize. The gift of forgiveness can chase that obnoxious guest right out of the living room.

And let's not forget to forgive ourselves. I just read this recently: If you screw something up, and you're really beating yourself up about it, think of what you would do if your best friend, someone you love, someone in your family, confessed that they had done the same thing. What would you do? You'd say, "Oh, come on, that's ok. That wasn't so bad." Treat yourself like a good friend; like someone you love. Remember that regret is bogus. It wasn't that bad, you learned something, and anyway, if you had done, or not done, that thing, everything in the universe would have been different.

Speaking of Gettysburg, at the dedication of the national cemetery at Gettysburg, in 1863, there were two speakers: Abraham Lincoln, and the other guy. The other guy was a professional orator and spoke for over an hour. This was a time when people would go to hear speakers for an hour or more—it was right before Netflix was started. So the other guy spoke for an hour, and then Abraham Lincoln spoke for a few minutes, and his Gettysburg Address has come down through the years.

Now, Abraham Lincoln-like, Ron Solberg will sum up this whole discussion of regret; in a few words and far better than I could do.