

A sermon by Heather Grantham
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church.
2/28/2010

I don't own a tv. I find that if I have a tv in my house, I get nothing accomplished. And it isn't so much the programs or shows that I'm addicted to, but the **commercials!** I'm one of the few people who can watch infomercials for hours on end, and when I do watch a tv program, I'm always waiting for the commercials: why is this show so long?! I need to be told what I need. There is something intriguing to me about advertising. I am the prime subject that most ads are made for. My family likes to tell me it is because I'm gullible. However, on closer observation, I love commercials because they show me things I need that I didn't even know I wanted. Commercials are mesmerizing because they promise that my life will be better if I had said product. Tired and drowsy in the morning, try Folgers brand of coffee - it is the best way for waking up! Then if you can't sleep, try Tylenol pm! Or if I'm having relationship drama, all I need to do is buy a new car or maybe try smoking that new brand of cigarettes. Commercials always begin with sad, single people who are severely depressed. Then suddenly, after the introduction of a new face cream, the same person is swept off their feet and transformed - single and depressed no longer!

And while I jest and make light of our consumer driven culture, I don't take lightly that advertisements speak to that deep seeded longing within every human being, a voice telling us we aren't complete - perhaps that voice is caused by our humanness. This voice says we need SOMETHING in our life to fill that gaping hole in the core of our being. We are all longing to be better, fuller, prettier, perfect, complete. And commercials offer us "stuff" in order to be made complete, in order to fill that hole.

I want to take some time for us to ponder what each of us use to satisfy that deep longing. When we are depressed or down, what is it we reach for - is it an actual material thing? Or maybe we get into co-dependent relationships - thinking that if we only had a partner, things would be ok. Or perhaps it is an action - always trying to impress people or do everything in order to be liked. Maybe it is the drive for success or perfection. What is your "filler"?

Food was how I filled that hole. Food was my comfort - if I was depressed, I gorged myself. If I was happy, I had dinner with friends, again gorging myself. If I was stressed, I knew that the Taco Bell drive-thru would soothe anxiety better than Xanax. I didn't want to examine my emotions - I wanted to silence them by pressing them down into my gut with food. For a very long time, I could not see how this was a problem - we all need to eat, right? And I'm sure we all have rationalizations for our behavior, don't we?

I was unaware of how making poor food choices had a negative effect on not only my body, but my spirit as well. Bodily wise, I had all types of medical issues - the most prominent being my constant back pain. Spiritually wise, the food was a way to numb all my feelings - acting as a blockage to my relationship with myself, others and God. Food

became my God, my light and my salvation. Food was how I processed my humanness, not through a deep introspection which is the essence of prayer. Addictions are like that though, having an effect on our total being: physically, mentally and spiritually. In the Philippians passage, Paul tells us that the people whose gods were their bellies are spiritually being impeded by this addiction. How does the thing you thought of before effect you physically? Mentally? Spiritually?

It was by being in this church, Noe Valley Ministry, with all your love and support that I finally became self-aware of just how much food hurt me and my relationship with God. So, as most of you know, I started a journey a little over a year ago. A journey which has resulted in me losing almost half of my body weight. I had to take some drastic measures when dealing with food. I had to eliminate that addiction and attachment. No longer wishing to be in the Sanctuary of Safeway, but trusting in the God of Israel who I know through Jesus Christ.

Because of the physical nature of this addiction, my journey has been extremely visible to others, making me vulnerable and exposed. And I'm amazed at how spiritual this whole act of "confronting one's addictions" became for me. I retreated into a dark space, a cocoon-like state in order to introspectively reflect on my whole being. I realized just how dependent upon food I was as a source of medication - as a way of dealing with every single emotion that popped up. With food no longer being a way to soothe myself, I had to deal with each emotion individually. I couldn't push it down with a tub of Ben and Jerry's. For every pound I lost, I had to confront my past demons - the enemies from my past. I felt like these enemies were rising up against me and trying to assail me, just as the Psalmist mentioned. I had to open up my whole being to this constant attacking of negative emotions - I felt like a vulnerable flower being torn open and apart by torrential rain drops. I isolated myself. I was convinced that no one would understand what I was going through. My mother and father didn't reject me in actuality - but I did have to change my interactions with them. When I went home, we could no longer gather in the kitchen or at our favorite restaurant. I was alone and depressed. Broken and beaten. I slept as much as possible, finding solace only in my dreams.

But then a seminary friend of mine, who was herself confronting her own demons and addictions, told me to turn to scripture in my dark state. So, I started reading the Psalms. How emotional and full of pain and anguish are all these Psalms! I began to use this state of isolation and introspection as silent prayer - my personal time with each emotion resulted in a connection with something bigger than myself. My experience was my own, and no one could comprehend the uniqueness of my situation... But God could. God who is the ultimate comforter was my sole source of nourishment during this cocoon phase. I lapped up scripture with a new enthusiasm. I was certain that the psalms might have been written by me in a previous existence. By examining myself, my relationship with God deepened. Come, said my heart, seek God's Face - just like today's Psalm.

But something other than a connection with God came out through my study of the Psalms. I gained a deeper connection with humans throughout history. No, the subtext behind psalm 27 was probably NOT food addiction. And, no, these Psalms were not

written directly to me or to my situation. But they were composed by other hurting humans using such general language that they connect to that brokenness and addiction present within each person - they speak to that deep longing of each of us, regardless of time or space or personality. These Psalms speak directly to our humanness, urging us to seek wholeness NOT from the world or anything/one in the world, but from God.

So, with this understanding, we can read through the Psalms, substituting our specific, individual problems for the generalities of the Psalms: to paraphrase Ps 27 vs11-12
Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a stable path
In spite of my addictions.
Do not give me up to the will of my cravings,
for unwise choices have risen within me,
and they are breathing out hatred of self.

When I did this, I was amazed at the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruent thoughts: the next verse talks about seeing God in the land of the living. How can I say that my flesh is being devoured while also saying that God is my light and salvation?

One night in December, when I was at my wit's end, I discovered that I had lost enough weight in order to take a bubble bath. I still can't remember the last time I COULD take a bath - so this was a unique and celebratory occasion. I lit candles, trying to silence all the voices inside my head telling me I wasn't good enough. Those voices shouting, reminding me of my brokenness and my creaturliness. I remember feeling so anxious, mostly because, in my cocoon like state, I was neglecting my responsibilities to this church and my classes. I was paralyzed by this impatient, inner voice which kept telling me all the things I "should" be doing and all the things I was doing wrong. It was in the midst of these voices that I heard a whisper in the back of my mind saying, "relax". "Relax". But it was such a small voice, so I had to concentrate deeper. When I concentrated, the shouting voices suddenly stopped and the word "relax" became clearer. I recognized this voice to be God's so I lapsed into a time of prayer. I had this immediate, overwhelming sense of peace surround me. The words "faith" and "trust" joined the whisper. And so I surrendered myself to that still small voice in my mind.

Later that night, in my sense of surrender, I opened up my bible to the Psalms and I read them in a new light. No, my pain and addiction and longing for something other than myself did not dissipate. The psalms do not deny the human element of pain and longing that is present, but this is why we find that weird juxtaposition I mentioned earlier. Having faith and trusting in God does not make our addictions go away. No matter how hard we may wish our addictions and troubles away, they will still remain. **But**, when we ask God to journey with us, these addictions lose their power because God lifts them up. They lose their power because we surrender to that small voice of faith in our minds telling us to "relax" to just "be" in the present, open arms of something bigger than us. I am still tempted by food every day, but I trust that everything will be ok - even if I slip up. Everything is the way it is, and there is comfort in knowing that God walks with us, urging us to grow stronger with each day, carrying everything.

So in this journey, I realized it's not just about "behaving" or "abstaining", it is about examining the emotion behind everything we do. Why do I want to eat right now? Am I hungry or just anxious? Why am I spending time with this person when they only drain me? Will a beer help me understand myself better, or will it only numb me? If my house is immaculate, will people like me and will my mom finally shut up? What makes us seek for that substance, or validation, or success? What is our motivator? It is in deconstructing the feelings behind the behavior that we find that hole in our heart meant only for God. We must transcend everything logical and lean into the arms of faith.

When we become aware of God's voice, we can be more confident that we are fine just as we are, without certain behaviors that act as a blockage in our sense of self - God created us good and wants us to go back to that state of full reliance on God. Trusting that God will work everything out so we don't have to. That is why we corporately confess our sins every Sunday - we acknowledge our humanness and the fact that we aren't God. And the assurance of pardon should liberate us to live in this world naked, vulnerable, being who we are and who we were created to be.

But our journey doesn't end with submission. Our Psalm for today ends with:
I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.
Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the God!

Only when we submit to something larger than our humanness, and become honest, open and vulnerable, can we find that spark of hope - that hope that God will work it all out in time and that God isn't finished with us. Hope is rare, but strong. Once found, it never lets go. Food lets go. People let go. Alcohol lets go. But God, and the hope God offers doesn't. God never lets go of us. God holds us and comforts us, so we can crawl up on the Almighty's lap, laying our head upon breast, and she strokes our hair and tells us everything will be ok. "Be patient with yourself, my beloved," she whispers. "Be patient with my work within you. Relax, just relax. Trust me."