

LESSONS FOR LIFE FROM BEAR CAMP

It's been quite a few years ago now, but I remember the day fairly well. Helmuth Dewald invited me to spend a day with him and his neighbor fishing on the Missouri River. I'm not much of a fisherman, but thought it would be good to spend the day with Helmuth, and we all know there is nothing better than fresh walleye! We set out from the Rifle Range boat dock and headed for the "bump" in the river. We drove a few minutes, pulled up along shore, and began trolling near the mysterious "bump" in the river. I was dumbfounded, not knowing how to identify a "bump" in the river, but figured it must have something to do with some fancy GPS or expensive fish-finding depth finder or some new technology I didn't know. I didn't want to appear stupid, so didn't ask. We fished up the river for a mile or so, then pulled our lines in and raced back down the river to the "bump" in the river. We'd caught a few nice walleyes on that first pass. We caught more on the second, and soon pulled in again and headed for the "bump".

My curiosity got the best of me, and finally I asked how they identified the exact spot where the "bump" in the river resided. They both laughed (at my novice expense) and pointed to an irrigation "pump" located along the river bank plain as day.

Following that excursion, I preached a sermon about lessons I'd learned about evangelism from my day of fishing. I learned that it is really helpful to know the language (and accent) of those you are trying to reach. I learned that when trying to catch fish (or people for Jesus) it's best to know where they hang out, and go there instead of just expecting them to jump in your boat because you ask them to come. I discovered it was essential to figure out what bait they were liking that day, or hour, and if you really wanted to increase your chances of success, put two lines in the water, or better yet, two lines with two hooks; the principle of multiplication works in evangelism too!

Well, early last fall I was invited by Jeff Schneider to accompany him, his father Harry, his son Jason, and his two nephews Lawrence and Gene, on a black bear hunt in Southwestern Oregon. I was humbled to be included in this family outing until it dawned on me the real reason I'd been invited. It didn't take me long to figure out I was the second oldest, but quicker still I rather easily discerned that I was also the first 'fattest'. The Schneider family invited me along knowing that they no longer did any of them have to outrun the bear...they just had to outrun this out of shape preacher!

We had a marvelous 10 day adventure. I would love to share a few lessons I learned along the way. They are not specifically lessons about evangelism, but lessons about life. I'm in no way advocating that bear hunting is an essential activity to increase your spiritual life; but I do want to demonstrate that lessons for life are all around us, if we just take some time to see them. Don't know if Solomon was a bear hunter or not, but he understood this principle:

I applied my heart to what I observed and learned a lesson from what I saw.

Proverbs 24:32

So here are 3 simple lessons for our spiritual life development I learned in SW Oregon, on a bear hunt, with the Schneider boys.

1. THE FASTEST WAY TO INCREASE YOUR HEART RATE IS BY GOING UPHILL

That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong. 2Corinthians 12:10

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.
Romans 8:18

The land we hunt is like a rain forest. Located about 3 miles from the beautiful Oregon coast line, with abundant moisture, trees and vegetation, this very mountainous terrain provided all the "stress test" I need for this month...at least!

We spent many hours of each day hiking these rather rugged mountain trails, and I soon discovered that my long winter lay-off recuperating from Rotator Cuff surgery had left me in terrible physical shape. (Continuously over eating doesn't help either!)

As I huffed and puffed up another "hill", I couldn't help think of my time spent in the Dr. Russ's office on the tread mill checking my heart health. It was taxing to have the speed increased, but what really got my heart pumping was when they started the treadmill on an incline! Going up hill is the best way to get your heart pumping.

And just to be clear, getting your heart pumping is a good thing, right? And not just for a stress test, right? We are told multiply times every day about the wonderful benefits of aerobic exercise for the maintenance of a healthy heart and life, right? So we agree getting our heart pumping is a good thing, right?

How about in our spiritual lives? What do we do to maintain a healthy spiritual heart? What 'uphill' exercises are we pushing ourselves to do, so as to maintain a healthy spiritual life? What 'uphill' aerobics are helping to maintain our spiritual well-being? Do we ever intentionally take the opportunity to go up hill once in awhile just to see if our heart is healthy?

Let me be clear. Coming to church is a wonderful spiritual discipline, but it's an awful lot like watching TV, for far too many folks. Some of us are living our spiritual lives vicariously through the preacher or worship. We may sing along or not, we may enjoy the sermon or not, we may visit with friends, or not; but our worship must be seen for what it is: helpful, but not sufficient...alone...to maintain and grow a healthy spiritual heart! We've got to do more to go uphill.

I'd advocate for all of us that we, more regularly, read and study our bible, pray with greater intention, fast once in awhile, give more generously, spend more time in solitude, and practice living more simply.

And if you really want to go uphill, get off the couch and engage your neighbor or co-worker, or even a stranger in a conversation about what God means to you in your life. Or, sign up to go on a mission trip, or volunteer someplace that helps people, spend more intentional time with a family member, rekindle a lost friendship, or forgive a grievance and restore a broken relationship. It's time to relearn that growing a healthy spiritual life is best accomplished by going uphill, intentionally, at least once in awhile.

2. THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS OFTEN BRING THE GREATEST JOY

They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity. 2Corinthians 8:2
When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. James 1:2

Walking the steep and treacherous trails, especially after the sun goes down is one thing, but the real work begins after a bear has been shot. See those same steep mountains we find hard to climb, also cause the bears to tumble into the bottom of some unsavory and overgrown canyons. Much time, effort, energy, sweat, and even some blood was/is spent retrieving one's bear from the canyon floor. I was repeatedly grateful to have 3 strong young backs to lug bears out of the bottom of the canyon. I had a hard enough time toting my own "front pack" let alone a back pack full of meat or hide.

But the principle must not be missed. There is great joy when you reach your bear, and realize the culmination of a dream, the reward for some very hard work, the successful ending of months of planning, the preparations have paid off, and the effort has been worth it. As I climbed out of yet another canyon it dawned on me, that so often in life those things that seem most difficult at the time, are sometimes the most rewarding, and sometimes later, produce the greatest joy.

In our spiritual lives there lives this truth as well. We endure some difficulties in this life. We say goodbye to loved ones, we struggle with addictions, we fight loneliness, we deal with fears and failures, we wrestle with our humanity and sin, we put up with inconveniences, and we even sometimes suffer what seems, at least at first glance, like injustice. And though I'm much more of a realist than placing our only hope of the Christian life in the after life; we cannot deny that the reward that awaits us will far outweigh the difficulties that surround us! We cannot deny that in the midst of grief there is joy for a life shared, even if but for a moment or no moment at all. We cannot deny that after addiction there is recovery and renewal of health. After loneliness there is reunion, after failure there comes success, and even in the midst of injustice there is God...and isn't that enough?

Yes, it seems to be true that those things in life that at the time seem the most difficult, are the very things that make us the strongest, and keep us the most grounded, and humble. Those things we might never choose; are the very things we most often need. Those things that are the most painful; might bring us the most health. Many great difficulties are only outweighed by the greater joy that comes because or in spite of them!

3. LIFE IS BEST SHARED WITH GOOD FRIENDS

There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me. John 15:13-15

When three of Job's friends heard of the tragedy he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort and console him... Job 2:11

To be honest, bear camp consisted of a double-wide modular, 3-bedroom, two baths, full kitchen with dishwasher, and a washer and dryer. We enjoyed luxurious accommodations at days end; and we left specific instructions with our hostess that the only thing we might have needed, the only improvement we could consider,

the only criticism we might have had...would be to include a hot tub on the deck to soak our weary bones after long days hunting.

As much as I enjoyed the solitude of hunting alone amongst massive mountains, I also enjoyed the experience because I got to share it with some very good friends, and obviously for the Schneider's, family. There is nothing better.

Part of what makes Legacy UMC, part of what makes the Christian faith so great, is that we are good friends, and in many ways, a family. So many of you responded to the survey last week by indicating how you find this place welcoming, warm, respectful and comfortable. I hope we can always be the kind of place where all kinds of people, feel comfortable. I hope we can always be extended family to those who are separated from their natural families. But I have an even greater hope.

As comfortable as people feel here, being part of this place is more than just being good friends, or even loving family; it is sharing life together. As Peter so eloquently reminded us last week, God didn't create us for solitary lives, but for relationships. God is most blessed when we, His creation, share life together. And that includes the good stuff of life; and some of the messy stuff as well. We are not a place that puts on artificial airs and tries to impress people with our 'togetherness'. We are a real world place where all kinds of people with all kinds of problems, or no problems at all; can find someone to love them, believe in them, and help them along the way! I've heard evangelism defined as "one beggar telling another beggar, where to find bread." I'd like to define our church as: "one big happy family learning to share all of life together." We are not perfect...not many families are! We are not all that impressive really; but we are honest, and I hope we will always be real. We are learning to know that life is better, when shared together.

Well, those are some pretty simple lessons aren't they? But there is a challenge within them that I don't want you to miss. The hunt may have blessed us 6 knuckleheads, but these lessons might help all of us as we search, and learn from our life experiences as well.

Don't be afraid to do some of the hard work to get your spiritual heart pumping once in awhile. Maybe, like me, you've grown fat and out of shape; and its time for a spiritual "stress test"?

May you find some joy today that has a direct corresponding origin in some difficult thing you are learning to survive?

And may all our lives be enriched as we share them together, with friends and family – made so not by a birth or marriage certificate, not by a bear hunt or fishing trip; but because of the invitation from a Savior who makes us one! God bless these lessons to our lives...together.

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