



Ash Wednesday
February 17, 2021
Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Christ Church Detroit

Readings: Isaiah 58:1-12, Psalm 103:8-14, 2 Corinthians 5:20b--6:10, Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

The Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is famous for his landmark research on flow, that “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience,” he writes, “is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost,” throughout great difficulty, “for the sheer sake of doing it.”¹ The state of flow, he concluded, is a core component of happiness -- of wholeness and satisfaction.

Csikszentmihalyi, as one writer shared, started researching happiness “because of the adversity he faced growing up. He was a prisoner [in Hungary] during World War II, and he witnessed the pain and suffering of the people around him during this time...As a result, he pursued the question, What creates a life worth living?”² Where is creativity, where is healing, where is wholeness, amid unprecedented trauma and unimaginable death? Or, in the words of Psalm 51, “How can I sing if in ashes I lie?”³

He looked, after the war, to art for answers and religion for meaning, and eventually also stumbled upon psychology, attending a lecture by Swiss psychology Carl Jung, who spoke of the traumatized psyches of the European people after World War II. Csikszentmihalyi was so intrigued that he started to read Jung, and later moved to the U.S. for a doctorate in psychology, which also, for him, was a pursuit of meaning; he wanted to study and dwell in wholeness.

He found, through his research, his personal experience, and his firsthand observations, that happiness is not about external circumstances; it’s about what’s inside. It’s not about, if we just had a bigger house, or if we just had a lot of money, we’d be happy because our problems would be erased. Happiness or peace, as a magnet I keep on my fridge says, is not about being “in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things, and still be calm in your heart”⁴--to still find wholeness; to still find, in Csikszentmihalyi’s words, happiness.

He found, and we know, that “when basic needs are met, happiness - wholeness - is about changing our consciousness,”⁵ that is, our mindset, our heart. And our hearts and minds can be changed by tapping into the

¹ *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 1990

² Mike Oppland, “8 Ways to Create Flow According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi” <https://positivepsychology.com/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi-father-of-flow/>

³ As rendered by Rory Cooney in “Psalm 51: Create Me Again”, 1993

⁴ Author unknown

⁵ See, for example, “Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi: Animated Book Summary”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h6IMYRoCZw>

flow of creativity and connection. This flow is available to us even throughout trauma and discord. This flow, in fact, is always available to us.

Flow, to use Csikszentmihalyi's word, is one thing that I believe God has created us to seek, like deer to a stream.⁶ Like a thirsty deer, we long to feel connected, to feel worthy, to feel clean, and to feel whole. We long to feel and inspire joy; we long to know and be known; to love and be loved. We long to let go of those sins that impede our relationships with God and one another, those sins that in fact distort the love and joy in which God has created us.

During Lent, God calls us to the stream to be satisfied and renewed. God calls us to the deep river of truth, to relinquish our sins and swim toward justice and joy. God calls us to flow, to create, and to be created anew.

To flow with God, we must admit and let go of our sins, and we must let go of distractions that keep us too far from the river. Csikszentmihalyi noted that distractions--so common in our hyper-digital, super-complex life--detract us from flow, and thus inhibit our wholeness. And that is why in Lent we are called to fast from distractions and indulgence, and to embrace simplicity.

In Lent we are called to learn and dwell in scripture, and to be renewed through the transformation of our minds.⁷ Above all, we are called to pray: that is, to listen for the voice of God still speaking, still and small, within us, and to let even the raging waters of our feelings of anger, frustration, resentment, overwhelm, boredom, and desire flow with and toward that voice.

When it is hard - and it is, and it will be - we need not be discouraged. After all, as Wendell Berry has written in his poem "The Real Work", "the mind that is not baffled is not employed. The impeded stream is the one that sings."⁸ And indeed Csikszentmihalyi cites challenge as an important catalyst for flow. We rise, from the ashes, toward a task worthy of our attention, our minds, our hearts, and our souls.

The task this Lent is to love God with all our mind, and all our heart, and all our strength, and all our soul, even when God is hard to find - and hard to love - amid our current torrents of trauma and grief. God is still washing you and sating you in love.

Beloved, these ashes are not a yoke upon your shoulders, but signs that God is not done with you, nor with me. God is not done creating you. God has been creating you in the waters since before you were born, is creating you anew today, and, when the moment of your death comes, will birth you again into unending joy. You were created in love; in love you will live; and to love you will return.

⁶ Psalm 42

⁷ Romans 12:2

⁸ From *Standing by Words*, 1983, <https://gratefulness.org/resource/our-real-work-poem-wendell-berry/>