

# “Making the Most of Regret”

Fire Communion 2011

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## Homily: “Making the Most of Regret”

“I live my life with no regrets.”

Even though I’ve said it a few times myself,  
I find I’m increasingly worried when I hear people say it.

No regrets? Really? None at all? Not a single one?

Nothing you wish you could do over?

No words you would take back, if given half a chance?

No moment you might want to have turned out very differently than it did?

I have a pretty long list myself.

A list of things I wish to do better, of things I still hope to get right.

When people say that they live without regrets,

I think they mean they are trying to live their lives to the fullest,  
making the most of whatever each day brings.

I get that. I try to do that myself.

But, for me, that also means trying to make the most of regret.

Regret—about what we did, or didn't do,  
what we said or failed to say,  
what we felt, or what we didn't feel at all—  
can serve a powerful purpose,  
if we're willing to look at our lives and learn.

If we're ready to work to understand  
how our actions or our inaction affect others,  
and how the choices we've made ultimately affect ourselves.

This kind of looking back is a natural part  
of what we do at the dawning of a new year;  
standing at the threshold,  
some part of us looks back to the year that is now past,  
while another turns toward the year that is to come.

In the early days of any new year,  
we do well to wonder what will come of it,  
and to think about where it might take us.

We make resolutions.  
We often commit to change ourselves in some meaningful way.

But, truth be told, for better or worse,  
the future before us in 2011 will look a great deal like 2010,  
unless we resolve to do something about it.

Now, in the year ahead,  
there will surely be things that none of us can see coming,

as we sit here this morning—things that will shock and shake us, and things that we will ultimately have to learn to live through, or not.

But, given the possibility of good health for another year, it's worth asking ourselves what exactly we hope or expect or plan to be different when we gather here a year from now.

How will any of us have changed?  
How will all of us have changed?

We can't, of course, know the answers for certain, but my hunch is that whatever we're hoping for today is tied in some way to something we regret—something we're hoping to do better or set right. Some mistake that we're determined to learn from rather than repeat.

Henry David Thoreau put it so poetically:  
“Make the most of your regrets,” he said.  
For, “To regret deeply is to live afresh.”

Thoreau recognised that regret was essential to refining and renewing our lives.

He knew that sometimes we have to sift through the wreckage of our lives in order to find the courage to actually change.

And, yet, so often, we don't.

Two of the most haunting words in the English language are surely found in the question: “What if?”

These are words I hear often, as a minister.

“What if I had only done this or said that?”

“What if, what if, what if?”

Making the most of regret, means resolving to use those words in a different way.

It means using whatever we truly regret to point us in a new direction.  
It means turning from the past tense to the future,  
asking ourselves not “what if I had \_\_\_\_\_?”  
but “what if I were to \_\_\_\_\_?”

What if I were to do things differently?

What if, next time, I were to act out of compassion instead of judgment?

to show the people I love that I do?

to live out of my deepest values,

and into being my best self?

What if, what if, what if?

Used in this way, regret can become our surest guide,  
pointing us back to the path whenever we’ve lost our way.

This is a lot like my GPS, the little computer in my car  
that gives me directions to wherever I’m trying to go.

As many of you know, with these gizmos,  
you just type in the address of where want to go,

and a computerized voice begins to tell you how to get there.

Now, when Bob first brought this thing home several years ago, I thought it was a silly gadget and a waste of money.

But, now, I can't seem to live without it.

It's been enormously helpful since arriving in Toronto, as we've tried to navigate this city, which doesn't always have the clearest street signs!

The best part about a GPS, though, is how it handles my mistakes.

When it tells me to make a right turn and I miss the street, or when it tells me to take an exit and I drive right past it, the GPS simply takes a moment to think up another route, and, while doing so, informs me that it's "recalculating."

Now, this doesn't mean it's always been a perfect experience.

When we first got the GPS, its voice was that of a woman with a fairly clipped British accent.

Over time, it started to feel that whenever we made a mistake, she got more and more frustrated with us.

It's not so much what she said, but how she said it.

With a slight huff and a brief pause,

her “recalculating” seemed to come with a bit of hostility.

It was a bit more judgment than we were looking for in our lives, especially from a computer that we own.

So, it didn’t take us long to discover that there were other voice options.

Today, our guide is a very friendly Aussie guy who just seems happy to go with the flow.

“Recalculating,” he says, as though it’s no big deal.

Here at the beginning of a new year, some of us are hearing a voice—and I do hope it’s a friendly one!—saying “recalculating.”

It may be telling you that you simply missed a turn, or it may pointing out that you’re completely lost.

Whatever the case, let that voice lead you.

If there are things you regret, mistakes you’ve made and failings that can’t be ignored, decide here and now to make the most of them rather than allowing them to keep you enslaved to a past that cannot be undone.

Recalculate.

This is not to say that there aren’t consequences for the mistakes we make.

The process of “recalculating” may take a while,  
and it may take a lot of work.  
It may involve making apologies or making amends.  
It may require learning to forgive,  
and it may require learning to be forgiven.

But, that is the real work of our lives.

Recalculating and driving on toward the goal.

So, let us learn from our mistakes.

Let us make the most of our regrets,  
that we might live into the full promise of this new year  
that stands open before us.

Blessed Be.