

MESSAGE: **Increase your soul's health**

by The Reverend John William Zehring  
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Fifth Sunday in Lent

TEXTS:       Isaiah 43:16-19  
              Philippians 4:4-13

MEDITATIONS:    *I pray that... you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.* (Ephesians 3:16)

*Happiness comes from the health of the soul* (Aeschylus)

Prayer

**Lead: Extemporaneous. Walk around asking...**

When it comes to good physical health, there's a wisdom of the ages which knows what's good for you.

For example, if you want to be in good health, you should **exercise**. That's good for your cardiovascular system, for lowering cholesterol, and for many other parts of your body and it makes you feel good.

What's another? You should drink six to eight glasses of **water** a day. That keeps the plumbing healthy.

What are some other things to increase your health? [ASK– call it out]

- Get enough **sleep**.
- **Fruits and vegetables**. An apple a day...
- Don't **smoke**.
- Don't **drink** too much alcohol.
- Lower your **stress** – reduces your health and increases your risk factors.
- Keep your **weight** in line with your health.
- floss
- get regular physical **check-ups**... keep eye on blood pressure
- others... [ASK]

It's not so complicated – less than a dozen wise living habits and you can increase your health dramatically, feel better, enjoy life more, live longer, see fewer doctors.

So too with the health of the soul. The Greek dramatist **Aeschylus** observed:

***Happiness comes from the health of the soul.***

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That sounds good. We'd like to be happier. If happiness comes from the health of the soul, what can you do to improve the health of your soul?

### How to increase your soul's health

You already know about traditional **religious practices** like going to church, reading the bible, prayer, devotional reading, music, service – these practices have great potential to increase your soul's health.

And... just like you promise yourself to get enough exercise, drink six to eight glasses of water, and eat enough fruit and vegetables, SO TOO do you think about giving more attention to devotional practices. Yet, we wonder, are there other ways as well to increase the soul's health... because we know that's something we must do if we're going to find happiness.

I've been watching people and have had the good fortune to study those who give evidence of a healthy soul, so...

based upon their experiences,

I'd like to suggest **7 PRACTICES** to increase your soul's health:

#### **1. Do something different.**

I taught writing at a college where students asked what they should do when they faced writer's block. Experienced writers have discovered the answer is to GO DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT for awhile.

Same with if you're wrestling with challenging problems, ideas, or relationships. Creativity is more likely to blossom if you put it down for awhile. Go do something else.

Take a walk. People who attend to the health of their soul speak of "*walking for the soul*" – no taking a pedometer to calculate the steps and the heartbeats, no effort to get anywhere, no concern for speed, no worry about going in circles. Simply getting away from linear life.

If you're in an unhappy mood, go somewhere else... like the Psalmist David did: He went out into NATURE, lifted up his eyes upon the hills, and gained perspective on his life and on how God was his keeper.

## 2. Do nothing.

This is the opposite of doing something. Do nothing... because... you need to empty yourself. *Our lives are on screech*, one young dad told me. *We live full-time in overdrive*, said another. You can easily become saturated with noise, bloated on images, crammed with information, enslaved to schedules, cluttered with gadgets, bound to lists, busy to overflowing.

Thomas Moore wrote about the importance of occasional withdrawal from the world, even for a small time each day. A mini-retreat. He observed how saturated people can get and summarized that *At the sight of nothing, the soul rejoices*. You need more nothing. Take some time to empty yourself. Retreat. Do nothing. For your soul. Stephen Covey asks:

*Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.*

*"What are you doing?" you ask.*

*"Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree."*

*"You look exhausted!" you exclaim. "How long have you been at it?"*

*"Over five hours," he returns, "and I'm beat! This is hard work."*

*"Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?" you inquire. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster."*

*"I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically. "I'm too busy sawing!"*

I'm often the first to say *"I don't have time to retreat. I'm too busy,"* which is self-defeating behavior because then I end up with a dull saw which then requires longer and harder work, and the vicious cycle continues. Break the cycle. Plan islands of retreat for yourself.

Retreat. Look at all the bible's words that begin with "re"

Rebuild	Renew	Refresh
Reshape	Remake	Recreate

Restore... *He restoreth my soul* is one of the most refreshing phrases in the bible.

***Happiness comes from the health of the soul***

Schedule time to do nothing. Re-create. Recreate. Retreat.

*"Be still and know that I am God."*

## 3. Move into the present.

In the comic strip, Lucy apologized to Charlie Brown when she dropped the ball:

*"Sorry I missed that fly ball, manager.*

*I thought I had it, but suddenly I remembered all the others I've missed.*

*The past got in my eyes!"*

I have seen it in you and in me:

**Regret over PAST and worry about the FUTURE robs abundant life in the PRESENT.**

You can't change what happened in the past. You can't do anything about the choices you made. Give yourself some grace and move into the present. When Jane Clayton died, I asked her daughter Cindy what kind of a mother she was. Cindy answered, "*The best thing she taught me was to 'live in the moment'.*"

Learn from the past, but don't let the past get in your eyes. All that'll do is make you drop the ball. Plan for the future, but don't dwell there. Robert J. Hastings wrote a little parable called "*The Station*" where you are going through life on the journey, like a train ride, but all you can think about is the final destination: the station. And you're waiting, waiting, waiting for the station. He writes:

*However, sooner or later we must realize there is no one station, no one place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us.*

*"When we reach the station, that will be it!" we cry. Translated it means,*

*When I'm 18, that will be it!*

*When I buy a new Mercedes Benz, that will be it!*

*When I put the last kid through college, that will be it!*

*When I have paid off the mortgage, that will be it!*

*When I win a promotion, that will be it!*

*When I reach the age of retirement, that will be it! I shall live happily ever after !"*

*Unfortunately, once we get it, then it disappears. The station somehow hides itself at the end of an endless track.*

Move into the present and live the journey, for THIS is the Day which the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it. Rejoice today. Be glad today.

#### **4. Extend an invitation to God's Spirit to be in you.**

If I'm having an unhappy day, after a while I know what the problem is. The lightbulb flashes and I remember... what seems to be the problem... the root of what's wrong: Oh yeah: **the spirit of God is not in me.** If I don't do anything about the root cause, nothing's going to

change. I must attend to the CAUSE, not the SYMPTOM. And so, I begin by inviting God's spirit to dwell within me.

I remember this plaque I saw in Vermont which read:

**That which you are seeking is causing you to seek.**

Perhaps unhappiness is a part of what is causing you to seek God's presence.

*When you search for me, God says in Jeremiah (29:13),*

*you will find me,*

*if you seek me with all your heart.*

***Happiness comes from the health of the soul***

so therefore **unhappiness** is a symptom of **the soul's need**,

which is addressed by searching for, seeking, and inviting God's spirit to be in you.

## **5. Work on your gratitude.**

I'm forever indebted to a woman named Dottie who told me after a Thanksgiving Service: *"I know I should be more grateful. I'm working on my gratitude."*

When I've visited members in their homes and they show me all the things they've done to make their homes beautiful, they'll sometimes say: *"It's a work in progress."* Our gratitude is like that too: a work in progress. I'm working on it.

I've noticed an almost 100% correlation between **gratitude** and **joy**. Low on the joy meter is directly connected to low on the gratitude meter. High on the gratitude meter equals high on the joy meter. They move in tandem.

Increase your happiness by increasing your gratitude, which begins by saying *"Thank you"* to the One from whom all blessings flow. Sometimes I offer this little confession, using a play on words: *"I am grateful. Help Thou my ingratitude."*

And then I remind myself: the goal is not to pretend to be grateful just to increase my happiness, as though gratitude were a means to an end. Gratitude is the end itself.

## 6. Pray for healing.

You pray for your physical health. You pray for the health of others. We do that every Sunday. Why wouldn't we also pray for our soul's health... or for another's health of soul.

Our church has been working with Dr. Peggy Matteson as we consider starting up something in the area of Parish Health. That's her specialty and she's one of the top leaders in the country: president of the professional association, author of the textbook, teacher at a seminary, and practitioner at a church in Rhode Island, as Commissioned Minister for Parish Health.

When she was meeting with our Deacons, Peggy made two points which I thought were very insightful.

First, she said, *illness is the opposite of wholeness.*

Second:

***“Healing occurs when we achieve a sense of wholeness and spiritual well-being, even though the illness or disability may not be cured.”***

Do you see the difference between being **healed** and being **cured**? That makes so much sense. I've witnessed physically uncured people... even dying people... seem to be so healed because they were whole. Their inner nature was healthy.

Paul got this. He wrote (2 Corinthians 4:16)

*“... do not lose heart.*

*Even though our **outer nature** is wasting away, our **inner nature** is being renewed day by day.”*

Yeah. You have an outer nature and an inner nature.

Look at the bulletin meditation:

*“I pray that... you may be strengthened in your **inner being** with power through his Spirit.”*

Pray that you may be healed and made whole, in your inner being.

## 7. Believe. [Refer to *Polar Express* movie, ticked stamped “believe.”]

**BELIEVE that the power behind you is greater than the task ahead.**

Increasing your soul's health is an exercise in faith... in believing that there is power to be got that is greater than your own... something God gives you.

*He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.*

*Even youth will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted;*

*but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

(Isaiah 40:29-31)

People of faith believe that there are things **God gives**:

- God gives **joy**. (John 15:11): *"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."*
- God gives **peace** (John 14:27): *"My peace I give to you... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."*
- God gives **life** (John 10:10)... *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* "Life which is life INDEED," wrote Paul.
- God gives **power**.

Perhaps God stands wanting to give to you, and all that is necessary is for you to open your arms. receive, and believe:

**Believe that the power behind you is greater than the task ahead.**

**Pray for healing of your soul.**

**Work on your gratitude.**

**Extend an invitation to God's Spirit to be in you.**

**Move into the present.**

**Do nothing, and**

**Do something different.**

***Happiness comes from the health of the soul.***

May you receive God's gifts as you seek him with all your heart and work on increasing your soul's health.

Be healthy. Be happy.

Amen.