

From 2003 to 2009, I was hopelessly single. Sure, I went on dates here and there. But there was always something... off. When the problem wasn't with me (which almost certainly was/is the case), people were simply too conservative or too liberal. Too tall or too short. Too dry or too sarcastic. Too intellectual or too simple. Too evangelical or too atheistic. Too dependent. Too cautious. Too anxious. Too cheap. Indeed, those were some bleak times, my friends.

Now, I don't know about your experience, but if you're single and in your late-20's or early-30's, everyone's got a word of advice for you. Apparently, everyone around you is suddenly an expert in love and the only appropriate response is to be grateful when in the esteemed aura of their wisdom.

One of the more common refrains I remember hearing, when in the presence of such charity, was, "just make sure you don't come across like you're desperate. Oh Brian, anything but that! So, don't say five words when three words will do; don't linger too long when the date is over – pretend like you've got something more important going on that you need to get to; and for goodness sake, whatever you do, **do not call the next day**: that's the clearest signal that you are a desperate sod!"

But I *was* a desperate sod! From wearing horrible cologne promised to allure the female pheromone, to modulating my vocal pitch, to feigning complete absence of care, or conversely, acting as if the entire law of gravity was crushing down upon me, yes, I attempted everything. So desperate to meet and attract the right someone, the right anyone, I even remember sinking so low to seriously consider if just maybe Costanza was on to something in that episode of Seinfeld, where doing the total opposite of my every instinct would be the key to my relational salvation.

Unchecked, desperation sure can lead one to the ridiculous. To awkwardness. And that's if you're lucky with just a mild diagnosis. More severe, desperation can lead you to chase anything with a scent. Welcoming anything that exchanges a glance. To settling. To dependency. To co-dependency. To completely losing yourself, your inhibitions, your passions even, all for the sake of finding and securing something that would have been better off left undiscovered and unhandled.

And whoo boy, when taken outside of the context of dating, desperation can look really ugly. Think, cheating on an exam. Think, faking a resumé. Think, throwing a colleague under the bus to remain a step ahead. Think, posting about every mundane thing you've done in your day just to get a like or a re-tweet. Think, abusing painkillers all to numb yourself and run from your demons. Think, lying under oath. Think, money-laundering. Think, back-channel deals, whatever it takes to promote and preserve one's self-interests. Think, all of the politically motivated violence. The shooting at the congressional baseball game. The attack on the bus in Portland. The immoral legislation both under consideration and already passed, that will no doubt affect if not destroy the lives of millions, just to erase an opposition's legacy, just to get a "win" for your party, just to protect one's seat.

When you think that all the walls around you are crashing down, you truly believe that your only way out is to do something rash, something drastic, something so unusual and desperate, that you might even forget to first consult with your reason or sense of morality.

Desperation then, my friends...well, it often ain't a good look. I mean, look, it can even lead you to look right into God's eyes and laugh in God's face.

In both our Old and New Testament lessons this morning, we witness dramatic episodes where people who were once so desperate for a reversal of their fortune, yet openly shake their heads at the divine presence and promise of good news. Sarah not only laughs at God's promise of a child promised to her in advanced age, but like our Attorney General in front of an intelligence panel, she also "can't recall" that she ever did so in the first place. Desperation, it just makes you not think right. Likewise, when the onlookers in the crowd – folks who were so desperate to find any excuse to not believe in the Christ -- hear that poor family beg Jesus to resurrect their dead daughter, they laugh at the family's tears and the bravery of their request. Desperation, it just makes you not act right.

And yet, in both cases you can almost sympathize with the mockers, the laughers. I mean really, get real, God, we say. Old women who have been barren can't suddenly be with child. Children who have died can't suddenly be restored to life, no matter how much the bereaved wishes it so. Just let those people cling to their sorrows, we say. Just let them go through their grief.

You see, I think too often, we who despair, don't really want to receive help. We don't want to hear a divine promise. For clinging to that hopelessness shapes our identity. It becomes our identity. And so we trick ourselves into believing that if we lose our sadness, and overcome our sorrows, we would actually be reduced to nothingness and non-existence. And so we wear that grief like a badge. Because if self-denial is all that we have, and pity is all we can get, well then at least that's something.

But, here at the turn, I think it would be wise to remember that as much as it can feel like it, desperation is yet not depression. It does not manifest as apathy nor lethargy. Sure, there might be some tendencies of each mixed in, but those who are truly desperate feel, in general, charged to do something, to try anything, anything at all that might change their circumstances. So I'm not sure then that I'd classify Sarah as being truly desperate. She was probably more depressed than anything, so withered away by so many fruitless years. But, the woman with the hemorrhages on the other hand, now she was desperate.

We are told that she had been suffering for 12 years. She had been bleeding for twelve years! She could have given up. She probably should have given up. Out of anyone, she should have been depressed, lethargic, apathetic, ready to laugh hysterically at the presence of Christ finally showing up. Luke's gospel recounts that she had seen every doctor, every healer she could, but no one could help her. I imagine then she was told that she should just surrender all hope. To give in. But then...perhaps at the point of doing so, she saw Jesus moving through the crowds, and thus, flashing before her eyes was hope. Was change. Was something, anything to reach for and cling to. And so with a desperate determination, she pushed her broken body through the masses, and touched his garment. She did something. And, in a moment, that rash, impulsive, act of desperation led to her remedy. Her salvation.

Just maybe then desperation can also be a "good" thing? Maybe, if channeled properly, perhaps it is the very encouragement someone who has all the cards stacked against them needs to fight. To disrupt the status-quo. To challenge the consensus.

Some years ago, Louise Taylor, a member of our congregation, was in a bad car accident. Her vehicle accelerated into a brick wall, and both her knees shattered against the force of the frontal impact. Louise, I don't think would mind me saying, was not exactly a spring-chicken when this happened. Approaching 90-years of age, the doctors offered her little in the way of hope. The surgeries to restructure her bones and ligaments, would be a risk, especially considering her age. And there was no guarantee that her body would respond positively post-op. Nevertheless, she elected for the knife.

After the procedure, the doctor, who didn't exactly possess a warm bedside-manner, said: "well, I've done everything I could. It's up to you now." After that lovely sentiment, Louise was then transferred to Saint Joseph Villa of Whitemarsh for what would be an extensive recovery and rehabilitation process. There, she spent months (spanning Thanksgiving and Christmas) in a tiny room that had no bathroom, and no discernable amenity. And once again, she was given dour reports, that the chances of her walking again were slim at best. That she should expect to be in a wheel-chair. That she should expect to need assistance the rest of her life. That she should sell her house, move into a nursing home, and certainly put aside all dreams of ever driving again. And truth be told, at first, she (you) were in despair. And who could have blamed you?

And yet, today, here she is (here you are). Walking again. Driving again. Living in your house. Teaching piano lessons. Eating cheese and drinking wine with me when I visit. And oh how good both taste! Especially when remembering that horrible gruel the Villa called food. Especially when remembering that depressing gym where shoulders slumped and mouths drooled. Especially when remembering that visit around Christmas when, together, we looked out of your tiny window at the cold blanket of snow drifting down. You, looking out at a world you weren't sure you were ever going to re-enter. And yet, here you are. Louise, you had every reason to wallow in sadness and self-pity. To be hopeless. To give in. To give up. And yet, you persisted. Yes, you had help. Yes, the church showed up. Yes, even the nuns came to offer you prayer and communion. But in the end, it was you. It was you who was determined to not let that place be your reality, your end. And so here you are. At home.

Now, of course there are scenarios and examples where people simply aren't or couldn't be as strong as dearest Louise. Cases where there wasn't even an opportunity to be desperate or a chance to get better. But for those of us who are still living and able, the trick, I think, is to not deny it, but to be ready to admit that we, yes, even we, at times, despair, and, that that's okay. And normal. That along the road of life, we will undoubtedly visit as many valleys as we do peaks. But as best as we can, and as much as we are able, we mustn't let those valleys... those painful memories, insecure thoughts, darker desires, and troubling realities consume us. Nor can we afford to wallow in them. Rather we must try to check and balance them. To confront and desensitize them, lest they completely overrun us. Lest they begin to define us. Lest they cut us up enough such that we consider doing the ridiculous, the crazy, or even the harmful. Lest we even laugh in the face and presence and promise of God.

Lord, may we always then trust that the promise of this gospel, that is the promise of hope, is both real and tangible. May we always believe that through many dangers, toils, and snares we yet can still overcome. And may we then always be so determined to mend ourselves, as well as all others around us, such that we can begin to stop the bleeding. Such that we can begin to bring about the change that we, as a person and as a people, as a nation and as a world, are in so great and desperate need of.

Amen.