

Word for the Year: PERMA

[Slide 1] A few years back, our eldest daughter Sonja, encouraged each of us to find one word to focus on for the New Year. It's a very helpful way to focus your year, your prayer life, your goals and expectations for the coming year.

[Slide 2] When you think back over the year 2020, what's the one word that comes to your mind that best describes the year that we just had. If we were all together, I would ask you to shout those words out, and if we were a techie enough congregation I would have you text those words that we could show up on the screen. What would be your one word? [Pause]

As we discussed last week, when I think of 2020, [Slide 3] the word that stands out the most is suffering. And probably the event that stands out the most for me is the loss of one of our young healthy students at our university in our program, who within less than a week became sick and died. On Friday, the global death toll from COVID19 passed 2 million and the US death toll passed 390,000. And regardless of your political position, who has not been shaken by what we see in the news over just the past two weeks. For most of us it's been a tough year.

[Slide 4] I think back to Pastor Shaun's sermon on our fatal flaws. And how that when we are in the midst of a difficult time and suffering, we often unfortunately cope by indulging in our fatal flaws. It is easier to be upset and angry, to give in to those sins such as sloth, lust, and gluttony. And to look at others with envy, jealousy, and to have greed in our hearts. We fall for these short cuts to soothe our suffering, "to crawl through sewers" to end our pain instead of turning to God.

[Slide 5] As we saw last week with the image of the Suffering Mountain from Romans chapter 5, it is actually in these times that we can experience God's love in a deep and personal way that can transform us to grow in confidence and to have Bold Love.

[Slide 6] in many ways it is this path of suffering that helps to transform our Fatal Flaws -Vices into Character-Virtues. When you go through suffering and [Slide 7] you understand it can be seen as a gift from God because you have this inside information...

1. [Slide 8-Pride] You understand how false your pride can be and in your need for dependency upon God and others, [Slide 8-Click 1B Suffer-Humility] you develop true humility.
2. [Slide 8-Click 2 Anger] and it's harder to maintain your anger or to be easily angered because [Slide 8-Click 2B Patience-Kindness] your humility and suffering moves you to a more compassionate understanding of others and patience and kindness develop.
3. [Slide 8-Click 3 Lust-Gluttony-Sloth] and as you continue up this road, we find the diminishment of the fatal flaws based on a lack of self-control - lust, gluttony, and sloth [Slide 8-Click 3B Character] because you're developing character, this reliability, this ability for self-control and diligence in the midst of suffering and difficulties.
4. [Slide 8-Click 4 Cowardice] and then an odd thing begins to happen, that false pride you started off with, that is actually covering your own insecurities and cowardice, fades into true confidence, [Slide 8-Click 4B Confidence] or courage.
5. [Slide 8-Click 5 Envy -Greed] and with this new found confidence there is no need for envy and greed, because this confidence is based on a [Slide 8-Click 5 Bold Love] bold love that enables us to be the way God originally created us to be; which is to be generous, to give ourselves as a gift to others in radical ways.

[Slide 9] For this upcoming year how can we maintain this path of growth into being more of what God wants us to be. What are the small but significant things that we can do that will help change our fatal flaws into true godly character from vice to virtue? From us simply trying to hang on during this time of the unknown and suffering to actually flourishing in our life with God and others.

What would it mean for me to move from just trying so hard to manage my sin, my fatal flaws, to slowly developing into the flourishing person God created me in His image to be through cooperating with the Holy Spirit to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ?

[Slide 10] Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the Glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another....

[Slide 11] Or, as The Message version puts it:

Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

So that once again, we can be like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, bearing the image of God in our daily life, and since the fall, by focusing not on “looking good” but by focusing on Jesus, the author and transformer of our faith, our Lord and Savior, as we look forward to our life in the eternal, restored Garden of Eden.

[Slide 12] What would happen if “Flourishing” is your Word for the Year 2021? What would that look like? How would you do that?

Might I suggest an odd Word on how to Flourish in the Year 2021.

[Slide 12-Click 1] The word is PERMA. I’m sure at this moment that makes no sense whatsoever and the weird symbols only make it more confusing and that’s okay. Perhaps if we lengthen that word to Permanent that might help keep that word in your mind. [Slide 12-Click 2]

I don’t know about you but often when I have had a really positive spiritual experience or growth, I am making it up the mountain with

God's help, and I feel like "WOW" I'm really making progress then "BAM," I realize I have fallen, and I am looking back up at the mountain of growth flat on my back. It wasn't permanent. What can I do to help my growth be more permanent?

Well let's look at PERMA [Slide 13] PERMA is an acronym developed by a Dr. Seligman based on his research on what develops Flourishing in our lives. Observation and research on how humans grow and develop is simply the unfolding in very practical, concrete ways of how God created us.

[Slide 14] the P in PERMA is for Positive Emotions. And not that you won't or shouldn't have negative emotions

[Slide 15] the psalmist writes in

Psalm 42:11 Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why the unease within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God.

We all experience negative emotions in times of distress that we need to cry out to God about. That we need others to come along side of us.

[Slide 16] Not that you won't or shouldn't have mixed emotions. I am fascinated by Matthew's description of the women coming to the garden on Easter Sunday, and after they find the empty tomb, he writes "So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

Mixed emotions can be very hard to process and understand. [Slide 17] With children I've use a book called *Double-Dip Feelings: Stories to Help Children Understand Emotions* that use the illustration of an ice cream cone with both vanilla and chocolate or strawberry and blueberry ice cream to illustrate that you actually can have two very diverse emotions or more happening at the same time.

Unfortunately, we often believe emotions are completely out of our ability to have God transform them. And if PERMA becomes your word of the year and you begin to look for those snippets of positive emotion that we all have no matter how distressed we might be, you can actually begin to expand upon them. And so in the midst of suffering and difficulties for flourishing, grab ahold of the positive experiences and savor them.

[Slide 18] What in years gone by we described as “counting your blessings”

1. Be Specific, Not General
 - a. Not just your family or your church, but what is it about your family.
 - b. I can remember the first time I heard someone’s prayer that included “thank you Jesus for life, for breath, for the air that we breathe.” That is gratitude, that is specific, for something we should not take for granted.
2. Catch “Surprises” and Savor
 - a. A smile by someone passing by
 - b. The sound of a bird
 - c. You will need to pause, breathe, and savor.
 - d. Savor the good in your life. To savor food is to smell it, let it lie on your tongue, feel the texture, slowly chew it. Get the most out of it.
3. See these Good “Gifts” as from our Good God.
 - a. James 1:17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.
4. Read the Psalms
 - a. Many of the Psalms were written to help us savor God’s goodness

[Slide 19]

Psalm 92 (ESV)

A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath.

- 1 It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
- 2 to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
- 3 to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
- 4 For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands, I sing for joy.

[Slide 20] For some it is helpful to write these down, like in a Gratitude Journal of how God has brought flourishing into your life, answers to prayers, and a way to see how your positive emotions are increasing.

[Slide 21] PERMA – Positive Emotions

[Slide 22] Engagement: What fulfilling work, interesting activities and hobbies, have brought you a sense of intense focus to the point your awareness of yourself vanishes, time flies, and you are in the "flow"? That is Engagement.

What is an activity that takes your mind off of the stress of your life? This can be puzzles, crafts, hunting, wood working, exercise, reading that stimulates your mind, listening to music that lifts your heart, etc.

What are those activities that you can do when you're stressed that are healthy as opposed to the "Fatal Flaws" that we sometimes do instead? A consistent finding in the research on stress is that the more stressed we are the less likely we are to do these things that actually help us. And often our excuses are I have no time, I am so stressed, I don't feel like it, I don't have the energy, I have so much to do. And it is in fact during those times, that we most need to make the time to be engaged in those healthy habits that can re-energize us.

And let me just add, engagement is not binging on Netflix or Hulu or video games. It's okay to do this, but life experience and even studies

are clear, they actually do not develop the true happiness or joy that comes from productive engagement.

Please don't minimize the importance of Engagement in building a life of character and virtue. A Flourishing life. Being engaged and creative is how God created Adam and Eve, and that stamp of His image is still upon us. We flourish when we live out how God has made us.

[Slide 23] PERMA – Positive Emotions, Engagement, and

[Slide 24] Relationships

We were created out of love by God, for love, to be in relationships with God and others. The author of Genesis 2 is clear that “It is not good that the man should be alone.” We were created with a great need for relationship, just like Adam and Eve.

2020 has been a difficult time for relationships. And not just the social distancing and not being able to be with others. Though I know that has been a difficulty.

[Slide 25] As for many of us, Christmas was unusual with our family celebrating together, but in multiple places.

As we stated last week this has been a time of [Slide 25-1 click] illness and death, [Slide 25-2 click] with the normal process of grieving together unavailable to many. The final goodbye for our time together in this Age, has been either at a distance, in virtual reality, or only in our minds and souls. How we need physical touch and funeral rituals for closure and to say goodbye. [Slide 25-3 click] We have found ourselves on different sides of family and friends with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic, the face-to-face versus virtual church services, how to handle the economic difficulties, [Slide 25-4 click] and the issues of racial injustice and law and order.

Relationships are often hard work. To start, develop, and maintain, and most importantly to repair, because all relationships will have hurts and wounds. Now is not the time to give up on relationships over these current issues, but to work harder on forgiving and repairing relationships.

I know for myself, how easy it has been to be overly sensitive, to misunderstand others, and to feel hurt, and to be tempted to respond with at least grouchiness, if not anger, meanness, or a cold shoulder.

When Christians divide over these issues, and when I am hurt and angry, I try to remind myself of two things:

The first is Paul's admonition that the real enemy is not each other, but those demonic forces at work in our world. In the closing chapters of Ephesians 5 & 6, Paul writes about the importance of relationships – couples, families, relationships of different social status and work, and closes with this “Inside Information”:

[Slide 26] Ephesians 6:12

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Paul is not speaking of some vague spiritual warfare out there. He is talking about the spiritual warfare between couples, families, relationships of different social status and work relationships. He is talking about us!

Paul goes on to say that these spiritual conflicts between us and others require the Whole Armor of God. He closes with his grand illustration of the Roman guard's armor for our need for truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and praying at all times in the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying this because our fight is not against the people in those relationships he just mentioned in the letter,

but what is behind it all, the cosmic fight of good and evil in-between us and our relationships.

There are some things in this life you should get angry about. To be indignant. To have a righteous anger. But remember it is never that person in front of you whom you are battling, but the cosmic fight that Jesus Christ came to end through his life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection, and coming again.

There is a spiritual reality behind your relationships. Make sure you know who you are fighting. And what you are fighting for. Almost all the things we often argue about will pass away, but our relationship with our Lord and Savior and each other will remain. We need to hold them above all else.

[Slide 27] And the second is an image of the Still Face Experiment that shows the power of the truth of how we were created and how we need each other.

[Slide 27 – Click 1] We were created by God for Good

[Slide 27 – Click 2] We were created to want the Good (God and a Life that Flourishes)

[Slide 27 – Click 3] We were created by God to Love

[Slide 27 – Click 4] We were created to reach out and connect deeply to others. Watch how this Still Face Experiment demonstrates this.

[Slide 27 – Click 5] Still Life Experiment (2 minute video)

[Slide 27 – Click 6] Every time I see this, distresses me. And we respond in distress when our relationships hurt us. We never leave this emotional response of this young child. Whether you want to admit it or not, that youngster is always with you, and you might try to hide it in many ways, especially with Fatal Flaws, or you can embrace the distress and transform it through forgiveness and the repair of relationships.

[Slide 27 – Click 7] We were created with a need to repair our relationships. We can't but respond to a hurt in our relationships. The question is how do we do this?

[Slide 27 – Click 8] Often our own distress makes it worse. 2020 has been a time of relational distress for many.

Are there Relationships you need to protect, maintain, and repair? Each time I am tempted to be, or someone else is, grouchy, angry, mean, gives a cold shoulder, I try to have this image of the young child in the Still Face Experiment and remind myself that this what is happening right now. My own distress. The distress of the other, even if it does not appear this way. A profound hurt, a trauma, a significant event or lack of support that needs to be healed. That deep down, we truly do want to connect in meaningful ways with each other.

And to pray for the Holy Spirit's wisdom and power in the midst of this spiritual conflict within our relationships. To remind myself, it is not this person that I am fighting, against flesh and blood, but unseen spiritual realities.

Sometimes I need to wait for the other, sometimes I need to pursue the other, sometimes I need to protect myself from the other, most times I need someone else's perspective to help me, and at all times, I need to breath deep and pray.

[Slide 28] Relationships are so important for us.

[Slide 29] PERMA – Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, and

[Slide 30] Meaning

- What is the purpose of your life?
- What brings meaning and joy to your life?

In a 2010 paper, Leslie Francis studied a group of nearly 26,000 teenagers throughout England and Wales—and found that those who

read the Bible more, tended to have a stronger sense of purpose. [Slide 31] How do I find my purpose? You don't. You must discern your purpose. It is a process.

1. Know, Love, and Follow Jesus

We believe that our purpose is to Know, Love, and Follow Jesus. But what does that really mean? It first means we need to know Jesus.

- Gospel Stories with Jesus – Often we focus on, meditate and memorize Bible verses that have a truth statement, such as John 14:6
 - Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” which is good.
- A way to discover yourself and your relationship with Jesus, to know, love, and follow him, is to look at the whole story, John 14:1-14. It is about a conversation between Jesus and his disciples and he is telling them that he is going to leave. And if you have been in the Christian life long enough, you know there are periods of time when you feel alone, as if God has left you.
- Ask yourself, if I was in this conversation with Jesus and the disciples,
 - Would I have responded to Jesus like Thomas? “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?”
 - Like Philip? “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.”
 - How would I have felt if Jesus responded to me like he did to Thomas? “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.”
 - Or, how he responded to Philip? “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip?”
 - This is more than knowing truths about Jesus. It is learning to know Jesus, to experience him, and to experience who am I in relationship to him.

2. By Learning and Telling Your Story

I find for many us, not only do we struggle to really know Jesus, but we struggle to really know our selves. Take time to start learning or relearning your story. Write it down, or just jot notes, or make a timeline, or a collage of photos. Who are you? What makes you tick, and what ticks you off?

And tell your story to someone else! We need the support and feedback of others in this process. As you discover yourself, you will begin to find your purpose.

3. In Your Hurts

In your story, you will find hurts.

Throughout scripture and history, we find individuals finding their purpose through turning their hurts into healing purposes. I think of the favorite hymn "Amazing Grace" with words written by John Newton who had a very difficult life, was involved in the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and eventually through his conversion to Christianity became a key player in the end of the slave trade in Britain. His hurt became his purpose.

We read about the significant wounding in the lives of Joseph, Moses, and David and how those hurts became the spiritual and emotional breeding ground for their spiritual leadership.

I know of many, myself included, who are in the helping field, whether professionally or as volunteers, due to the hurts in our lives.

As you relearn and tell your story, what hurts does God want to turn into your purpose?

4. By Helping Others

In many different and profound ways, we learn our purpose by reaching out and helping others. As John wrote, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.” It is only in our reaching out to others, doing what we were created to do, do we understand who we are, whose we are, and what our purpose is. We often learn the most about our self when it is hard to help someone else. Someone who is difficult or doesn’t want but needs help. We learn about our weaknesses and our strengths, our lack of abilities and our giftings. We learn about what our purpose is.

And don’t forget to thank God for what you are discovering about yourself! It is a blessing. And you can note it in your Gratitude Journal if you want to.

[Slide 32] PERMA – Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and

[Slide 33] Accomplishments

- Having goals and accomplishing them
- Checklists
- Pride in yourself

[Slide 34] Paul presents this unique balance in Galatians 6:2-5

Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.

There is false pride, that we talked about in the beginning of the sermon, and there is true, or healthy, pride. It is good to have pride in what God has done in and through you, in the growth and development you are

making by His grace, and the talents, skills, and gifts you are developing and using.

A simple list of these to remind yourself, and a daily checklist of what you accomplished each day helps build flourishing in your life.

I have a friend who recently found himself in a unique situation that was far below his regular life situation, and he noted that what keep him going during this time was reviewing the prior accomplishments of his life. You need to have that list to be prepared.

[Slide 35] It should be obvious by now how much these concepts and things that we can do to develop flourishing in our life, Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments overlap and intersect with each other. This is how God has made us. I would like to strongly encourage you to give consideration of having PERMA your word for 2021.

In stead of focusing on what not to do, to some how manage your sins, focus on Jesus and the life He wants you to live.

[Slide 36]

Remember PERMA is:

- **P**ositive Emotion. What has brought you positive emotions, optimism, pleasure and enjoyment this year? [Slide 36-Click 1]
 - Savor Positive Emotions
 - Count Your Blessings
- **E**ngagement. What fulfilling work, interesting activities and hobbies, have brought you a sense of absorption to the point your awareness of self vanishes, time flies, and you are in the "flow"? [Slide 36-Click 2]
 - Find Activities that Engage You
 - Make the Time for Engagement

- **R**elationships. With whom have you found your social connections, love, intimacy, emotional and physical interactions? [Slide 36-Click 3]
 - We are Created for Relationships
 - Relationships Have Spiritual Realities
- **M**eaning. What has brought you deeper levels of purpose and meaning in life. [Slide 36-Click 4]
 - Our Purpose in Life is Jesus
 - What's Your Story?
- **A**ccomplishments. What goals and important achievements have you made that you can take pride in yourself? [Slide 36-Click 5]
 - What Gives You True Pride?
 - List Your Accomplishments

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for our brother, Jesus, who through the Holy Spirit is always with us.

May our eyes be ever focused on Him, the author and completer of our faith, that with nothing between us and You, we may know, love, and follow our brother Jesus being transformed gradually into Your image for Your honor and fame and for our flourishing as your dear children.

You have blessed us in the midst of suffering, given us life, breath, and engagement in our everyday activities, placed us in relationships to live out your love, given us purpose in living out our story in the grand story of Jesus the Messiah, and have provided opportunities for true Pride in our daily life.

We thank you for this by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen