

FAITH & VALUES

Week #1 of the 4-Week Series, "The Foundation of Fulfillment"

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With Rev. Richard Maraj

Alright; so here's an oldie, but a goodie.

So this U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration officer -- a DEA officer -- stopped in unexpectedly at a ranch in the Florida Panhandle. He got out of his black, unmarked SUV, and he walked up sternly to the old rancher and said, *"I need to inspect your land for illegal drugs right now."*

The rancher was pretty cool, and he said, *"Sure! Of course! But just one thing; don't go in that field in the back corner."*

And the DEA officer said, *"Mister, I have the authority of the federal government with me."* He takes out his badge and he says, *"You see this badge? This badge says that I'm allowed to go wherever I wish on any land, no questions asked; no answers given. Do I make myself clear? Do you understand what this badge means?"*

And he said, *"Yes, sir."* And he nodded and he just walks away.

So about 15 minutes later, the DEA officer's is running from his life: running from the rancher's prize bull. And he's gaining on him; he's trying to run towards the fence, but you could just tell he's going to get gored. And so he's screaming and yelling, *"Help! Help!"*

And the old rancher drops his tools, moves towards the fence, and he yells, *"Your badge! Show him your badge!"* [Congregation laughs]

So ... Alright.

So this week I was reading an article, and it was called, "How to Be Happy." And the author said there are two ways to be happy. The first one is stop looking for happiness. Because we all look for happiness in our lives; we all look for things that please us. Things we like. We like things to go our way; achieve what we want; and create certain conditions. And when we don't get it, we're not ... You know, when we get it, we're happy. And when we don't, we're not as happy. You know, happiness can be really quite fleeting. And it can be very difficult, especially when things aren't going well, to experience the enduring happiness that we often look for.

And the second thing she said that is the important way to happiness, and to be happy, is to find fulfillment, instead. Because fulfillment is deeper. Fulfillment is about meaning; it is about purpose; it is about intention. It is about living from an inner, centered place within ourselves. She says fulfillment is actually better and easier and healthier for us than trying to always pursue being happy.

Today we're going to start a four-week series entitled, "The Foundation of Fulfillment."

On a scale of 1 to 10, I want you to think: How fulfilled are you in your life right now? How fulfilled in your work? How fulfilled are you in your relationship? How fulfilled are you with yourself? And what would need to be different for you to feel more fulfilled in any or all of those areas?

You know, fulfillment is something we all need to find on our own. But I truly believe that there are certain foundational principles that we have to use to really build a more fulfilling life for ourselves. So we're going to look at the first two -- and we'll look at two for the next four weeks.

And the first one is the absolute foundation of fulfillment, I believe: It's **FAITH**. I want you to think about faith. What does faith mean to you? What role does faith play in your life currently? And how does faith make your life better?

You know, people are always saying stuff like, *"Keep the faith!" "Have faith!" "Hold on to your faith!"* Because at some level, we know that having faith is an important thing. You know, the Bible mentions faith 458 times! It mentions love 541. Not much of a difference when you consider love is the greatest commandment! It makes sense why there's so many. So obviously faith has a high value, as well.

Faith is a belief that there's a Higher Power and Intelligence and Spirit through which we can call forth infinite good: unlimited amounts of love and wisdom and goodness and understanding and abundance. Studies show repeatedly -- they have done lots of studies about people of faith. And it shows consistently that, when people live a life of faith, they have a greater locus of control.

People of faith have more optimism. People of faith have a higher self-esteem; a greater resilience; a level of strength to achieve the things they want to achieve or things to overcome in their lives. People of faith tend to feel better and have better immune systems. And feel less lonely. People of faith know that there's a higher plan and purpose for things, even though we can't always see it in the moment.

So I truly believe faith is a foundation of fulfillment, because it gives a level of spiritual groundedness and emotional stability when we live a life of faith.

How many people here have ever had a time in your life where you lost your faith? Anybody ever lost your faith? Okay; about 10 of us. Great! [Congregation laughs] I mean, ever lose your faith to the point that you just felt empty and alone? Or lost? Even hopeless or powerless that you could ever make your life get any better? Ever reach that point where you feel so disconnected and so far removed from the life you wanted to have? So far removed from the person you wanted to be and the things you wanted to feel and enjoy and experience in your life?

Can you think of a time in your life where you had a lot of faith? Think of a time where you had low or no faith? And how different was your experience of life? I really believe that faith makes a huge difference: having it or not having it. I think faith is an element that affects the quality; our enjoyment; our experience; and our level of confidence in how we live our lives.

Matthew 21, Verse 21-22 is my favorite -- one of my favorite Scriptures. And Jesus speaks on the power of faith. We'll start at 18 to get a picture of the whole scene. It says:

"In the morning when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing on it at all but leaves. And then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once.

When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?'

Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive.'"

Let's look at a few things. First of all, the context: every time I read this ... You know, Jesus was hungry. The fig tree didn't have fruit. He cursed it and it withered. I always think of that commercial where it's like, *"Cranky, Jesus? Maybe you could use a Snickers!"* [Congregation laughs] He's hungry and he curses the fig tree? I bet you if someone handed him a Snickers, that fig tree would be alive today ... but I don't know. [Congregation laughs] I digress ...

Here's the answer, and here's the power of faith that he's talking about. He says, *"Truly, I tell you, if you have faith ... not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive."*

Here Jesus is saying that we are very powerful and, through our faith, we can do three things. And the first thing is: With our faith, we can curse things and they will wither. Sometimes we need to be careful with the power of our faith and the power of our spoken word. Sometimes we curse things in our lives we don't like. We curse our jobs; we curse our bodies. You know, we curse our car. We curse the weather. There are all kinds of things that we just curse and put down; complain about; think negatively and speak negatively about. And what we're doing is withering our own joy! Withering our own experience of abundance and happiness and fulfillment!

So he's saying: You're powerful -- faith is powerful! -- and you need to be careful where you invest and channel that faith.

The second thing he says is that we can remove mountains. Mountains represent any problems or obstacles: anything you think in your life that is blocking you from achieving your goal or stopping you from being happy. I mean, we can complain and get stuck and feel this is hopeless; it's terrible; it's impossible ... or we can use our faith to remove those mountains. To say that, *"God is greater than this. I can overcome this! I can improve on this! I can get better and better and from this thing. This thing will not stop me!"*

Any mountain you feel in your life: it can be removed! Things can change; things can improve! And that is a powerful investment of our faith: not letting those mountains stay there -- or even believe that they'll always be there -- but having the faith to know that we can remove them. That they can be removed!

And then the final thing it says: *"Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive."* And it's saying that we are so powerful in faith: If there's something that isn't in our life, we can ask! It says whatever! Relationship; health; energy; financial improvement ... Whatever it is in your life -- whatever it is that you desire -- you can call it forth. You can invest your faith and know that it's possible; that it is available; and that you are worthy of it.

Jesus is showing here the power of faith that we have. And it's how we use it and invest it. The warning to not curse things. Be intentional and careful how you speak your words! You can remove mountains and obstacles, and you can call forth anything you want with faith.

I want to reread this again, and I want to emphasize a word for a specific reason. So here we go:

"Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. Whatever you ask in prayer with faith, you will receive."

I love that, because six times Jesus says "you" in two verses. Do you think he meant that intentionally, or was it accidental? Do you think it was intentional, or Jesus just worked for the Department of Redundancy? [Congregation laughs] I don't know! I would suggest he was pointing out to remind each of us that you are powerful. That you have the power of faith, and you're the one who has the control where you invest this incredible gift and power of faith. Because it can create; it can move mountains; and it can also curse. And that's why we have to use it intentionally.

Two things about faith: It must be cultivated; and it takes time and it takes consistent effort.

Let's go to Matthew 13. Here's what it says:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that one took and sowed in a field. It is the smallest of seeds, but when it has grown, it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that birds of the air come and make nests in their branches."

You always hear, *"Faith the size of a mustard seed."* And we say stuff like that. Well, here that's not the point. Here's the point: The point is this small mustard seed can grow to a great shrub and tree. That it's about a growing phase, is what it's talking about. That we have a responsibility to grow our faith.

And look: It says that it grows until birds of the air come and they can nest. And what it means is: When you grow your faith, it will support your dreams; your ideas; your goals. When you build a strong faith, it will support all these activities and things that we want to call forth into our lives.

So we need to grow our faith. And why do you think we need to grow our faith? Other than to have it support our dreams -- to have the faith to overcome and the faith to do these things -- the second reason we need to keep cultivating our faith is because the greatest challenge and enemy to our faith is ... Okay, I'll tell you. Fear!

How many people have ever let fear creep into your mind and have fearful thoughts? Anybody? Alright! Like, there are about 30 people now! [Congregation laughs] We're building up the momentum; I can feel it!

I'll bet every single one of us has allowed fear to stop us from pursuing a dream. I'll bet every one of us allowed fear to keep us from asking for what we want. Every one of us has allowed fear to prevent us from speaking up or being honest or sharing our feelings.

There are all kinds of things human beings fear; it's amazing! We fear failure; we fear success. We fear intimacy and we fear rejection. We fear open places; we fear closed places. I mean, we have all kinds of ... We've got a category of phobias to name all the fears that we fear. And there are hundreds! We're afraid of spiders; we're afraid of snakes; we're afraid of heights; we're afraid of public speaking. I looked up some phobias -- these are real phobias -- to show how many fears that we have out there. If it's out there, we've got a fear of it!

One is called globophobia. Anybody know what that is? It's a fear of balloons. Come on! Are we scraping the barrel of fear to be afraid of balloons. Another one: popaphobia. It's a fear of the Pope.

[Congregation laughs] I mean, come on! Are you kidding? I could see being afraid of a clown, but the pope? [Congregation laughs] Final one -- these are for real! -- is gelotophobia. Gelotophobia is the fear of laughter. So now I know the next time I tell a joke and you don't laugh, it's not that you don't like ... it's you have a fear of laughter! [Congregation laughs] You have gelotophobia!

So here's a question: What's your greatest fear in your life right now? And what are the things that you tend to fear? And tend to allow to hold you back from living as full a life as you would like and are meant to live?

You know, the Bible mentions fear 336 times, because human beings have a propensity to turn to fear. Worries about fear. I mean, thoughts of lack are all about fear: that we're not going to be okay. And you know what it says in the Bible 179 times? It says, "*Fear not.*" "*Do not be afraid.*" It says it over and over again! Because we know we have a mind that has a propensity for fear, so it always says, "*Do not be afraid. Do not have fear.*"

And here's the line that is often said the most: "*Fear not, for I am with you.*" Fear not, for I am with you! When you know that God is with you, what happens is: your faith increases and your fear decreases. If we want to build our faith -- grow our faith like a mustard seed, the best way to feed our faith is to spend time with God. Time with the Divine. Time in the pure presence of Spirit is the way! That's why it says, "*Seek ye first*" ... "*Seek God with all your heart*" ... "*Listen to the still, small voice*" ... "*Be still and know that I am God.*"

Paul says, "*I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me.*"

Jesus said, "*The Father and I are one.*"

Paul said, "*We live and move and have our very being in God.*"

It is when we get to the awareness that, "*God is with me now; God is in me and all around me at all times.*" That's when our faith lifts up and our fears begin to dissipate and get smaller.

"Fear not, for I am with you."

"I am not afraid, for God is with me."

"I am not afraid, for God is with me."

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I am not afraid, for God is with me."*

Again: [with congregation] *"I am not afraid, for God is with me."*

"I need not fear, for God is with me."

Together: [with congregation] *"I need not fear, for God is with me."*

One more time: [with congregation] *"I need not fear, for God is with me."*

And the more that we immerse our mind in the Mind of God, the more we're filled with God, and the more the fear just goes away.

Jesus prayed five times a day. And it is that frequency that's needed to renew our minds and to keep building our faith and not allow fear to creep in. Because it is a constant aspect, as the mind wanders, that sometimes our minds can slip into fear. So that's why we need to continuously cultivate faith and expand it and grow it.

Another thing about faith: besides growing it, we need to test it! And we need to work it! In the Book of James it says, "*Faith without works is dead.*" Faith without works is dead! It's like: if you do not apply and use and demonstrate and stretch your faith, and test it, you will not get the benefits of it. You know, if you want it to work, you've got to work it! You've got to work and stretch and expand your faith.

Remember the story when Peter and the disciples were in the boat, and the water was stormy. And Jesus was on it. And they were a little scared; they didn't know if it was a ghost or what the deal was. And Peter said, "*Jesus, if that's you, call me out.*" And so he calls him out of the boat. Peter steps out of the boat; he's standing on the water, just like Jesus! And he looks at Jesus.

But then he changes his focus from the Christ to the crisis, and sees all the storm, and he gets afraid. And he sinks, and he has to climb back into the boat. Yet later on, Jesus said, "*Peter, you are the rock upon which I'll build my church.*" And you know why? It's because he was willing to step out of the boat; out of his comfort and stretch his faith. And that's what it requires. It isn't about getting faith perfect all the time. It's: Are you willing to stretch your faith? Are you willing to go a little bit beyond what you currently believe is possible? And to have your faith in God carry you and expand you?

So in what ways are you willing to grow your faith and stretch your faith? And step out of the boat of your own comfort to demonstrate and put faith into action? Because faith without works is dead, but faith with works grows. And it expands and it supports and it gives you confidence and resilience, and helps you to believe that all things are truly possible.

The first foundation of fulfillment is faith.

And the second one, to me, is about VALUES. You know, the article that I was reading, the lady's name is Jennifer Tzeses. And she says, "*Fulfillment is about living your values.*" And whether it's integrity or honest, or kindness, whatever your values are ... your values and your priorities.

And so that means that we need to know: What are the things that are valuable to us? What are the things that really matter the most in our lives? What are our priorities? And then building our lives and our actions and our relationship based on those things.

You know, knowing what our values are -- our priorities: what are most important -- is a huge thing. Because we can't do everything with our time. We need to decide, with what time we have, what is the most important way to spend the time? Who are the most important people? And that is what helps life be fulfilling.

Mark Twain said, "The two most important days of your life are the day you were born, and the day you discover why."

So why are you here? What are the gifts you're meant to share with the world? And the difference you're meant to make? What is your purpose? Who have you come here to be? You know, I think these things are important. If you want a life of fulfillment, to take time to figure out what our values are. What do we stand for? What is important? And what difference have we come here to make?

And sometimes if we don't know, exploring questions like: What gives us the most satisfaction? What gives us the most joy? Because these are important questions to ask if you want to have a deeper experience of life and fulfillment.

Viktor Frankl in his fabulous book, *The Search for Meaning*, said, "*We often ask the question, 'What is the meaning of life?'*" But he said, "*But that's the wrong question! The question we should ask is: What meaning do you give to life?*" So I ask you now: What meaning do you give to life? To your life? What meaning do you give to your relationships? What meaning do you give to your health? Your body? And all aspects of your life? What meaning do you give to it? Because when we have meaning, then life has more fulfillment.

One more quote for fun! Friedrich Nietzsche said this. He said, *"When you know the why, you can endure any how."*

So when you know your "why" -- and I'm going to categorize the "why" as when you know your values; and you know your priorities; when you know your purpose; when you know your meaning -- you can endure any "how." When there are challenges; and there are obstacles; when you make mistakes; when there are difficulties, that you don't see them as roadblocks. You don't see them as things that make you unhappy. You see they're part of a process of you fulfilling the great life that you've come here to live. You're seeing all these things as part of the journey of fulfilling your "why": of why you came here and what you came here to be.

And it could be you're doing your work, and you know you are here to provide for your family. Or that you're here to help improve the environment or with animals or children ... or whatever it is that gives you a sense of purpose and meaning. It's something that is valuable or important to you. It isn't always your job! Sometimes it is, and sometimes it's not.

Yesterday after the funeral, a gentlemen came up to me and he let me know that he was a prison pastor. And for 21 years, he's been a prison pastor. And he didn't know what I was talking about [today], but he kept saying, *"Oh, it is so fulfilling! It is the most fulfilling thing in my life. I love being able to help those inmates believe in themselves and know that support is there for them."*

And so I said to him -- because he was just beaming with this. I said, *"So how did you get into this?"* He said, *"Well, my father was in prison, and I saw the impact that it had on my family, that it had on myself. And even how he was treated inside. And I wanted to make a difference. And so in his honor I do this."*

And I said, *"Is it your job?"* He said, *"No; I volunteer. It's on weekends. For 21 years, I've been doing this."*

He knew his "why"! And he said, *"It ain't easy, but it's fulfilling."* And that's the difference. Sometimes when we look for happy, we look for easy. But fulfilling is a deeper level that you are accomplishing when doing something greater than you even thought you could do or were meant to do.

So anybody ever become a friend with somebody on Facebook that you don't even know? I don't know what it is, but like, there's this guy I know; his name is Mike. And sometimes I get things that say, *"So and so has accepted your friendship request."* And I'm thinking, *"I didn't request anything!"* But anyway ... For whatever reason, he became my friend. And he's a young man in his 30s or something, having some tough times. So once in a while I'll send him a little "Messenger" message. Over a year, a little encouragement and support, because he's just had some struggles. So about three months ago, I didn't hear back from him two or three months. So I thought, *"Well, I guess he doesn't want to be friends, or he didn't respond to any of those. No big deal."*

And so he just posted something, and he said, *"I've been gone for 75 days because I've been locked up. And while it was hard, it was a real blessing for me. I was homeless. I'm a drug addict. And I had zero motivation to do anything with my life except look for the next high."* He said, *"I've been sober for 80 days now."* He said, *"And another good thing is I went in there and I weighed only 110 pounds, and now I weigh 145. It is amazing what three square meals a day can do. Living in a sober living place and I am beginning my healing process."* He says, *"I won't let my life pass me by anymore."* He said, *"Now I'm going to live it."*

I was so inspired! You know why? He found his "why." He found his "why"! Life isn't easy, and it's hard to sometimes be happy. But we can be fulfilled! And fulfillment will bring joy, too, but it just puts into perspective that sometimes we have to work through the tough stuff to get to that level of fulfillment.

Right now you are more powerful than you have ever been! You have more experience than you've ever had. You know yourself better than you've ever known yourself. You have more clarity and awareness than you have ever had. Which means that you have the power -- more than any time in your life -- of where to focus and invest your faith.

And so I really encourage you to spend time with God. Expand that faith. Let it increase your faith and reduce your fear. To build up your faith from a mustard seed to be like a strong tree that can support your goals and your dreams and your life. And take time to figure out your "why": your values; your priorities; the meaning; and everything that is important to you in your life. Because when we get that clarity, and you build that faith, amazing things will happen.

Every one of us: Let us make a commitment to build on the foundation of fulfillment. And let us start with faith and our values.

God bless you all! [Congregation applauds]

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