

The Samurai Warrior and the Zen Master

I'm going to tell you a story about a Samurai warrior and a Zen Master. The warrior was big and strong and had won many battles. The Zen Master was a rather small old man with merry eyes, and was well-known far and wide as being one of the wisest and kindest men in the land.

One day, the Samurai warrior went to the Zen master for instruction. "Please," the huge man asked, "teach me about heaven and hell."

The master scowled at the swordsman, then broke into mocking laughter. "Me, teach you about heaven and hell? I wouldn't waste a moment trying to instruct the brain of an overweight ignoramus like you! How dare you ask me for such a lofty insight?"

Well, upon hearing these words, the Samurai grew furious. No one could insult him like this and get away with it. Enraged, his face flushed and he drew his sword to chop off the teacher's head. Just as he was about to strike, the master raised his hand and calmly said "That, sir, is hell."

Upon hearing this, the samurai suddenly realized the profound lesson the master had just taught him - that we make our own hell by indulging in anger and resentment. The warrior was so grateful for this teaching that he dropped his sword and fell to his knees in front of the Master, bowing in humility and gratitude. When he looked up, the old man was smiling.

"And that, sir," the teacher noted, "is Heaven.

How many of you have ever felt so angry you wanted to chop somebody's head off, or at least punch them really hard?

And you know how it feels to be filled with gratitude, too, I'll bet. When someone has just given you a wonderful gift, or sometimes when you just realize how blessed you are to be loved, to have wonderful friends, good food to eat. Sometimes that feeling of gratitude only comes after suffering, like when you're sick with the flu and then you finally feel well again. Or maybe you're really, really hungry, and someone gives you something yummy to eat. Then it's "ahh, yes, wonderful! Oh, thank you!" That feels like heaven.

So, you know what? Most of us go through life and think these feelings just happen to us. Someone or something makes us mad. Or something good happens and we suddenly feel grateful. But part of growing up and

becoming wiser is realizing that we have some choice about how we respond to things that make us angry, and that we can also deliberately set out to create that feeling of gratitude, by making a conscious decision to practice looking at what's right in our lives rather than focusing on what's missing, so as to enter that state of heaven more often.

Remember the child who loved chocolate in the opening poem? The last thing she said was “and I really like to be happy.” Deliberately developing an attitude of gratitude is one of the most sure-fire ways I've discovered to create happiness. Today, we're going to be looking at ways to develop that attitude of gratitude. I'm going to share something we call a “practice” with your moms and dads and the other grown-ups here to help strengthen those gratitude muscles. Because, you know, when you're in a state of gratitude, you can't be angry or resentful or bored or jealous or any of those feelings that feel like hell. You can't have a rainstorm and a sunny day at the same time. Practicing gratitude is like shining the sun onto your life. And the really cool thing is, you don't have to wait for the sun to shine before you can feel happy. You can get your hands right on the sun and shine it into your life yourself by practicing gratitude. How can you do that?

Lots of ways. You're going to do a gratitude practice that's also a fun art project when you leave here and go back to the cottage with Laura and Sarah in a few minutes. And I'll be sharing a gratitude practice with the grown-ups after you leave and you can ask them to tell you about it when you see them after the service. But before you go, I'm going to share one practice with you that Isaiah and I do every night before sleep. And that is, we tell each other three things from that day that we're grateful for. So just imagine you're lying in bed, and you're thinking back over your day today, or you can include yesterday too if that gives you more to work with - now think back-- what happened? What did you see? What was given to you? What fun did you have? What are you grateful for? You might not have felt gratitude at the time, but now, looking back, you can see “Oh, yeah, that was a good thing. I'm glad that happened,” or “That was really fun,” or “I really learned something from that!” So just think for a moment. I'll stop talking. Can everybody think of one thing they're grateful for? So now, turn to a person next to you and quietly share with each other the thing you're grateful for.

Okay, thanks for sharing. We're going to let you guys go back to the cottage now to have some fun practicing gratitude in a different way. We'll sing a song to send you on your way. The congregation will start, and then the choir will come in. “Go Now in Peace.”