

## What Will Your Verse Be?

Summer Saints Sermon Series: Robin Williams (July 19, 2020)

Friendship Presbyterian Church

*Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.* (II Corinthians 12: 7b-10, NRSV)

It would be hard to believe that we're already in the middle of the summer but for stepping outside! It's scorching outside, but then, we've been staying *inside* much more in the last few months and so perhaps don't notice it as much.

All this time in relative isolation has forced us to look inward more, to deal with ourselves and our family members more closely, and that may not be easy. In more "normal" times, our lives have more distractions and we can avoid some things, but these are not exactly normal times. The cracks, the weak points, in our hearts, minds, and souls are easier to see and feel. And this burden of extra awareness may feel heavy.

Perhaps for this very reason, today, our next-to-last Summer Saint for this season may come as some comic relief, though the choice may well *surprise* you too, not just because he was not really known as a religious person, but also because of his "Hollywood" life and well-known issues with substance abuse. I'm talking about the late American comedian, actor, and voice actor – the incomparable – Robin Williams.

His talent was off-the charts. I can't think of anyone, ever, who was as naturally gifted at making people laugh as he was. He began performing stand-up comedy in San Francisco and Los Angeles during the mid-1970s, and then became a household name for playing "Mork from Ork" in the sitcom *Mork & Mindy* (1978-1982). You remember! He was simply unforgettable.

And in this and in his routines, it was the *improvisation* of his comedy ... the speed with which he could make connections and pull gold out of the depth of some divine madness – which always seemed like it could spin out of control at any moment – it's this that has never been equaled.

But then, with equal genius, he could touch our hearts too ... inspire us ... through leading roles in such brilliant films as *Good Morning, Vietnam*; *Dead Poets Society*; *Patch Adams*; *Mrs. Doubtfire*; *Good Will Hunting*; and many others. Often, in these, he had his moments as *\*himself\** in hilarious comic rants, but then moments of deep emotional

gravitas, exploring the many shapes of the human heart. And these performances left a mark on so many of us.

I was a senior in college when he so brilliantly played English teacher John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*. That movie left a lasting, deeply positive impact on my life. His love for his students and his art, his passion for helping others to discover their own passion, helped shape my own emerging sense of a call to ministry and, within it, a call to the practice of teaching. My love for the poetry of Walt Whitman comes from that movie, and what a gift that has been.

I'll never forget the scene in which he has his class huddle up around him, and he says,

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for. To quote from Whitman, "O me! O life!... of the questions of these recurring; of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish...what good amid these, O me, O life? Answer. That you are here—that life exists, and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."

He repeats that final line, "*That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.*" And then he looks at the boys and asks, "What will your verse be?" What will your verse be? That question has stayed with me ever since.

Yes, Robin Williams possessed an amazing power to make us laugh, to make us cry, and in some cases, to change us and gift us with new, life-enriching and life-giving possibilities. And yet, for all this, he was himself deeply broken – and he knew it. He carried pain and depression, unhealed hurts, that he sought to ease temporarily through alcohol and drugs – addictions that he never did finally escape. And in the end, his depression, coupled with an ominous diagnosis of early stage Parkinson's disease and diffuse Lewy body dementia, led him to take his own life in August 2014.

There is a great stigma in our society surrounding mental illness. We don't know how to talk about it. Those afflicted with it are often *afraid* of talking about it and so become even further isolated and hopeless. But the only shameful thing about mental illness is the stigma attached to it. As USC Law professor Elyn Saks has written, "No one would ever say that someone with a broken arm or a broken leg is less than a whole person, but people say that or imply that all the time about people with mental illness."

Robin Williams' personal demons, though all too real, did not and do not finally define his life. His life, for all its inner pain and brokenness, was one in which this pain and

brokenness was channeled into strength for others. In the midst of his own turmoil, he made this world a little better for the rest of us.

As President Obama said about him soon after his death,

Robin Williams was an airman, a doctor, a genie, a nanny, a president, a professor, a bangarang Peter Pan, and everything in between. But he was one of a kind. He arrived in our lives as an alien – but he ended up touching every element of the human spirit. He made us laugh. He made us cry. He gave his immeasurable talent freely and generously to those who needed it most – from our troops stationed abroad to the marginalized on our own streets. [My] family offers our condolences to Robin's family, his friends, and everyone who found their voice and their verse thanks to Robin Williams.

Indeed, through his character in *Dead Poets Society*, he asked us all, “What will your verse be?” And out of his despair, he answered his own character’s question with his own beautiful verse, and thereby gave us all a little extra strength to find ours too.

And we need that strength, because we too know what it is to be broken, to feel weak, to hurt. Perhaps not to the same degree as Robin Williams (though some of us may), but we *do* know. And one choice we have is to turn in on ourselves, languishing in our own pain, or we might project our brokenness outwards in anger and cause harm to others.

Or we might, in our own way, yield ourselves to another path – a path of relinquishment and surrender in which we offer up all of ourselves to that divine Spirit which moves over the chaos of our lives, stirring up new creation. This is that path in which death is transmuted into life, and our wounds become a means for others to be healed.

This is what the Apostle Paul found as he strove to fulfill his ministry. In his second epistle to the church in Corinth, he writes of his own extraordinary, ecstatic spiritual experiences, visions of Heaven itself ... fits of a divine madness he couldn’t possibly put into words.

But he couldn’t remain in this paradise – the real world kept his feet on earth. He writes of a “thorn” given to him “in the flesh,” a messenger of Satan to torment him, to keep him from being too elated or proud. What this thorn is has been open over the centuries to a variety of interpretations and guesses. Is it a physical ailment or abnormality of some kind? Some scholars have suggested epilepsy, or an eye condition. Or might it be a personal enemy trying to thwart his every move? Or ... might it be some affliction of the mind or soul – the personal demons of depression or other torment? Why *not*? We’ll never know, but why couldn’t it be?

Whatever the affliction was, it was enough for Paul to beg the Lord to free him from it – *three times* he would make the heart-wrenching appeal. And three times, he was

refused, but then was told this by Christ himself, words that could be seen as the great verse of Paul's life –

*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.*

Living into this truth, Paul would discover – over a lifetime gripped by heavenly ecstasy and yet grounded by real earthly suffering – that it is precisely in and through these sufferings, from the places in which we feel the weakest, that healing and strength and blessing may be mediated to others.

The Apostle Paul lived this truth, and in a very real way, Robin Williams lived it too. You may never have thought the Apostle Paul and Robin Williams could have so much in common, huh?

And as it was true in their own lives, it can be true in ours as well. The late, great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once put it this way:

Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not “How can we hide our wounds?” so we don't have to be embarrassed, but “How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?” When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

May it be so, and so express with our very life a verse that brings new life to the world – to the glory of God! Amen.