

The List Maker

Text: Leviticus 19: 1, 33-37; Romans 12: 1-2, 9-21

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It's almost summer . . . just four more days! And to mark such an occasion I want to frolic with you just a wee bit this morning. Mind you, it's a kind of purposeful fun I have in mind, prescribed for a reason and something to nourish our own wondering souls.

So let me ask it straight up. Who among us make lists as a way of navigating the tasks of daily life? Anyone? Written lists maybe? Hidden lists? Secret lists? Lists held to the refrigerator door with little magnets? Perhaps notes to self? Lists of "to-do's" or even "honey-do's" that we carry in our minds?

Be not bashful! It's nothing to feel apologetic about. In fact, we can trace the practice of list making to the most ancient of days. Leviticus and Numbers in the Hebrew scriptures for example list out lots of what to do and not to do, to eat and not to eat, to touch and not to touch – quite appropriate for nomadic people whose lives depended on such guidance.

And much later there was Paul – the Apostle with a letterbox filled with all sorts of lists. So much of his teaching was methodical and strategic in reminding the early followers of Jesus of the attributes of faithfulness; and also, often by contrast, indentifying practices to avoid.

I've been reading . . . a new book with the curious title "Make a List." The author, Marilyn McEntyre, makes a compelling case that being a list maker is not a symptom of forgetfulness or a sign of neurosis as some might surmise, but an underestimated spiritual practice in living deeply and well.

"I list a lot," she writes, "and for a variety of reasons. To get organized, for example; or to plan the day; or to set priorities; or to dispel mental fog. I find that if I stay with the process of writing what so ever my lists are . . . they move from the more mundane to something much deeper. Gradually they become as mirrors revealing what has come to matter to me; or what is missing. They become a way of learning, of listening deeply, of letting go, even of prayer. Best of all they slow me down long enough to breathe."¹

Here's one of her lists that goes way beyond things like picking up a quart of milk at the store or remembering to go to the bank. She calls this list "What gives me joy . . ."

*Unexpected conversation with those I love
Early morning light
Walks by water – river, lake or ocean*

Flute, fiddle, and drums
Deep quiet
The teaching that comes in dreams
Writing time
Grace, intelligence, and good humor
Stories, pop-corn, and candlelight

Her book brims and overflows with suggestions about these deeper, more reflective kinds of lists - lists I would never have thought to write down in a million years but that do lead me to wonder.

Lists like: Unspoken needs I never mention. Permission I need to give myself. Five ways to make boring meetings go better. Favorite gifts I've been given. Seven small things that have really mattered to me. The first three things I would do if I were president. Three people who have made my life better. What seventh grade was like. What the beach teaches. Ten things I would snatch quickly if the house were on fire.

Turn deeper with me . . . to Paul now, list-maker par-excellence, and for the best and deepest of reasons. He consistently tried to keep himself, no less each of us, on the high road of being true to Jesus. He must have observed how prone human beings are to forgetting and even drifting, and how helpful a list can be.

If we create an inter-textual-look at his letters we find, for example, a list he posted to the church at Philippi reminding them of the importance of attitude in life. "You'll do you best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly, things to praise, not to curse." That's one of my all time favorites.

Or one that he sent to the folks in Corinth all about the attributes of love. You know the words: "Love is patient and kind; it is not boastful or jealous; it is not arrogant or rude; it does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in the wrong but rejoices in the right." And then just a single verse later another list not about what love is or is not but about what love does: "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Scarcely a wedding goes by without those lists being read.

And then to the church at Rome, another list: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all. Extend hospitality to strangers."

Let me say that one again. "Live peaceably with all. Extend hospitality to strangers." I need the counsel of that last one as I turn on the news, never sure of what's true or not, fake or real; and as the erosion we continue to experience wears so many of us down.

But on a father's day, such as we have, just to think of separating parents from children and call it appropriate and lawful breaks my heart with anger and shame.

So . . . lists, lists, lists . . . and simply this for today. I want you to do some summer wondering and go home and make one! I'll do the same – about what's important and what matters when all is said and done. About worry and joy, love and life, justice and equity and community.

Add one more list to the frolic. Did you know that Benjamin Franklin lived by what he called a master list? He identified 13 key values for his life. He wrote each one in a little book that he carried with him. Each day he would focus on one of those values, noting daily how well or poorly he had fared in living up to it. He observed that while he never achieved perfection in living out his values, he was a much better and happier man for having engaged that discipline over the years.²

May it be so in the goodness and grace of the lives that we are given to list and to spend. Amen.

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¹ Marilyn McEntyre. Make a List. Eerdmans Books, 2018, pp. 1-11.

² "Stewards of Our Time" by David Heetland, in The Christian Ministry, September-October 1993, p. 18