

## **Ain't Misbehavin**

by Rev. Don Garrett

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Our text today comes from the Book of Fats Waller, with the words by his songwriting partner, Andy Razaf:

*No one to talk with, all by myself, no one to walk with, but I'm happy on the shelf. Ain't misbehaving, I'm saving my love for you. I know for certain the one I love. I'm through with flirtin' it's just you I'm thinkin' of. Aint misbehavin', I'm savin' my love for you. Like Jack Horner in a corner, don't go nowhere what do I care? Your kisses are worth waitin' for, believe me. I don't stay out late, don't care to go. I'm home about eight, just me and my radio. Ain't misbehavin', I'm savin' my love for you.*

What we have here is a truly joyful declaration of a deeply abiding love. It says that temptation isn't temptation if it doesn't tempt you. And it also raises the question for us to consider, which is, "What do you love so completely that you can give yourself fully with absolutely no feelings of sacrifice?"

When I look back on my life, I can see a number of times I've felt that way. Certainly, the most obvious and immediate was the birth of my daughter, Cypress. It was as though her arrival opened my heart and turned it inside out. Love wasn't about me any more. It was all about her. I had no way to anticipate what happened to me when I first heard my daughter's cry of distress. It felt like my heart was being ripped out through my chest, so compelling was the feeling of responsibility to her welfare. Suddenly, love was no longer about how I, myself, felt. It was about how completely my own desires had been subsumed by the needs of this vulnerable infant. All of a sudden, voluntary, joyful, selfless sacrifice became the essence of loving behavior. And that feeling didn't ever really end, even though she's now a

grown adult living in St. Louis and working as a Doctor of Chiropractic Medicine. I love her that much.

But this kind of love isn't necessarily limited to the people in our lives. When we love doing something, we naturally choose that something over other things that might be enjoyable, but just not as much. My early life was so full of music that I didn't think twice about practicing four, five, six or more hours a day – I just loved playing music that much.

But when we don't love something, it's can be awfully hard to give it our full effort and attention. When I was in high school I was bored, sad, confused and distracted. Although I loved to play music, I hated schoolwork like Captain Hook hated Peter Pan. I avoided it whenever possible and got poor grades as a result. I also got a lot of patronizing lectures about not living up to my potential.

When I returned to school in my 40's, things were different. I'd had enough life experience to know that education was the gateway to a more meaningful professional life, so I was more than willing to do what it took to get a degree. But I had no idea how much I would enjoy it! Instead of a gateway to go through, education became a pathway that I walked with joy and excitement. Freed from the obligation and drudgery of my high school experience, I discovered that I loved learning for its own sake. My classes were the high points of my day and homework the most enjoyable part of my week. I changed my priorities, stopped doing other things and let schoolwork fill in all the spaces.

Later there was another challenge that asked for what appeared to be sacrifice. You see, I love to eat. I enjoy fine food – and by "fine" I mean eating whatever I like. I love to cook, to invent recipes, to ask myself what would taste good and then creating something from scratch. So this was a part of my life as I worked and studied. And it was still true after school as I began my new career in ministry. I gained quite a bit of weight. So when the doctor told me that I now had Type II

diabetes, it got my attention. He told me that I needed to change my diet and exercise more. And he told me that I needed to lose a lot of weight.

I took this seriously. I came up with a weight loss plan that trimmed away 20% of my body weight in just four months. I thought it would be hard to do, but it turned out that my commitment was stronger than temptation. I valued being alive and healthy more than indulging my appetite.

And then there is mindfulness practice. It may seem boring to some, just sitting there and doing nothing, but it can be a gateway to feeling the kind of committed joy Fats Waller sang about – finding it in every single moment of our lives.

My teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote, “When you contemplate a beautiful sunset, do you have to make any effort? I don't think so. You don't have to make any effort in order to enjoy a beautiful sunset. You need only to be there, to be there mind and body together. But if your body is there and your mind is in the past or in the future, then the beautiful sunset will not be there for you.”

By way of explanation, he continues, “There is a kind of energy that helps you to be there body and mind together. That energy is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity of being there body and mind united. When you drink your orange juice, drink mindfully and you will enjoy your juice because you are really there one hundred per cent. If your body and mind are united when you contemplate the beautiful sunset, it means that you are mindful. Mindfulness helps you to be there in order for the beautiful sunset to be there too.”

So we can see that the loving connection that the song, *Ain't Misbehavin'* celebrates isn't necessarily limited to our children or lovers or other activities. I mean, what about our SELVES? When we make choices that delight us, aren't we expressing a primary love of ourselves? We want to please ourselves, we want ourselves to be happy, so we make choices that we like with no sense of sacrifice.

What about food? How much regret do we feel when we sink our teeth into something really delightfully delicious? None at all, if our approach to life is at all healthy. Of course we're happy when our senses please us!

There's a phrase, "easy as pie." I've heard some say that pie isn't really all that easy. You've got to make a crust and filling and put them together just so or the pie doesn't come out right. But there could be another way of hearing "easy as pie." It could be as easy as eating pie. Now, that's easy. No argument there, and certainly no sense of sacrifice. Yumm!

And it feels so good to lie down to rest when we're tired. It feels good to sleep and wake refreshed. If we love ourselves we want to take care of ourselves – we enjoy taking care of ourselves. We even enjoy taking a shower or brushing our teeth. They become sensual pleasures we can enjoy every day.

And of course we do enjoy many, many sensual pleasures. We may vary as to which pleasures we enjoy the most, but enjoy them we do. And if we're lucky enough to be reasonably health about it, we hardly ever stop in the midst of a pleasure, annoyed that it's keeping us from doing something else.

Even lesser things can gain our allegiance. When I can watch the UNC Men's Basketball team playing on television, I rarely notice the sacrifice I'm making in not doing something else. But then again, I'm fortunate enough to be reasonable healthy about it – I don't resent the team for all the months of the year that they're not on TV. But this doesn't rule out the possibility that someone may resent the loss of my attentions during the basketball season.

I think that this kind of non-sacrificial love connects back to the kind of love that I've called the essential move of spirituality. It is the relaxation of the boundaries of our sense of self in order to include something that wasn't previously a part of our self.

All the things we enjoy for ourselves – food, rest, pleasure, among many others – we want to bring into our circle of selfhood. That's what makes the love

non-sacrificial. We experience our children as extensions of our own selves. The nature of a romantic partner is that we include our lover within the walls of ourselves. Sure, there's risk involved, but it's a risk we're willing to take because our selves become so much richer when they include another.

As Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, our thoughts and inner distractions can serve as a barrier, preventing our experience in the present moment from becoming a fully integrated part of our own selves. When we can be fully connected to our experience in the present moment our lives become immeasurably fuller and richer.

I think this is behind the spiritual teaching of loving our neighbors as ourselves. When we relax our defenses and open our hearts to one another we become immeasurably richer. This is also the key to coming together as a beloved community of hope, faith, and trust. Sure there are risks in lowering out defenses, but the rewards are worth it.

When we choose to experience the deeply satisfying pleasure of belonging to a beloved community of faith like our congregation, we expand the circle of our selfhood to include much that wasn't there before. This is a deeply spiritual practice. When we open our hearts and minds to our seven principles, to our mission and covenant, to our core values of compassion, nurture, and justice, we are changed, transformed by the experience. When all these things become integral parts of ourselves, they guide us in how we behave, both within this community and beyond.

When we open our hearts and minds to the 200-plus members of this congregation, it widens us, it changes our lives. When our self-identity includes being members of this congregation, its joys are our joys, its needs are our needs.

We each are living one life apiece, but each of our lives is composed of many loves and many commitments, all of which we value and cherish. Each love needs to have its time and place in our lives if we're going to give them our full attention. Like my love of college basketball, each love needs to have its season. We enjoy them in

their time as they yield to one another in what we hope will be a graceful, loving kind of dance.

Just as we enjoy our loves in their times, our loves all require some maintenance. From time to time we need to give them more than our attention – we will need to decide which we will give to and which we will set aside for a while. This is what the concept of stewardship is all about. We may enjoy a grassy lawn, but good stewardship tells us that we also need to spend time watering and mowing it. We may delight in our children, but there will be times when we need to teach them, discipline them, or buy them clothing.

And so we set aside a certain time of the year to practice the stewardship that nurtures our church.

We may enjoy our church on a Sunday morning, but stewardship points out that our enjoyment needs to go beyond that, to taking care of the many tasks that need to be done. And, of course, it means making sure that our church has the financial resources it needs to function as a vital, healthy community.

The great news is that, if we truly love our church, if we have made it an integral part of ourselves, caring for our church will be as easy as taking care of ourselves! Pledging to the Stewardship Convass will be as easy and pleasurable as eating a piece of pie!

We don't feel bad when we indulge ourselves with the things we love – we feel good. So today I invite you to indulge yourselves in the pleasurable act of giving – gratefully and generously – to our beloved community. Make or increase your pledge. It's easy as pie!

May it be so.