

I'M SO GLAD I'M STANDING HERE TODAY

April 19, 2020

Rev. Richard Maraj

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning and welcome, everybody! Thanks so much for joining us! Thank you for your continued support and prayers; thanks for reaching out and feeling that spiritual connection – that community connection – still, even though we're doing all of our activities virtually.

You know, today – while we're recording this – is actually the 15th anniversary of me being at Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center, and I've enjoyed every minute of it! And even though we're doing ministry a little bit differently now, it's still a joy to get to be with you, even virtually! So thanks for all your love, support and prayers; this is a strong ministry, and we've got even many more great years still to come.

We have a great service to come; Rusty Ferracane's going to sing a song that will knock your socks off. But let us begin first by preparing ourselves to commune and connect with that Living Spirit of God through our time of prayer and meditation.

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to close your outer eyes and join us in a time of prayer and meditation. To take in a deep breath and release it slowly. And take in another deep, cleansing breath and – as you release it – let go of any busy-ness you've had so far today. Begin to move your awareness within: to the calm, quiet place within. To that place where we are one with Spirit; that place where we rest momentarily to begin to know the Divine at more deep levels.

In this space, we know that anything is possible. That God has good for us. And no matter what is going on in the outer, when we are in the inner, we have the strength of the Lord. We touch the wisdom of the Divine. We know just how powerful we are, and that we can do – or be – anything we came here to do. Because every moment of every day, God shows us the way: one small step ahead into that which we came to do. One small step into the greater awareness of God at the center of our being. One small step that brings us closer to the Divine in every moment. Because, with God, nothing is impossible. And with God, every good thing we've ever dreamed of is coming our way. That there are no challenges in our way; that our way is smooth and easy. And that we fairly dance into the life we want to create.

God, we feel your presence all around us: at the center of our being and across the cosmos. We're connected to every sentient being on the planet: to every person; to all of the animal world; to the plants, microscopic and gigantic. To all of it, we participate in this oneness.

And so, God, we rise up into our health and wholeness. We feel your vital energy in every cell of our body. And we claim our good now. And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence as we recognize the wholeness of God within.

SILENCE

Mother/Father God, we come in gratitude for all of our blessings. For the knowledge and understanding that you created us in your image and likeness. That we are spiritual beings having a human experience and that, through prayer and meditation, we know you more deeply, more fully, more lovingly. And so, God, for this and every blessing, we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God. And it is so. Amen.

SONG:

Rusty Ferracane: 'I'm So Glad I'm Standing Here Today' (accompanied by Craig Bohmler on piano)

There were times
I remember
Had to fight just to hold my head up
Those times when even my friends
Tried to make a fool of me
There were things that my heart looked at
That they just couldn't see

Some said I was hopeless
Mind tangled in the night
But strong hearts just keep goin'
That is why I'm still standing here today

Come together
Raise up your voices
This time my song of love and life won't go away
I'll sing forever
Here in the sunshine
I've lived to see the sun break through the storm
And I'm so glad I'm standing here today

If you're lost in your troubles
And the world just seems to forget you
If you remember sunshine
Even on your darkest days
Just follow what your heart says
And you'll find your way

Some said I was hopeless
A mind tangled in the night
But strong hearts just keep goin'
And that is why I'm still standing here today

Come together
Raise up your voices
This time my song of love and life won't go away
I'll sing forever
Here in the sunshine
I've lived to see the sun break through the storm
And I'm so glad I'm standing here today

Come together
Raise up your voices
This time my song of love and life - it won't go away
I'll sing forever
Here in the sunshine
I've lived to see the sun break through the storm
And I'm so glad I'm standing here today

I've lived the sun break through the storm
And I'm so glad I'm standing here today!

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: *[Applauds]* Wasn't that fabulous?!? Rusty, thank you so much! What an awesome song, and what a great job singing it!

'Morning again, everybody! So what did Obi-Wan Kenobi say to the cowboy? "*May the horse be with you!*" *[Chuckles]* I know; I can feel for you! Only two left!

What do Winnie the Pooh and Alexander the Great have in common? The same middle name. *[Does a "rim shot" drum roll]*

What did Mr. and Mrs. Hamburger name their daughter? Patty! *[Chuckles and does another "rim shot" drum roll]*

Okay; I know they're bad jokes; I know they're horrible! But I bet at least some of you will tell at least one of those jokes, or re-tell it to your friends sometime today or real soon.

Sorry to put you through that *[laughs]*, but now we'll get on to the talk!

And today's talk is a talk about one of the all-time favorite songs of one of my all-time favorite people. And the song is, "I'm So Glad I'm Standing Here Today." And the person whose favorite that is, is the Rev. Jimmie Scott. This is an amazing and wonderful song, and I love it so much, because it really acknowledges the fact that we all go through a lot in life. We go through a lot of losses and disappointments and struggles. The song acknowledges that, but also acknowledges that we have the ability to rise and stand tall again. That we have the ability to grow through those processes and make it to our feet: to stand firm, to stand strong, to stand confident in living a life of joy and meaning in spite of the difficulties we may all face.

You know, just hearing that song uplifts me! It is a song of celebration; it is a song of triumph! It is a song of resilience and courage that reminds us that we have that in us – no matter what we face – to come through and still stand tall and stand strong.

You know, whenever you hear all the references that relate to standing – stand firm; stand your ground; take a stand – it always connotes a feeling of strength. Of empowerment. Of having a positive posture. Of really hanging tough and persevering through those difficult times. If you look in the Bible, it says all those things: Moses said, "*Stand firm and see the deliverance God will give you today.*" Other parts say, "*Stand strong in your faith.*" "*Stand for God.*" Other ones say there is a prominence to be standing: like he was standing on the bank of the river; he was standing on the top of a hill; he was standing at the entrance. And it's always connoting this idea that standing is a powerful, empowering word. It's more than just about physically standing; it includes mentally, emotionally, and standing spiritually, as well.

All these analogies and metaphors about standing, for me, makes me realize that life is calling us to ask: So where do you stand? What do you stand for? How are you standing? And how do you show up in your relationships? How do you show up toward your self-care and your health? The kind of person that you are, the kind of things that you want to achieve: are you standing tall and strong? Or are you cowering and shying away? Are you standing with your head tall, or is your head down? There are all kinds of ways! Are you standing in the truth of who you are, and living your most authentic life? Or are you hiding?

To me, standing tall really says a lot about how we choose to live: how consciously we choose to show up. How willing we are to learn, to grow, to change, and to expand and become a better person in every way.

This song – “I’m So Glad I’m Standing Here Today” – was actually written by Will Jennings and Joe Sample, who were members of a jazz funk group called The Crusaders. And they wrote this song for Joe Cocker, who was really having struggles in his life. The music industry had given up on him; he couldn’t get a contract. Couldn’t get a venue to do a concert, because he had... He had just gotten over his struggle and addiction with heroin, but still struggling with alcoholism. He was really kind of on the ropes, and not knowing if he was going to be able to bounce back. But they believed in him. Will Jennings’ father was a minister, and he believed in the redemption and the power for us to overcome and find success and salvation. And he believed in Joe Cocker, and they wrote this song for him, and it appeared on their album in 1981 entitled, *Standing Tall*. And, in fact, in 1981 Joe Cocker was nominated for a Grammy Award for this song, “I’m So Glad I’m Standing Here Today.” And it was really his comeback song: it was his comeback to let people know that he was okay; that he made through the issues and struggles of his life. It helped him save his reputation, cement his legacy, and really give him back himself... have himself know that he was back on his feet. And he was so glad that he got through the storms and was standing here in his life again.

And so, I think this song has a powerful message for us, and we’re going to combine it with some Scripture to see what it can teach us about how to live our lives to the fullest, and how to get through the difficult parts. I believe this Scripture you’re going to hear in a minute is a formula for – not just overcoming – but for living well! To living a happy and joyous and meaningful life.

And here’s the Scripture we’re going to use, from the Book of Revelation. It says, *“Behold; I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To anyone who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.”*

And so, this is Jesus speaking. And he is really saying that God’s Spirit is standing at the door. That God’s Spirit is present; is accessible; it is fully available to each and every one of us. And it is just waiting there for us to open the door. That God’s peace and love and joy and healing and possibilities and reconciliation and transformation is always there at the door of our consciousness, knocking and awaiting us to invite it in. Awaiting us to open ourselves to utilize all of the gifts that we have been given that we don’t always use... that we don’t always turn to.

God is our help in every need and every present moment, fully available, but it’s waiting for us to open ourselves to it.

And so here’s this formula: three steps.

It says, *“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he will eat with me.* And what that’s saying is that, our job – even through Spirit is there at the door knocking – our job is to open the door! To let Spirit in! To let that peace in! To let God’s love in! To let God’s wisdom and guidance in!

And it sounds easy, doesn’t it? Just open the door! But how often do we close the door in our lives? See, we can open our heart or close our heart. We can open our mind or close our mind. We can open ourselves to life, or we can close ourselves off to life. And the fact is: when hard times come, we tend to shut down. We tend to close off, thinking it’s protecting ourselves, yet we are actually shutting off the very Source and Spirit out of which can bring us out and bring us up and beyond the difficulties.

So the very first step to a successful life – or overcoming or making it through the storm – is to open the door to God’s Spirit. Open the door to God’s wisdom and creativity and abundance and goodness. Because it is always there, available to us. It’s there waiting, and when we open the door, we open

ourselves to hear the still, small voice of God. When we open the door, we quiet our minds, and fear and negativity begin to slip away as we open our lives to God.

And the only thing we need to do to quiet our minds and open our hearts to God it says in the Book of Jeremiah: *"If you seek me, you will find me if you seek me with all your heart."* To open the door just needs us to have a sincere heart: to open ourselves and our hearts and our lives to that Living Spirit of God... to that Spirit of peace... to that Spirit of truth.

You know, the door being opened and waiting for it is just our choosing and deciding to open ourselves. I love the line in Job; it says, *"Decide upon a thing, and it will be established for you."* And so it's: decide to take a stand and stand firm in our faith by just opening our hearts, and opening ourselves, and turning to Spirit each day and each moment. Because there's nothing in our lives – whether it's a goal or a difficulty or a dream or financial or health – where turning to God isn't our best resource in every way!

And it says: when you open the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he will eat with me... which means you will be nourished spiritually. You will receive your daily bread. You will commune and connect with that Living Spirit of God, and all things that are not of God will fall away, and everything that is of God will actually begin to flow. Will begin to move in and realign ourselves with those great truths.

And so a simple prayer – saying, *"God, I open my heart to you; I open my mind and my heart in this situation. Heal me! Lead me! Show me the way to the fullness of your presence; the fullness of your peace; the fullness of your light; and the fullness of your love."* Just take a deep breath [***breathes in deeply***], and feel how easy it is to open your heart when you decide to open, and when you decide to choose to stand firm in your faith in God by simply opening the door.

So the second thing we need to do the work that we need to overcome. It's one thing to open the door... but then we actually have to do the work that supports it. It says, *"Faith without works is dead."* So there's that faith of opening the door to Spirit, but there's also work that is needed to be done to actually bring that to life and have it move and flow and make a difference in our lives.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said in *The Law of Compensation*: *"What will you have? sayeth the Lord. Pay for it and take it!"* What it's saying is: you can have anything you want! But you have to do the spiritual work; you have to do the mental work, the physical work, to acquire the consciousness for it, and then it will be yours.

It doesn't matter what you want in life: it could be success in business; it could be in school; it could be science. It could be whatever. It requires work! That is the reality of it: that there is work and effort to be done to acquire, to achieve and to experience the things that we want. Let me give you some Biblical and non-Biblical examples.

David became king and he was known famously for defeating Goliath. And there was the large Philistine (Goliath), and everybody was so scared, nobody would even try. No one would take a shot; no one would go against him. And what I love about David: David was willing to commit to take some action. And so he got his slingshot and his five smooth stones; he went out into the arena; and he took a shot, and he knocked out and killed the giant Goliath (which symbolizes our problem). And so the rest of them were so scared, they didn't even try! They didn't put any effort or work in. And what did David do? He was willing to step out and put his faith in action! And the giant – the obstacle – was overcome. And he succeeded, and it led him to becoming king.

Let me give you another example. Remember Peter in the boat in the storm? Where Jesus called him out and, at first, he was (walking) on the water? And then he started looking at the storm, and he ended up sinking in it? Well, that same Peter: you may think, well, he kind of failed. He took a try and he missed! Uh-uh! You remember: he is the one that Jesus said, *"You are the rock upon which I will build my*

church.” And you know what it’s saying? Is that, when you try – and put faith in action and do the work that you need – that it will bring you to a level of success. It will teach you more; it will grow you more; it’ll develop you more! Peter may have not succeeded in that moment, but he tried. He did the work and effort! Had he stayed safe in the boat, he would not have known what it was like to step out, to risk, to take a chance.

Every time we do work, it changes us. It grows us and expands us into something more than we were before. Whether it works out or not, the activity of the work moves energy, and actually changes us and our lives.

A couple more examples. Rudy Ruettiger was a walk-on football player for Notre Dame Irish. He did not have much talent. He was very short. But one thing: he worked hard. He worked so hard, even though he didn’t have the talent – even though he never started – that they kept him on the team, because his effort was so there. And so he finally, on the very last game – after four years – he got to play one play. One play! With four years of hard work. They made a movie about him named *Rudy*; you might have seen it. And the point I’m trying to make there is: even without a lot of talent, because he worked so hard, that transformed his life. He became famous, because – even though he didn’t have much talent – he put all that work in, and the work made a difference.

Michael Jordan: considered the greatest basketball player of all time. People say, “*Oh! He had so much talent; he’s a natural!*” That was one of the worst things; he hated people saying that, because it diminished the work he put in. He put in a lot of work! He had one of the best work ethics of any athlete. And you see his success! And the point I’m making here: here’s lots of talent and good work ethic, and see how he rose? Here’s not much talent and work ethic, and he had success.

Regardless of our skill or talent or amount of money, any time we put effort and work and intention into things, we will expand, we will grow, and we will develop.

Henry David Thoreau said if you move confidently in the direction of your dreams, you will raise to a higher order, and laws and energies will help you to succeed at a higher level than you have known before. Because there is something about action – about work, about effort. Whether it is about dealing with an addiction, or losing weight, or healing a relationship, or becoming more spiritually centered, all things take work and effort, because it’s about putting faith into action.

So what is some work that you are being called to do? What do you stand for in terms of committing yourself to have and to achieve and succeed in the areas that you want to?

Now, this work might come in the form of just staying positive. This work could come in the form of seeing a therapist and getting help. This work could come in the form of stopping something, and rethinking it, and maybe moving in a new direction. This work could be working harder at what it is that you’re currently doing. It could be trying something new. It could be a lot of different things!

The question is: what work you know that you’re being called to do? Are you willing to take a stand and commit yourself to doing that work?

One of the things I always believe is that, if we want to get something that we’ve never gotten before, we need to do something we haven’t done before. So it’s not a matter of always just doing the same thing; it’s to ask the question: is there something new I need to do? Something different I need to do? Something I need to stop doing? Because if we want something we haven’t gotten before, it’s time to do something we haven’t done before to help us get those results.

Work, I believe, always sets things in motion; puts our faith in action; and actually lifts us and grows us into something better than we can even imagine.

Open the door; do the work to overcome. **And the third one is that, when you overcome, that you get to sit at the right hand on the throne. And, to me, that is to feel that connection to Spirit and, particularly, the consciousness and the mindset of God.**

Paul said, *"Let the same mind that was in Christ Jesus be in you."* And, to me, having a mindset – a Divine mindset and a positive outlook and attitude – is an important thing.

Here are two wonderful Scriptures about mindset. One says, *"In all things give thanks, for this is God's will for you."* So it says: in all things, have a grateful mind, because this is God's will! To recognize good at all times.

And the second one in the Old Testament is: *"This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."* To have a mindset that is grateful – that rejoices in all things – is powerful!

That line – *"I'm so glad I'm standing here today"* – is a line that says, *"I'm grateful!"* That I'm rejoicing in where I am... that I'm rejoicing in far I've come. It is an affirmation of appreciation and celebration. And I think the quality – when we stand for anything – the quality of that stance is 100% reflected by the quality of the attitude that we handle life with. When we handle all the things in our lives with a positive and joyful attitude, that it will help us be able to see the sun come through the storm. It'll see us rise through the difficult time to come to more joyful and positive experiences.

You know, there was this placard in a church over a door that was kind of low. And the placard gave a warning, and here's what it said: *"The height of this doorway is somewhat shorter than the height of the average person. If, therefore, you're at this average height or above this height, be especially careful how you approach and pass through the doorway, lest an accident ensue."* And right below the sign and the warning was an abbreviated summary of the warning, and it said, *"Bend or bump."*

And the thing about life [*chuckles*], is that sometimes we will bump our head into situations because we are so rigid and inflexible and negative. Sometimes in life you need to bend! And that bending really represents flexibility. We have to have a flexible mind; a curious mind; an open mind; a mind willing to learn and discover. A mind that's willing to change.

Somebody once said, *"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape."* And, to me, that's an important thing! We have to be flexible of mind; we have to be willing to change our mindset, our perspective, our attitude and our outlook.

So do you remember in *Tom Sawyer*, when he got punished and he had to paint the fence? And then he pretended – his friends were coming – and he pretended he was really liking it? And he pretended it so well they were like, *"Oh, my God; that looks like so much fun! Can I get to do it?"* And, in fact, he convinced those boys how joyful this was that they paid him money to paint the fence for him!

And so, my brother was sharing his recollection of that. Because one of his least favorite things at home – he and his wife share cooking and dishes and all that stuff – but they put everything in the dishwasher except the pans. And when there's a lot of that grease, and stuff from baked chicken and stuff, and it's caked on, he couldn't stand that! He loved cooking and all this stuff; he just did not like sharing cleaning these pots and pans. He thought it was a chore, a burden; he couldn't really stand it. It was dirty and kind of nasty and grimy and greasy. And so he reflected back on Tom Sawyer; not the negative part, but the fact that he made painting a fence seem so joyful! So he said, *"I'm going to commit to changing my attitude of it being a chore and a burden to it being a joyful thing: something that I will enjoy. Not something I have to do, but something I get to do."* And, over time, my brother started loving doing these pans! Seeing how he could get all the grease off, and all the baked off stuff. Thinking, *"Oh; I'm doing this to support my family. These dishes need cleaning because we have enough food to cook and to prepare!"* And he just started loving this process! He said it's a part of his refuge; that he gets lost in this experience!

And so, to me, what a great example of transforming your attitude. He knew he didn't like it; he knew it was a chore! But he transformed it into something joyful and positive. And now it isn't a burden. You know, he has transformed that situation into something that's fun.

So, question for you: what is something you don't like doing? Like him and the pots and the pans? And would you be willing – like Tom Sawyer painting the fence look joyful, and my brother realizing he could find joy in it – would you be willing to do that? Would you be willing to change and transform your attitude and your energy and how you do that?

So, how about this? What do you think would be the attitude and mindset of someone who overcame and was happy to be standing here today? What would be mindset of someone who really got through a difficult time, and did it with the best perspective? Would they have a hopeful attitude? A joyful attitude? A playful attitude? A curious? A willing? A mindset to discover, to learn and to be changed? And a willingness to do things differently?

It kind of reminds me of when it says in Scripture, *"To enter the kingdom of heaven, you must become as a child."* You must have that pure, joyful, playful mindset in. So what mindset would you be willing to take on to make your life more joyful? And to experience a more heavenly experience, no matter what things you're going through or we could go through?

You know, as we move through these days that are a little unusual and difficult and challenging, or as we move through wanting to achieve goals and experience greater success, let's remember these principles and this formula for success. Open the door to Spirit, and invite in the light, the love, the peace, the wisdom and the guidance of God. It is our greatest resource, and it's there, standing at the door of our consciousness, knocking. The question is: will you let it in? And let's do the work to overcome: do the work to succeed. It takes effort and energy, from Michael Jordan to Rudy to David and Goliath and Peter... everybody! It is when you put energy and effort in, it will change you; it will expand you and grow you in amazing ways, and open new opportunities. And, finally, let's have a fabulous outlook and attitude. Let's make painting the fence or doing our pans – or whatever it is – a joyful experience. Let's put that consciousness and mindset out into the world. And then this song can truly be an anthem to help us get through anything.

And let me end with the final verse:

"Come together

Raise up your voices

This time my song of love and life won't go away

I'll sing forever

Here in the sunshine

I've lived to see the sun break through the storm

And I'm so glad I'm standing here today."

God bless you all!

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. We just want to say thank you for your generosity: we've received your checks in the mail; we've gotten them online. We just appreciate how you're supporting us, even though you can't be physically here. We're with you in spirit and online, so thank you for all that you've given us.

We know that tithing is a spiritual practice that brings us closer to God. So, God, our offering blessing is: *"Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* Will

you affirm that with me? *“Divine Love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive.”* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts and these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love; they are received in love; and that they move through this ministry with the energy of Divine Love out into the world as good, and that each giver is blessed, heaped up, pressed down, and overflowing, for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God. Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: Just want to say thank you for being with us this morning; you’re here in our hearts and our souls and our minds as we reach out to you to uplift you on this beautiful Sunday morning. Namaste.

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