

Flawed Abundance – To Want What We Have and Find Gratitude for the Work of Loving the World

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, November 26, 2017

Music Videos used during this service:

“Beautiful Day”

- by U2; sung by 3B4JOY

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOC0RrChNLQ>

“Grateful: A Love Song to the World”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO2o98Zpzg8>

Sermon Reflection

“CHRISTMAS is at our throats again.”

That was the cheery yuletide greeting favored by the late English playwright Noël Coward, commemorating the holiday after which he was named. Less contrarian were the words of President Calvin Coolidge: “Christmas is not a time nor a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and good will, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas.”

Which quotation strikes a chord with you? Are you a Coward or a Coolidge?

Those are the opening words of a 2014 New York Times article by Arthur C. Brooks that addresses what he calls the “Christmas Conundrum,” the yearly pitting of competing impulses and desires against one another with an unhealthy dollop of raging consumerism thrown in for good measure. Brooks sees the bulk of our dis-ease at this time of year – or any time of year when we find ourselves dissatisfied with our own abundance to be a struggle with what the Buddhist’s call “dö chag” (**die Chag**) – their word for attachment, which translates quite beautifully, I think, to “sticky desire.”

In the days prior to the Thanksgiving holiday I thought that was where I was going with this sermon today – seemed quite appropriate for this time of year – but then as sometimes happens – other inspiration worked on me and I shifted direction. For this final Sunday of our month-long exploration of what it means to be a people of abundance, I found myself leaning toward something other than our “sticky desires.”

If I were to give a title to this new direction that reflects the sources of influence that have been working on me over the past several days, it would be called “**Flawed Abundance – To Want What We Have and Find Gratitude for the Work of Loving the World.**”

Let me first share with you a reminder of what the folks at Soul Matters had to say about our focus on abundance this month – this is posted on our website in its entirety:

When it comes to abundance, our culture and our religion are clearly at odds. Our culture cries, "Accumulate!" Our religion counsels "Appreciate!" The mantras couldn't be more different: The commercials tell us to "Go out and get what you want!" The pulpits plea with us to "**learn to want what you have.**"

So, yes, appreciation (gratitude) is central to this [month]. Noticing the abundance around us is clearly the work we are called to do. But one wonders if that's enough. It all depends on what you do after the noticing is done.

Sometimes there's a passivity to appreciation that leaves nothing changed. There's a big difference between appreciating the blessing of family and committing to sitting down together for dinner at least three or four times a week. It's one thing to notice the beauty that fills your own backyard; it's quite another to pull yourself out of the rat race so you have time to enjoy it. It helps to have a sermon remind us that our spouse or parent is doing the best they can, but that insight rarely sticks without a commitment to action that helps us truly let go of all the things we wish they were and **embrace the limited but wonderful abundance of what they are.**

In short, appreciation...gratitude...only gets us part of the way there. Noticing places abundance in view, but only new commitments put it within reach. Without a decision to change our lives, noticing becomes nothing more than nostalgia.

So, what needs to change? Maybe that's the real question [here]. What needs altered so you can dance with what is plentiful rather than worrying about what is scarce? What clutter finally needs cleaned up so there is room for new abundance to enter in? What changes will free you from the urgent and allow in the important?

Both the poet philosopher Mark Nepo and the late great minister of All Souls UU Church in New York City have wisdom to share about abundance, about recognizing and accessing it. Both of them had their teachings fired in the kiln of living with cancer and facing the reality of their deaths. It is a stanza from Mark Nepo's poem "The Way Under the Way" that sticks with me:

Stripped of causes and plans
and things to strive for,
I have discovered everything
I could need or ask for
is right here –
in flawed abundance.

Note: he wrote this from a hospital bed, certain that his death was close at hand.

Forrest Church had a life mantra:

Want what you have

Do what you can

Be who you are.

Peter Friedrichs once wrote in a sermon about the first part of Forrest's mantra:

To want what we have is to engage in a deep spiritual practice of appreciation. We've all heard the lines from the Joni Mitchell song: "You don't know what you've got 'til it's gone." Wanting what we have calls us to constantly keep in our awareness the things that we would miss, the things that we would long for terribly, were they to be taken from us. When we want what we have, we don't take things for granted. To use Forrest's language, we see all the panes of the window, the bright clear ones and the cloudy ones alike, and we are grateful for the light that shines through them all. Wanting what we have helps us to know and to love what we've got *before* it's gone.

Wanting what we have is not a passive exercise. Want, desire, acceptance and appreciation are acts of volition. It calls us to make a choice between longing for some other state, some other perhaps unspecified place - "Anywhere but here, thank you very much--" and where we are, living with what we've got. It requires us to actively engage in our lives as they are now. To live our lives with deep meaning and conviction, even if they're not the lives we might have hoped for or planned for. To want what we have calls our attention back from the other side of the fence where that greener grass of our fantasy beckons, and asks to apply our energies to tending our own yards, to digging out our own weeds, and to making our own lawns more beautiful.

I have no doubt that there are those here today who do not want what they have. Fear of losing a job. Anxiety over the choices a loved one is making. Depression that life has not worked out the way that we've planned. It seems almost trite to say it, but the truth is that life is hard, really hard, sometimes, maybe all the time. And often we wish it were otherwise. We pray for salvation from the pain and suffering, and sometimes we seek relief and release in ways that are hurtful to ourselves and to others. With our face pressed up against the darkest pane of glass, we are unable to see anything but darkness. **And yet, whether we see it or not, the light still shines in through all those other panes.** The light of the morning sun rising each day, the light of our child's smile, the light of a friend's constant companionship, the light of life which is our single, greatest gift. These are the things we have, and that we can hold onto. And if we do, we will never go wanting.

I want to close with a Thanksgiving blog post by the Quaker writer and teacher, Parker Palmer, that brings us to "**Gratitude for the Work of Loving the World.**" He begins with these words:

"I am thankful for many things. First of all, I am thankful for the world, because without it we would be floating in outer space. Second of all, I am thankful for mom and dad and sister, because they help me. Last of all, I am grateful for nature because if we didn't have nature it wouldn't be pretty. I am thankful for all of these things."

That's what one of my bright, kind, adventuresome granddaughters wrote a few years ago (at age 6) in response to a school assignment. On Thanksgiving Day that year — with three generations of our family at the table — we read her words aloud as our blessing. As we did, I thought, "Naiya speaks for me!" Like her, I'm grateful for simple gifts:

- For the ground on which I stand — whether it's the kind that grows greenery or the kind in which my soul can take root.
- For the people who've supported me — from those who know me well and love me nonetheless to strangers who offered help in a moment of need.
- For the natural world, which really does make things pretty — a beauty to which I often turn for solace, healing, inspiration, and peace.

The only way to keep a gift alive is to pass it along. So in this season of Thanksgiving — in a world where so many have been deprived of so much — I'll give thanks by finding more ways to share the abundance I've been given.

I'll also re-read this Mary Oliver poem. If I could embrace the idea that "My work is loving the world" — and spend my days living more fully into that job description — I'd be giving thanks not just with my words but with my life.

Messenger

~ by Mary Oliver

My work is loving the world.
 Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
 equal seekers of sweetness.
 Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
 Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
 Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
 keep my mind on what matters,
 which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
 astonished.
 The phoebe, the delphinium.
 The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
 Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
 and these body-clothes,
 a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
 to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
 telling them all, over and over, how it is
 that we live forever.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.

Sources

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/opinion/sunday/arthur-c-brooks-abundance-without-attachment.html>

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