

~ *Simplicity* ~
Small things with Great Love

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
December 11, 2016
Rev. Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love. This quote from Mother Teresa sets the theme for our service today.

I've preached a few times before about simplicity, focusing on having less stuff or being less busy. And for many of us these are appropriate goals. Today however, I'd like to consider as well that simplicity can be about doing what we can do, and stopping. Then after an appropriate rest, doing what we can do, then stopping. And so forth.

Last Sunday we concluded our service with the serenity prayer: "May I have courage to change the things I can, and serenity to accept the things I cannot change...."

This prayer, of course, is not about being passive. We cannot do small things with great love *by being passive*. Simplicity is active, not passive.

But activity does not have to be frantic, unfocused, and exhausting. Activity can join with simplicity when we acknowledge our limits, and then choose to act in accordance with our priorities, our principles, and our promises.

So to begin today let's remind ourselves of this promise, this covenant that we share:

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

GATHERING SONG

Morning has Come #1000

CHILDREN'S FOCUS

Flags Maxine Trottier

Summary: Mary assists her neighbor, Mr. Hiroshi, as he tends his garden of raked sand with a pond full of fish lined by tall irises (they call them "flags"). When Mr. Hiroshi is taken away by a bus to an internment camp and his house is sold. Before the new owners remove the pond and garden, and sod the entire yard, Mary clandestinely moves the fish to the river. Then she plants irises in her own yard. *A garden is never finished, Mr. Hiroshi had taught her. But one has to start somewhere.*

READING

“Limits”

Gunilla Morris

The pans are ready.
Their metal edges gleam.
They are greased and floured.
They are ready to hold just so much dough.

Our talents and our appalling lacks.
Our very breath. In. Out.
The lungs' capacity. No more.
Only so much can be lived!

There is nothing personal here.
This restriction must happen
the way death must happen.
It is the way.

The pans have limits,
and the dough will grow within them.
This is dependable and good.
A mercy.

Our lives depend on limits.
Our skins first. Our parents -
just those two. Our homes.
Our loves, our work, our friends.

WOMEN'S ENSEMBLE

Love is Little

Shaker Hymn

MESSAGE

The Whatcom County Racial justice Coalition met here this past week. Attendance had doubled since last month. We had about 80 people, many saying they'd never been involved in something like this before but that they couldn't be passive any longer. Probably half of the crowd were people of color; so we know it's possible for BUF to feel like a sanctuary for people of all races.

And that was the topic for the evening: not about BUF, but about what it would take for Bellingham (and Whatcom County) to be a sanctuary for all people. We weren't concerned about precise definitions, nor interested in attaining some official legal status. The question was, simply: what actual conditions would need to be present to create sanctuary—to make our entire community a place where all can feel welcome, and unashamed of who we are, without regard to race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or citizenship status.

I'm bringing this up in regard to simplicity because sometimes my life at BUF feels unfocused, I have trouble explaining or even sensing what it is, exactly, that we're trying to do here, what we're trying to be. But this conversation with the Racial Justice Coalition reminded me of many other conversations that have taken place right here where I've heard again and again that if BUF is about anything, we're about sanctuary. That's the vision we have of ourselves—not *instead* of the various social and educational and musical and spiritual stuff that we do, but as the center of all that, as the aspiration that holds it all together...holds *us* all together.

Still, until now I had thought of sanctuary as a *partial* answer to what we're about here. Because I mistook sanctuary to be only that which happens within these walls. Oh I've always been proud of the work we do beyond these walls: what we do as individuals and what we do together. And I've always seen that good work as *another essential piece* of our identity. But I hadn't seen the

convergence before. I hadn't noticed how well this word, "sanctuary," might describe our purpose both in here, and in the larger community as well.

Because: why do we care about water quality, and election integrity, and immigrant rights, and mental health and an array of causes out there so complex that to do anything constructive often feels beyond our capacity? Why do we still care? What might this all boil down to? What if sanctuary is at the heart of it? Nothing more, and nothing less than that? A sense that we, and everyone else, belong...because, wherever we go...someone's on our side; someone's got our back.

I also met this week with a group of progressive clergy from Bellingham, Ferndale, Blaine... there were about twenty of us, which was encouraging. We went around the circle each talking briefly about the ongoing work of our congregations that extends beyond our internal communities: work through which our congregations might collaborate. At a time when many might be overly invested in frantic preparations for special holiday programs, these people represented congregations with something else at the forefront of their minds: living the spirit of our respective holidays.

Asking: how might we prepare, together, to ensure that our Muslim neighbors remain welcome in this community? How can we protect our right to assemble and ensure that protest does not become criminalized, as has been proposed in the Washington State Legislature? How can we ensure that our transgender friends aren't prosecuted for using the restroom that corresponds to their gender identity? How can we ensure access to women's health care and reproductive choice?

Remember I said this was a *clergy* group (and the only other Unitarian there was our beloved Rev Barbara Davenport). I do not remember anyone using the word "sanctuary." But this may be what we were talking about. We weren't defending our isolated little fiefdoms against one another. We weren't bemoaning our fate as homogenous little bubbles of idealism scattered over many square miles. No, we were talking about *all of the spaces in between us* where life gets very complicated.

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So how might we simplify? Wendell Berry wrote: People have tried to simplify themselves by *severing* their connections. That doesn't work. Severing connections makes complication. These bogus attempts at simplification ignore or despise the real complexity of the world. And ignoring complexity makes complication."

If that's the case, the first step in simplifying our lives may be to acknowledge what is. Instead of making our lives increasingly complex, and difficult, by pretending that reality is something else, we start by acknowledging what is, and then seeking balance.

Just as humility is the middle way between thinking too little of ourselves and thinking too much of ourselves...simplicity is also the middle way. In terms of stuff, it's a balance between having

too little and too much. In terms of busyness, it's a balance between doing too little and too much.

The Buddha was born into a life of wealth and luxury. But this is not where he found enlightenment. So he chose a life of extreme self-deprivation, living intentionally homeless, with the minimal possible nutrition and clothing. But this did not lead to enlightenment. Eventually he came to appreciate what he would call the middle way, one of his key teachings: not too much, not too little.

Of course, not too much, not too little will mean something different for each of us. And it will mean something different today than it did last year.

So another way of getting at the same idea is this, from Rev Forrest Church, may he rest in peace. He used to say: want what you have, do what you can, be who you are.

Gunilla Norris put it this way: The pans have limits, *and* the dough will grow within them.

All of the fundraisers who have your email address put it this way: if your loved ones have enough stuff, give them the gift of a donation to a cause that's important to you.

The BUF newsletter puts it this way: get away from all that email, get away from screen time altogether for just an hour, come to lunch with Paul on Tuesdays at noon for some simple old-fashioned face to face conversation.

And Paul Beckel puts it this way: the best way to experience simplicity is through a deep sense that what you are doing right now is worthwhile, and consistent with your values.

And I would end there except I want to repeat what Forrest Church said. Because it's so simple, and memorable, and on target: It applies to us as individuals; it applies to us as a congregation; and it applies to us among neighbors and friends, families and workplaces and community organizations: "Want what you have. Do what you can. Be who you are."

NEW MEMBER WELCOMING Erika Moore

SOCIAL & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

A collection for *Whatcom Land Trust*, creating natural sanctuary and protecting the source of our drinking water by preserving farmland, parkland, and wetlands.

SENDING SONG *People Look East* #226

BENEDICTION by Mother Teresa #562

Love cannot remain by itself—it has no meaning. Love has to be put into action and that action is service. Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor, it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the doing; a lifelong sharing of love with others.