

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Memory”
Sunday, November 11, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation:

“Gratitude is the memory of the heart.” -French proverb

Unison Reading (Overhead - #484) William Henry Channing

To live content with small means;
To seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion;
To be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not rich;
To study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly;
To listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart;
To bear all cheerfully, do all bravely, await occasions, hurry never.
To let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common.
This is to be my symphony.

Sermon “Having Enough/Not Enough”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

Goldilocks and the Three Bears is a brilliant example of interspecies miscommunication. Goldilocks goes off for a walk in the woods for reasons that are unstated. No one asks, “*Why* does she go for a walk in the woods?” Perhaps we could say that she doesn’t have enough – excitement. Well, we can all identify with wanting to take a walk in the woods; it’s pleasurable. And tiring, sometimes. And if we walk for quite a while, we get hungry. So by pure happenstance (it’s a fairy tale, after all!), Goldilocks chances across a lovely cabin in the woods that is precisely suited to her needs at that moment. There’s food on the table, and one bowl of oatmeal is just the right temperature and just enough to sate her hunger. There’s a chair to rest in that’s just the right size – though a little rickety, it seems. And there’s a bed to rest in that’s neither too

hard nor too soft. Her needs are met. Goldilocks can be content with small means, as William Henry Channing puts it in our Unison Reading this morning.

Of course, *her* small means have been stolen from the bears! Who come back and find that they now do *not* have enough – not enough oatmeal and one broken chair – and of course Goldilocks flees from the scene of the crime away to safety, having had more than enough excitement for one day.

All of us as human beings are driven by needs and desires and by needs as human beings. It appears to be deeply embedded in our character and to have troubled us for millennia. Ancient wisdom was as preoccupied with problems of contentment and wealth and inequality as we are today. What does it mean to have enough? This we have been asking for a very long time. The Buddha was raised in great luxury as the son of a king. He had everything anyone could possibly want – wealth, a beautiful wife, a newborn son, and great prospects for the future. And yet when he discovered the presence of poverty and sickness and death in the world around him, he became discontented with all that he had. He left all of that wealth and happiness and success because it was somehow not enough. He tried the path of holy men who denied themselves everything, who did their best to have and need as little as possible; but that, too, led to discontent, to a kind of desperate grasping just for the barest basics to sustain life. His great revelation taught him that it was possible to live contentedly by giving up grasping, by taming the endless desire for more. He discovered a way

to still the endless desire for more that torments us and to be content with enough.

The writer of the book Ecclesiastes similarly traces the path of desire by living out three of the modes in which human beings strive for more. He has been a great king, he says, and has accumulated unimaginable wealth – more gold than he could ever spend, more amusement than he could ever consume, more wives than he could ever manage. And despite all of this, he is still unhappy because he knows that it could all slip away from his hands and that at his death nothing would remain. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, he proclaims in despair. He seeks a great place in the world, conquering and subduing other peoples and nations, but this, too, is not enough and will not last. He seeks wisdom, accumulating a great library and searching for people of wisdom from all around, but this, too, fails to satisfy – vanity of vanities.

He discovers, finally, that satisfaction is to be found in acknowledging the having of enough and in giving thanks for the small sources of contentment that are already at hand. In the version of his wisdom as rendered in one of the responsive readings in our hymnal, he advises us to:

*Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do.
Life is sweet and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.
Even those who live many years shall rejoice in them all.*

“‘Tis a gift to be simple, ‘tis a gift to be free” -- free from the grasping, the search for ultimate satisfaction, from craving for something more. Free to be

grateful for what is, free to live fully, whatever time we are living in, ancient or modern.

Nor was the author of *Ecclesiastes* alone in discovering the wisdom of living simply, content to accept the turns as they come, learning that “This, too, shall pass.” In the same era, somewhere between five hundred and three hundred years before the time of Jesus, the same deep wisdom was being discovered by Lao Tzu and written down in the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu taught that there is an ultimate reality and a way of living in accord with it. He called this ultimate reality the *Tao*, and he said that it is intrinsically ineffable, “Mystery.” Marcus Borg describes it this way: “The way of living in accord with the Tao is ‘not grasping.’ The way most of us live most of the time – the way of conventional wisdom – is the way of grasping. We grasp not only by seeking to domesticate reality, but also by seeking those satisfactions that convention urges us to seek. But grasping is futile. Indeed, in Buddhism, it is the primary source of suffering.”¹

The secret of happiness and contentment is the acknowledgement that we have enough and that in practicing gratitude we can remind ourselves that we have enough. We can remember what has been good in life has been good to us even in the midst of sorrow and sadness. We can give thanks for ourselves and we can give thanks together, and this Thanksgiving season is a special time to

remind ourselves and one another to give thanks for having enough. In fact, we have a song about that:

Oh, we give thanks

For this precious day

For all gathered here

And those far away

For this time we share

With love and car

Oh we give thanks

For this precious day.

Which is fine for each of us as a practice for ourselves. But to get back to the story I started with, Goldilocks got to have enough by stealing it from the bears, who then *didn't* have enough. I can imagine a different version of the story in which Goldilocks comes across the lovely cabin in the woods when the bears are about. Maybe they've sat down from breakfast when this lovely girl shows up at the door. [At this point the image of real bears in springing into your minds, images of danger and dismemberment. But these are pretty domesticated bears – in fact, they might even be vegetarians, given what they eat for breakfast.] We could imagine that they might offer a bit of porridge from each of their bowls so she wouldn't be hungry, and what's the harm in letting her take a nap on the bed she found most comfortable? It could have been an occasion for making

memories, as we say, maybe even a selfie of the four of them smiling together in front of the fireplace. After all, being hospitable is another ancient bit of ancient wisdom we need to practice. Of course, it would be a much duller story without Goldilocks' terrified flight at the end of the story, and we really shouldn't be teaching children *not* to be afraid of bears.

Wanting what we have, as Forrest Church puts it, is a good practice for living satisfying lives for ourselves. Acknowledging that we have enough is a much better way to live than being envious of our neighbors or of those who are better off than we are, coveting what others have – especially those who have far more than enough for themselves. But looking around, we also find that some really *don't* have enough, and others have far more than enough. Some are desperately poor, some have been forced to flee in exile from their native lands. Some are fleeing from the dangers of war and gang violence and others from the effects of climate change. This, too, has been a reality of human life for millennia. The prophets of the Bible inveighed against those who stole from and oppressed others, some of them in very vivid terms. The prophet Amos denounces wives who profit from oppression and proclaims divine intervention:

4 “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are on the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’

2 The Lord God has sworn by his holiness
that, behold, the days are coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.

3 And you shall go out through the breaches,
each one straight ahead;
and you shall be cast out into Harmon,”
declares the Lord.

A recent memoir, *Primates of Park Avenue*, paints a similarly disparaging image of wealthy women on New York’s Upper East Side, though not with the warning of divine retribution.

Our recent election raised questions about the vast inequalities that have come to characterize our own nation at this point in our history; questions about whether we should welcome those who are fleeing from safety and seeking asylum; and questions about whether we are all equal citizens of this nations regardless of race, religion, or gender identity. We are living in a time in inequalities not seen since the late 1920’s, a level unprecedented in almost all of our lifetimes. Can we be living in a just society when some people must labor at minimum wage jobs – or even two such jobs – just to make ends meet, while others live in unimaginable splendor? Can we be content to reject seeks of asylum and to persecute the strangers in our own land? How can any of us be

contented to live in such a nation? Oughtn't we as a country be striving to make sure that everyone can have enough? There will always be inequality among people – we are, after all, born with different skills and abilities.

We must not be content merely to have enough for ourselves. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1964 put it this way:

“We’ve been in the mountain of war. We’ve been in the mountain of violence. We’ve been in the mountain of hatred long enough. It is necessary to move on now, but only by moving out of this mountain can we move to the promised land of justice and brotherhood and the Kingdom of God. It all boils down to the fact that we must never allow ourselves to become satisfied with unattained goals. We must always maintain a kind of divine discontent.”²

A divine discontent, not for our personal lives but for the lives of our neighbors, those who don't have enough. This has been and always will be a balancing act for us humans, balancing between having and acknowledging that we have enough and being discontented to live in a nation and a world in which some don't have enough – enough freedom, enough opportunity, enough to eat and clothe themselves and find shelter and safety. No one of us can save the world, nor can all of us together, even with the best of intentions. Needs are great, and means are limited.

I quote from Ecclesiastes partly because my interfaith study group recently embarked on studying that text. We are currently working our way through a

text from the Talmud, *Pirke Avot*, the Wisdom of the Fathers, the founders of Rabbinic Judaism. One of the most famous of the sayings gathered there is by the great Rabbi Hillel, who lived in the century before Jesus was born. He says, [1:14] “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I? And, if not now, when?”

So we are called to gratitude for having enough ourselves and for divine discontent on behalf of others who don't have enough. And it's never OK to steal from others to get enough for yourself – especially from bears.

The film *Wilderness Journey* that a number of us watched after the service last week as part of our work in coming to terms with White Supremacy told the story of one of our Unitarian Universalist struggles to embody equality and inclusion – the Empowerment Controversy that was sparked in part by the Black Power Movement of the late 1960's. The song that accompanied the story is one of our favorites, largely from the words of the prophets Isaiah and Amos:

We'll build a land where we bind up the broken.

We'll build a land where the captives go free,

Where the oil of gladness dissolves all mourning.

Oh, we'll build a promised land that can be.

For ourselves, gratitude for all that we have been given; we have enough. For others, a divine discontent that more needs to be done so that all may have

enough, that we can build a promised land that can be; and in that way, we will find that our hearts *are* truly in a holy place.

May it be so, and AMEN

¹ Borg, p. 168.

² <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/10-famous-quotes-from-dr-martin-luther-king-jr>