

“Ready... Set...”
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UU Meeting of South Berkshire
November 15, 2009

Readings:

The Book of Matthew 6:25-33

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

from *Living from the Center* by Jay McDaniel

...the lilies also have something important to say, not in words, but in sheer presence. In their naturalness and spontaneity, in their receptivity to the breath of life, they embody the heart of spirituality. They find God in the present moment.

I think this is what Emily Dickenson had in mind when she remarked that the only commandment she ever obeyed was to consider the lilies. She rightly reminds us that our deepest calling in life—the greatest of Jesus’ commandments—is not to make money or become famous or have a successful career. Rather, it is to be open to God in a distinctly human way, as are lilies in their distinctly herbal way. It is to consider and then imitate lilies.

My subject, then, is lily imitation-spirituality-in the age of consumerism. By spirituality I mean *openness to God’s Breathing, day by day and moment by moment, relative to the circumstances at hand*. Understood in this way, spirituality is not supernatural or extraordinary, but deeply natural and wholly ordinary. It can be embodied at home and in the workplace, while alone and with others, amid dish washing and diaper changing, laughing and crying, living and dying...Spirituality is ordinary life itself, as obedient to the call of the moment, as lived from a deeper Center.¹

Sermon:

As you may know, I spend a lot of time in my car. On Wednesday night last week, I was coming home from work and stopped at a rest area on the Mass Turnpike. As I was coming into the building I saw a man with a ladder pulling things out of a cardboard box in the front lobby. As I got closer, I saw that they were snowflakes on garland strings. As I walked into the building, I uttered out loud, “Holy... Moses....” It looked like a CVS Christmas isle had exploded all over the building. There was not a drop ceiling tile without something hanging from it. There were wrapped presents and garlands on the flat surfaces, including vending

¹ P.3

machines. It was out of control. I stopped, startled, and thought, “what day is it?” I realized the clock had turned to November and in retail-land, that meant it was “the holiday season” and so it was time to bust out the non-denominational decorations and not so subtly remind people that it is time to spend some money.

No matter what our intentions as we move into this time of year, it is hard not to get sucked into the consumer machine and spit out the other side. I invite us all to take time to consider how we can stay connected to opportunities for spiritual growth and connection in the next two months, and how we can let go of attachments to what we “should” be celebrating, or giving, or how we “should” spend our time. I come to you not as an expert who is able to move through Thanksgiving and Christmas in a Zen-like state of humility and compassion, but as a fellow struggling seeker, with some insights and opportunities to offer all of us.

In the Buddhist tradition the path to enlightenment is known as the eightfold path. There are 8 aspects of wisdom, conduct and development that are named as necessary steps to enlightenment. These are: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. In Jay McDaniel’s book on spirituality in an age of consumerism, which we heard a bit from earlier, McDaniel looks to these Buddhist ideals to inform his work. We see this in his focus on attention in all aspects of daily life. The goals of presence and right intention, action, and mindfulness are also part of many Unitarian Universalist theologies. We seek to be fully integrated people through our attention to our relationships with all of creation and within our daily lives. In times of stress or busyness, it is all too easy to let our attention slip, and this is why in particular at this time of year, it is vital to be attentive to our spiritual practices and communities of faith.

One part of spiritual practice for many of us at this time of year is giving. We give gifts to one another, we give donations to worthy causes, and we open our homes and families to friends and strangers in hospitality. These are all special ministries and can be spiritual practices. At the same time, if we are not careful, they can add to the stresses in our lives and rather than connecting us with others, can leave us with feelings of disconnection and anxiety. In this year when so many are experiencing economic hardship there is an unfortunate conflagration of increased need and fewer resources among those who would normally meet those needs. How do we proceed?

Rev. Carol Howard Merritt is a Presbyterian minister in Washington, DC and has some suggestions in her book the *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation*. Merritt looks at ways to address issues of judgment around economic issues that many congregations face, especially intergenerationally. She reminds us that young adults are struggling with more debt than ever before. She notes, “It’s no secret that the rich have been getting richer and the poor poorer in this country, but with the combination of the rising cost of college, skyrocketing real estate, and stagnant salaries, we are creating an entire generation that could be doomed to poverty.”² She states that when middle aged and older generations remember working through college and getting loans paid off, they were attending school at a time when it was possible to earn enough money while in school to actually make a dent in costs like tuition and housing. Financial stress for young adults *and* people of all ages is a strong spiritual need that can be addressed in religious community.

It is the case that in our culture, people make judgments about others and the worth of people and creation based on their perceived financial worth. There is a thread of the old puritan understandings about money, that if people and organizations could just pull themselves up by

² Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church*, Alban Institute, 2007, p. 45.

their bootstraps and take care of business, they would not be poor, or struggling, ...or hurting and fragile. Our first principle addresses this idea head on by saying that all people have inherent worth and dignity. It is our stated goal to approach life and other people without these societal blinders over our eyes. I am sure we all have our good days and bad days in meeting these goals. What about when we are judging ourselves? Do we remember that we also all have inherent worth and dignity? Do we remember that we are just as fully human when we are also struggling with things so seemingly petty, but so surely stress inducing, as money and security? As we step into the time of year when many businesses balance sheets are made or broken, there will be a huge push for us to spend, and to feel somehow inadequate if we cannot. I propose that we consider how we give as an opportunity for spiritual growth and forgiveness in the face of a consumer culture.

In the passage from Matthew we heard this morning, Jesus calls his followers to trust in God, for as God provides for other creatures, so God will provide for the faithful, “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”³. This is a line that has been twisted throughout church history as one that feeds the judgment of the poor. There is a historical bent in some conservative strains of Christianity that looked at the poor as somehow morally bankrupt, for if they were faithful, they would be taken care of. Carol Howard Merritt describes this theology saying, “These notions drown out Jesus, standing on the Mount, telling us that the poor are blessed. Instead we have the idea that anyone who does not make it into the upper-middle class is undisciplined, vaguely immoral, and needs to put in more hours to make ends meet.”⁴ Another interpretation of this passage of scripture is, of course, to consider what it means to be taken care of by God. Does it mean that all people have a new car in the driveway and steak for dinner? Or does it rather mean that as communities of people, we are given all the tools we need to be sure that everyone in the community is fed? Does it mean that we are given all the resources that we need to build housing for all people? And does it mean that there is *enough*? I believe that this is the heart of Matthew and addressing the consumer culture. There is enough. The question is: are we willing to live lives where all can have enough, and some do not have everything?

In his essay on giving as a spiritual practice, Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Tony Larsen writes,

The trick, at least for me, is to know that there’s a particular amount of money I need in order to be happy. When people in surveys are asked how much it would take to make them happy, almost everyone says: “A little more than I have now.” People who make \$20,000 a year say, if I could just make \$30,000, that would take care of my bills and give me a little breathing room.” And people who make \$30,000 say, “If I could just make \$40,000, that would be just enough” and so on. We all think a little more money can make us happier. And in some cases, no doubt, it would. (At least it might cut down on some of the stresses we have.) But after a while, we’d get used to the new amount and then we’d want a little more. No fixed amount would really make us happy.

There is no magic amount of money that will make us happy, however we can work to extricate ourselves from outside expectations of what objects we must surround ourselves with, and how much we will spend on where we live and how we live. We *can* all have enough. There are millions of people in the world who struggle with hunger, food and shelter scarcity. There are few in the world who have the means to purchase all they could ever want, and many people are

³ Matthew 6:33

⁴ Merritt, p. 44

somewhere in between. In a year when many of us had the unfortunate opportunity to feel a closer affinity with those who struggle with meeting the basic needs of life, we have also been provided with an opportunity to engage with spiritual practices of gratitude in this holiday season, to reconsider what enough really is, and to give as we are able to those who are in need. Larsen suggests that as we make giving a spiritual practice, we have to be intentional about giving away a meaningful amount of our income, to give it and to not be attached to feelings of guilt about all those other worthy causes that we wish that we could also offer donations to.

We have the opportunity in our community of faith to support those who are struggling with how to give help, and those who are struggling with accepting the help they need. How do we do this work? At the most basic level we affirm the inherent worth and dignity in all people. We share our anxieties and gifts in community. No matter what our intentions as we move into this time of year, it is hard not to get sucked into the consumer machine and spit out the other side. I invite us all to consider how we can stay connected to opportunities for spiritual growth and connection in the next two months, and how we can let go of attachments to what we “should” be celebrating, or giving, or how we “should” spend our time and look rather to opportunities for generosity and growth. May we take time to sit with ourselves, our families and friends, and our congregation to discern what we have to give of ourselves this holiday season. How can we be hospitable to the friend and stranger? How can we offer meaningful gifts to others that have nothing to do with their cost? How can we nurture our generous spirits? And finally, what is enough? When we have taken time to be attentive to these questions and have made our choices, it will be all the easier to remain centered through the holidays. Tony Larsen shares this story from the Jewish Talmud about generosity:

Time before time, when the world was young, two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided the grain they had grown together evenly. One brother lived alone, and the other had a large family. Now the single brother thought to himself one day, “It isn’t really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for, but my brother has children to feed.” So each night he secretly took some of his grain and put it in his brother’s granary. But the married brother said to himself one day, “It isn’t fair that we divide the grain evenly—because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother doesn’t.” So *he* began every night to take some of *his* grain and put it in his brother’s granary. Then, one night, they met each other halfway between their two houses, and they realized what had been happening. And then, what could they do but embrace each other in love? The legend is that God witnessed their meeting and proclaimed: “This is a holy place. And here it is that my temple shall be built.” And so it was that the first temple was constructed in Jerusalem.⁵

May we all care for one another with such compassion... Are we ready?

Amen.

⁵ Tony Larsen, “Giving”, in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, p. 227