

A Cup of Tea
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
October 19, 2008

Patrick O'Neill, my good friend and colleague in Brooklyn, NY, tells a story of having been called, one Sunday, after he had gotten home from church, tired and ready to rest, by a local farm family about doing a memorial service for their mother who had just died. This was in Yakima, Washington, and while the family was not connected with the church, they had a neighbor who once had been a UU and suggested they call the local congregation.

The woman was elderly and had been a widow for a number of years. She and her husband had homesteaded the land back in the 1920s when land was dirt cheap and not very productive. It is very dry there, lying in the rain shadow of the Cascades, and they had barely eked out a living through the Great Depression. In the forties, however, with irrigation, the land became very valuable as it was perfect for growing apples and within several decades the Yakima Valley became the center of a worldwide agribusiness, their apples becoming the standard around the world. So, this couple, who had lived so close to the edge, were able to leave to their children a very sizable fortune.

Patrick said that when he arrived that evening, the daughter was sitting in the living room, softly weeping, several large crates open in front of her. She said: "I found these in the closet. These are two sets of Wedgwood china that my mother apparently bought from a catalogue thirty or so years ago, and promptly stored in the back closet. They have never been used, not once. In fact they have never been taken out of the boxes they came in, even to be looked at. Isn't that sad? My mother was so afraid that she might chip or break even a single plate that she never once dared to take them out of the carton. That's how she was."

That's just how she was. Wouldn't it have been wonderful if once, just once, that elderly woman in Yakima had had a cup of tea or a dessert on that exquisite china? To let something go unused because of fear – well, isn't it sad as the daughter thought?

Imagine, spending your life hoping for something, and then getting it or achieving it, and being afraid to use it or enjoy it. Imagine being afraid to lose something, being so afraid of losing it that it is never enjoyed. Know about that in your own life? I am not sure about mine. Those opportunities we let slide by out of fear of some sort?

Sad. The story about the old farmwoman is not just about her, of course; it is about all of us. It's about the little fears that rob us of a full life. It is about living on the scarce side of life. I know I do sometimes, and perhaps many of you do as well. We all know people who all too readily see the scarcity of life, who look around and see only the half-empty glass, the cloudy sky, the empty chair – sometimes it's that person we see in the mirror each day. We sometimes leave just what we need in the closet.

When I was a chaplain for Hospice in Virginia, I spent my days sitting with patients in nursing homes and assisted living centers. Many of them suffered from some form of dementia and so I just sat with them, then called family members and let them know I had visited. I would read – the Psalms or Mary Oliver or Billy Collins poetry. Garrison Keillor's collection of Good Poems is a great resource, or I found myself saying a prayer because – well, it seemed like the right thing to do.

With some patients I talked – we talked about their lives, about the world and what it means; we talked about what it feels like and means to die. A few were bitter but only a few. Some expressed regrets that they didn't use their good china a bit more. Most were eager to be as alive as they could and live right up to the end they knew was fairly close. Some asked me to pray for them and with them. So, of course, I did. I asked them what they would have me pray for – they said for comfort, for those they would leave behind, sometimes they would ask me to pray for those of us who work for Hospice. Lots of things. I had one patient one week ask me to pray for the Democrats! I asked if there was one in particular; he said no – all of them needed help! This was in 2002. I wonder what he would now ask. Just so you know, I pray every night now.

Working in Hospice taught me a lot about the human condition and meaning and love and indifference, about tragedy and triumph. But I surprisingly also learned something about faith – especially about prayer. I am trying to re-learn to pray these days.

You see, prayer is one of those things I had put in the back of the closet, like the china of the woman in Yakima. I had thought for years that prayer was worthless - though perhaps I was only afraid to use it but I have taken it out and found how helpful prayer can be. Let me try and explain:

Most people think of prayer as talking to God – the kind of talk where you ask for something for yourself– like help on a math test, or to win the lottery, or to be cured or have no pain, or may the Dodgers or Red Sox win, or Prop 8 fail. Those kinds of prayers.

Imagine if prayer really worked like that. We might be a little like a man named William Lawrence, Episcopal bishop of Massachusetts in the 1930s. He was out motoring one day in the countryside when he came upon another driver trying to change a tire. Playing the good Samaritan, he stopped to help. But the tire wouldn't come off and the man was turning the air blue with swearing. 'My good man,' said the Bishop, 'have you ever thought to try the power of prayer?' The man sneered at the bishop but, to amuse him, clasped his hands, looked heavenward and mumbled a prayer. He then tried the tire iron again and 'pop' off came the tire. To which the bishop responded 'Well, I'll be goddamned.'

I would imagine we all gave up that kind of prayer years ago - praying with the expectation that something would in fact happen. It is too selfish, too irrational, and, if you believe in God, it suggests a God listening for requests that can be heard and fulfilled. [actually, to be honest, this is the prayer I still do believe in – God please let me sink this putt or let my car run a little while longer or let my daughter be happy or let this patient find comfort and peace – yes – we know this kind of prayer.]

Sometimes prayer is the only language we know - a colleague of mine tells of when she was on duty as a chaplain in a hospital. A young woman had been seriously injured in an accident and was in the emergency room. While she was in surgery, her family arrived. They were not members of any church; they were not religious people at all. Told that their daughter was in very critical condition, they asked if they could go to the chapel. For a while nothing was said, until the father began quietly ' Now I lay me down to sleep ...'

Prayer. Mother Teresa was asked about what she said when she prayed to God. She replied, 'oh, I don't say anything. I just listen.' She was then asked what God said and she replied 'oh. God doesn't say anything. He just listens.'

James Carse teaches philosophy in New York. He once said that the opposite of hate is curiosity. Interesting, yes?

He claims that prayer is listening, not speaking, and I think he is right. In prayer, he suggests, we are listening for those words – those words like words or those words like silence – which will help our lives be more full. When we pray – properly understood – we open to hearing a deeper voice within ourselves. That is; even though the form may be speaking, the intent is listening. Dear God, help this patient find comfort and peace in this last journey of her life.' This is a door to the compassion in our hearts, to the sorrow felt at the suffering of another. Prayer becomes an opening to our own voice even though it may be addressed outwards.

Prayer is seeking the truth, listening for the truth. Prayer is listening, not speaking – it is seeking, not proclaiming. Does this make sense? It is, as Simone Weill said, attention. But, attention to what? To the sacred, to the spiritual? I know some of you struggle with what that means. I struggle with that, too, but it does have something with being open in a particular way. It is not open intellectually, or emotionally, though that may be a part of it, but open to mystery or silence.

Carse says that in all of his years of listening for the voice of God, he heard God only once. It was in college after a long day of wandering and wondering what was real and who he was. Carse wanted some sign from God that God was real – anything, just some sign to put his mind to rest.

He returned to his room late at night and flopped down on his bed. His roommates were sound asleep and he soon fell asleep too. But sometime later he woke in response to a voice – a voice so strong and authoritative he knew it was not a dream. It had all the quality of a voice we would think God has. [Noah] Carse looked around – his roommates were sound asleep; the radio was not on; there was dead silence. He heard the voice again and it said the very same thing. The voice was real and what the Voice said was this: 'Get up and make your bed.'

'Get up and make your bed.' Not exactly what he expected or hoped to hear from God. And since then, he has heard nothing - just silence.

Get up and make your bed - it had to mean something, Carse was sure, and slowly he began to understand that by turning to his own heart he might learn something. He had to make his bed – fix his own life. Get up – make your bed. Live your life; don't just think about it or worry about it.

One of the reasons Unitarians and Universalists broke away from the orthodoxies of their time was their belief that the orthodox were stingy with both love and belief. We have always been liberal – generous in our beliefs. The old saw is that Puritans were those people who feared that someone, somewhere was having a good time and it was their duty to root it out. Jerry Lee Lewis said that being a Baptist – or Puritan – didn't keep you from sinning; it just kept you from having a good time doing it.

But the essence of religion is abundance, and the early Unitarians and Universalists knew this - they looked for places where the Holy was, not for places where it was not. It was John Murray, the Universalist who said 'Give them not hell, but hope and courage.' They sought out blessings rather than looking for sins. They broke out of doctrinal constraints, proclaiming that God was love rather than judgment, insisting - as Emerson and Whitman and Dickinson claimed - that the holy was in the world.

Henry Whitney Bellows, minister of All Souls Church in New York City – Melville's minister – said that it was not the case that he didn't believe enough but that he believed too much.

Emerson told us to feel the fullness of life and see the sacred in everything. He said that faith is about abundance; it is about hope; it is about those moments in life that break in with unutterable beauty and joy. If we see the glass as half empty, we will miss those moments and despair and bitterness will be our companions. Emerson told us to take the good China out of the closet and use it. He told us to hear that voice within.

Now this is not Pollyannaish. Emerson, like every one of us, knew sorrow and he knew death. His father died when he was nine, and two of his siblings died in childhood and two more as young men. His first wife died of pneumonia after 18 months of marriage and his son died several years later. He grieved deeply and profoundly, but he never gave in to his grief or to his sorrow – he instead incorporated it into a deeper love of life itself. His life was one of endless renewal.

It may seem like an odd time to talk about abundance with our economy in a tailspin and with the worry about whether there will be enough. We know that we – as a culture – have been living beyond our means, that we need to simplify and learn how to do with less. But as we learn to have less of what is material, we can have more of what is spiritual. That is the abundance Emerson means and I mean – an abundance of compassion and justice, of meaning and joy, an abundance of courage and hope, an abundance of love and faith.

Emerson said that our faith is to help us to live fully and with passion. He wanted our lives to be larger. Isn't he right? Isn't that the vision we need? Does anyone here want help in living a smaller life, in being more timid, in believing less, in hoping less, in living more fearfully? Who here would like to be a spiritual miser?

Our faith is about abundance - intellectual abundance, social abundance, abundance in music, in art, in relationships, abundance in service, spiritual abundance. Here is a place where we take out the good china and use it - those things some of you keep packed away, your talents, your beliefs, your hopes, your dreams and ideals. This is a place where life, not death, should rule, where hope, not despair, should live. This is the essence of faith - it is about life, about abundant life. It is about the open heart and the open hand. It is about hearing the song of your own heart.

This is what you tell me over and over again – live, use the good china! My Hospice patients, and now this congregation, have taught me to use my faith, and the tools of my faith - like prayer – to live more fully. You have taught me to listen closely to my own heart, to look into the closets of my life – to take out the china, to take out the prayer, to listen to what Wendell Berry said was the deep heart's core.

So, when no words come or when fear creeps in – and this happens to all of us - pray – that is, listen for your own heart's living voice. Hear the voice of God telling you to get up and make your bed and live life more abundantly.

Get up and make your bed – give them not hell but hope and courage. Live – live the life meant for us – abundant and caring and deeply tuned to the songs of the heart.

Get up. Get up and make your bed.