

Intern Minister Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick
January 18, 2014
Theme: Stuff
Sermon: Cracking Up

Call to Worship:

Alice Walker writes:

All we own, at least for the short time we have it, is our life. With it we write what we come to know of the world...I have learned to accept the fact that we risk disappointment, disillusionment, even despair, every time we act. Every time we decide to believe the world can be better. Every time we decide to trust others to be as noble as we think they are. And that there might be years during which our grief is equal to, or even greater than, our hope. The alternative, not to act, and therefore to miss experiencing other people at their best, reaching toward their fullness, has never appealed to me. I have learned other things: One is the futility of expecting anyone, including oneself to be perfect. People who go about seeking to change the world, to diminish suffering, to demonstrate any kind of enlightenment are often as flawed as anybody else. Sometimes more so. But it is the awareness of having faults, I think, and the knowledge that this links us to everyone on earth. That opens us to courage and compassion...in the collective vulnerability of presence, we learn not to be afraid.

Do not be afraid, we are flawed and good, and we are together. The world around us, completely perfect, and completely imperfect, holds us and supports us. We must act and also rest. I invite you to take this morning to do both, to enact the good with in you, to feel it, and to rest there. In the safety of the goodness of those around you, trust that you belong, and your life, all that you own, is of great purpose.

Reading: From *Our Passion for Justice*, By Carter Heyward

Loving involves *commitment*.

We are not automatic lovers of self, of others, of the world, or of God. Love does not just happen. We are not love machines, puppets on the strings of a deity called "love."

Love is a choice – not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile.

Love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives.

Love is the choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.

Love is active, effective, a matter of making a reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one's friends and enemies.

Love creates righteousness, and justice here on earth.

Sermon: Cracking Up

Has anyone here ever grown an avocado plant from an avocado pit? I'm growing one right now. It's great.

If you are not familiar with the process, to get an actual avocado plant to grow, you can't just bury the pit in some soil. First you have to get it to sprout. You do this by submerging the hard round seed in water for a few weeks. My preferred method is to stick three or four toothpicks around the sides of it, and place it in a glass of water. The toothpicks catch the rim of the glass and suspend half the seed above water, so it doesn't sink to the bottom. This way the roots are given plenty of room to stretch out into the water below and grow strong.

While it's just nice in general to have plants around the house, I particularly like growing avocados. Not only because one must first eat an avocado in order to grow one, but also because, with avocados you can really watch the whole growing process take place – from fruit, to seed, to sprout, to shoot, to leaves. Unlike other plants and seeds whose growing process often remains hidden under soil or in opaque ceramic pots, if you soak your avocado pit in a clear glass, you can watch –patiently – as the hard seed slowly transforms before your eyes. The brown skin around it peels off, the two sides of it split, a tap root that looks a bit like a tail slowly begins to peek out at the bottom, and week by week, this root grows longer and longer, and thin, wispy off shoots begin to sprout from it. Soon your glass of water becomes home to a complex root system, and what was once this hard, dark brown, stone like pit, becomes a tender, delicate bulb, nearly unrecognizable from its former self.

After a month, the roots should be pretty well structured and you can go ahead and bury your avocado bulb in soil. You will be surprised, at least I always am, at how quickly a stalk will shoot upwards from your germinated seed and begin forming leaves. It can happen in a matter of days.

Recently I attended a talk given by an Australian Buddhist Nun. Her name is Venerable Robina Courtin, and she is renown in particular for her work in prisons across the world where she teaches meditation and other pacifying skills to inmates. While all of her energy goes, essentially, into making peace, Ven. Robina herself is quite a feisty, rabble rouser. With a mouth like a sailor, a piercing gaze, and brazen fondness for calling people out on their BS, experiencing Ven. Robina, I find tends to churn my waters, rather than pacify them. I think this is a good thing, I think it means that she is teaching something new, something that I need to hear – but am not necessarily comfortable with. It feels like change. Transformation.

Meeting with Ven. Robina in person after her talk, she told me briefly about her life before becoming a nun, “I went from a radical punk to a radical feminist, to radical lesbian, to radical atheist, to radical punk feminist lesbian atheist, and when I say radical I mean radical.” She explained to me. I like Venerable Robina – honestly, when it comes to nuns, what more could you ask for than a radical punk feminist lesbian atheist? She was staying at a local Buddhist center for a week. I went to see her as often as I could.

While the specific topics of her nightly talks varied, the overarching theme of Venerable Robina's teachings dealt with the issue of reputation, specifically, the suffering that comes from being attached to one.

In Buddhism there is the belief that we humans suffer in many different ways – one of the main ways is through attachment. We tend to get attached to stuff – people, objects, places, routines, money, jobs, plans, avocado plants – pretty much anything, – we even get attached to stuff we don't like and we relish complaining and ranting about it. We're like big strips of duct tape – just adhering our minds and bodies to stuff all the time and holding on. Time after time these attachments bring us suffering, because it is the nature of our mind to believe that what we attach ourselves to will not change – we will always have our friend, our lover, our house, our houseplants, our jerk colleague, and annoying siblings, and they will stay the way they are – right now, - but they don't. Such is the nature of the suffering that comes from attachment – we get attached to things, and we get used to them being a certain way, and we get attached to that way – and then they change, and we don't want them to, and it hurts.

What we are most attached to in our lives is our selves. The way we are – the good, the bad, the lovely, the ugly – we're attached to all of it. Like a long twisted up piece of duct tape, we're just stuck all over ourselves. This is why change is so hard, because not only are we attached to the way other people and things are, we are attached to the way we are with them. We are attached to our reputation: who we think other people think we are. We spend the majority of our time trying to secure the existence of that person we think we need to be in order to meet the needs we think other people have of us.

Phew. What? I've lost you – I can tell. At least – I think I know what I think you might be thinking about what I think I just said.

In the midst of her talks Ven. Robina often randomly calls on members of the audience to explain back to her what she just taught – be thankful I'm not as radical as her.

If you're feeling confused or uncomfortable – just know that it's a good thing. Often when I go to Buddhist talks I feel like my brain starts to do that thing that GPS's do when you're off track and that spinning icon comes up on the screen and the word "recalculating" flashes on and off. We're recalculating right now, we'll find our way again.

Let's try. Attachment to reputation is a form of suffering. Why? Because it causes us to resist the change that naturally comes from being alive. We try to stay the same – even if we're not content the way we are, but we hold onto it because it's its how we've learned think of our selves, and how we think other people think of our selves. What will people think if we disrupt that vision that we work so hard to construct – if we change careers or drop out of school, if we get married or get a divorce, if we come out as gay – or straight, if we begin to follow a new religion, if we say "no" when people expect a "yes," if we quit veganism for a day and eat a big mac? What will people think?! We don't know – and that's really scary. But is just holding on to this hypothetical self - based off what we think other people think - really a way to live?

Venerable Robina explained attachment to reputation by way of an acorn metaphor. She said we were all like acorns, and that we are all spending our lives trying to be the best, shiniest, hardest, and neatly capped acorn we can possibly be, without giving much thought ever to the fact that acorns are supposed to grow into oak trees. Grand, strong, all weather, fully present and available oak trees.

By being attached to our reputation – and working only to meet the ongoing requirements of that static self, we are ignoring and resisting all the possible selves available to us at any given time on any given day. We are closing and hardening, rather than cracking and sprouting.

While taking on the undemanding project of growing an avocado plant can serve as a great reminder of all the beautiful ways we can change, another very simple practice is to just make a fist with our hand. This is like our attachment to our reputation.

It's hard. It's tight. It feels really powerful right. Hold up your fist for all to see! Make it really tight! Whoa! Check out that forearm muscle! I like what I'm seeing! Don't stop! Feel all that strength in your hand! Keep holding it – is it starting to kind of get uncomfortable?

What can we do with our fists? We can swing em around and pound em on stuff – show people how tough we are. Try to pick up your hymnal and turn a page. What happens when we try to hold someone's hand? Or scratch an itch? What would happen if the only hand gestures we made were with fists? Would it maybe limit our personality? Limit the way people thought about us? Would it confine us to acting in certain manners? – Would it influence point we were trying to make with our words.

Keep holding that fist. Look at it. It's like that acorn we are trying so hard to be. Rock solid, strong, unchanging, no space to let anything unpredictable in.

Now – slowly start to crack your fist open. Feel that physical sensation of letting go. Look at your hand. Fingers fully extended. Move them around a bit. What a beautiful piece of our body. There's so much space between our fingers! Notice how we can move one at a time, how we can wiggle them really fast, how we can totally relax it and just let it hang limp. Notice how we can also still make a fist if we want, but how we can stop and do something else when that fist becomes uncomfortable. Think about all the things we can hold, and touch, and shape when our hands aren't just fists.

Like our lives, we can do many things with our hands. Can you imagine if we just used them to make fists? What a waste! How foolish when we can do so much with each individual finger!

Crack open your acorns! And see what sprouts up!

Now, like most of our attachments in life, we are never going to completely free ourselves of our reputation. Arguably, being a little attached to our reputation and what people think of us can have beneficial results – causing us to honor the needs of those around us, the requirements of our daily duties, and the expectations of our beloved communities. We don't need let go of everything, but we also shouldn't hold on too tight.

Our reading today came from a priest named Carter Heyward. Reverend Heyward was a member of the Philadelphia 11, the first group of women to be ordained priests in the Episcopal Church during a renegade ceremony in 1974. Despite being declared invalid by the Episcopal House of Bishops a week later, Carter Heyward ignored the ruling and began offering mass and Eucharist at churches. Wherever she went her reputation as – dare I say – a radical feminist priest – preceded her, so that often her church services were filled with supporters who cheered and embraced her and protesters who spat on her and even bit her when she offered them communion.

Despite her fear, her ego, her public persona, Rev. Heyward did not let reputation impede on progress. She just kept going, building up her reputation as a social justice activist and cleric, while remaining open to the needs of the community to keep the movement strong, and her own personal needs to be well and happy. She spoke at national meetings of the Episcopal Church, she came out as a lesbian, she re-imagined Jesus as a woman, and God as Love. She was a tenured professor Episcopal seminary, she wrote books, led worships, and ended up falling in love, retiring and opening up a horse ranch. She was undoubtedly at times, a hard, tight, angry acorn upset about the way she was being treated, but again and again she cracked open and allowed oak trees to sprout – even if she had no idea if it would survive, even if it was uncomfortable, even if she felt she didn't deserve it.

How did Rev. Heyward get that acorn to keep cracking open? The same way we get an avocado to sprout – the same way we do any good work in the world, with love.

“Loving involves *commitment*.” She writes.

We are not automatic lovers of self, of others, of the world, or of God. Love does not just happen. Love is a choice – not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity – a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives.”

This Martin Luther King Jr. weekend, let's reflect on our reputations and the ties – some just, some unjust - that bind us to them. Let's be willing to participate fully in this broken world, hands open to our selves and to others, challenging their thinking, and allowing them to challenge ours. Lets crack up, root down, shoot out and see what we can become – free of pretense or guile. Letting go of who we think we need to be, resolving instead to be aware of what we are right now. Let's be willing, when the time comes, to change. And in the meantime, let's all get together, make some guacamole, and grow some avocado trees.