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October 12, 2014
Theme: Compassion
Sermon: We Gather

Reading:
X – Wendell Berry

Whatever is foreseen in joy must be lived out from day to day.
Vision held open in the dark.
By our ten thousand days of work harvest will fill the barn;
For that, the hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled by work of ours;
The field is tilled and left to grace.
That we may reap,
Great work is done
while we're asleep.
When we work well,
a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day,
and finds it good.

Sermon: “We Gather”

It’s fall. We’re reading Wendell Berry, it’s peak foliage in Northern New England, there are more flannel shirts appearing on the passersby, there are pumpkin spice lattes, pumpkin spice donuts, pumpkin spice ice creams, pumpkin spice tortilla chips, pumpkin spice greek yogurts, pumpkin spice sausages, pumpkin spice gluten free pancake mixes, pumpkin spice seltzers, pumpkin spice – just...pumpkin spice – available to all at every major grocery chain, and most importantly, the East Village Fair is happening next weekend. Now, I don’t entirely know what this East side sha-bang is all about – but I will tell you that I expect to have many pumpkin spiced delicacies available to me as I cruise round the fair in my flannel shirt next Saturday.

My new friends, happy fall. It’s the gathering time. Everyone now is gathering. Chipmunks are gathering acorns, cider makers are gathering apples, I am gathering my smartwools, our rakes are gathering leaves. It is a time for making piles. Piling everything in a pot and making soup. Piling logs of firewood. Piling on the sunshine before our skin once again turns a whiter shade of pale and we become seriously deficient in vitamin D. So indeed, let us take this time to gather, to make our piles, and bring them near. Because soon it will be dark, and soon it will be cold, and we will need all the insulation we can get to stay warm.

With this shifting of the sun from bright, to dim, to dark, and the turning of the seasons from warm to cool to cold, what we of course need to gather more than anything right now, and what we need to pile higher than any mound of leaves, is love. Gather what we will to stay warm, we must be sure to spend time this season harvesting love. Love, soup and smartwools, the winning combo for a warm and well spent autumn and winter.

And yes we have our soup recipes, and yes we have our wool socks, but where is our love? We know, yes, it is there, and here, and everywhere, but how can we gather it? How can we make sure it is there on those dark cold days. How can we feel it, and smell it, and taste it and see it like a pot of applesauce simmering on the stove?

A couple of summers ago I lived at a Buddhist retreat center up at the top of a steep dirt road, deep in the woods of the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. At the center I was the head gardener and spent every one of my days outside tending to our many rows of vegetables and many beds of flowers. Over that summer I became good friends with a local goat farmer, the town was so small it was hard not to get to know the locals. He taught me a song one day that became a mantra of mine. Maybe some of you know it, it's a Navaho song. It goes: I walk in beauty, beauty is before me, beauty is behind me, above me and below me.

It was easy to sing this song while living as a gardener at a Buddhist center in rural Vermont. Believe it or not, beauty was easy to come by there. There was a giant meadow next to that center that opened a panoramic view of the Green and White Mountains. Most days I would go out into the middle of this meadow, ticks and mosquitoes be damned, and just look and listen. It was so beautiful, it was so fresh, and real, and alive. Everything, EVERYTHING, all around was alive, from the giant pine trees in the distance, to the swooping hawks high in the sky, down to the littlest buds of the wildflowers, and the littlest sweat bees that fed on their nectar. The dirt under my feet filled with worms and moles was alive, even the shifting thunderheads in the distance seemed to be breathing. And as the wind breezed through it all, the grasses, the leaves, insects, everything had a pulse, and a rhythm. It was gathered before me, - behind me, above me and below me. It was all gathered for everyone to see and feel, and hear, and taste, and smell. If they wanted. Everything there was alive, and it seemed to be echoing: "I am here, I am here, I am here."

I distinctly remember not wanting to move back to Boston once my gardening job ended that summer. Moving from the bright country back to the grey city felt a lot like the move we are all about to make from the bright summer back to the grey winter. Dark, lifeless, winter. Dark lifeless city. There are no grand meadows in Boston, no vistas of mountains or panoramic cloudscapes. The trees are telephone poles. Although Harvard is having trouble with a flock of wild turkeys that has moved into the square, rarely does one see wildlife. What could be dirt is usually covered with a layer of pavement or concrete.

Opportunities to experience life and beauty in the all-encompassing Vermont way were greatly reduced in the middle of this city. Or so I thought.

It was fortuitous then, that a month after I moved back, when that Vermont meadow really started to seem far away, that a venerable man showed up in Boston and a public event was held in his honor. A free, open to the masses, handicapped accessible, outdoors for everyone to see, sounding loud for everyone to hear, event. This visiting person was Thich Nhat Hanh, a name which may ring a bell for some of you, and may just sound like a collection of random syllables to others. Either way is ok.

If you're not familiar, or your brain needs a little re-jogging about this guy, what's good to know about Thich Nhat Hanh is that he's a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who is known for his peace work. He's written a lot of books about making peace and finding love, in ourselves, in each other, and in the world at large. If you want to learn more, Thich Nhat Hanh is worth reading up on. Exiled from his native country for his work to end the Vietnam War, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr. Hanh is also a best-selling author of over 100 books, and he is leader of a numerous international organizations and monasteries for peace. Yesterday he turned 88 years old. Thich Nhat Hanh is an important and useful person if there ever was one. And if I were to elaborate further on him, I would use only one more adjective: gentle. Thich Nhat Hanh is very gentle.

When he took the stage that Sunday, before a clapping and cheering audience stretching far across Copley Square, the same place where two bombs had exploded just six months earlier at the marathon, Thich Nhat Hanh didn't say a single word. He just smiled and sat down. And so did we. A crowd of thousands just smiling and sitting down on the concrete ground. And we all sat together, silent in the midst of a city humming with passerby conversations, cars, duck boat tours, police sirens, restaurant patio laughter, street musicians, and drunks. It was all there. The world was all alive around us, the thousands of us. And we were all just sitting silently with it. We had gathered ourselves and the world had gathered around us. Easily. Gently.

We sat for a long time. Thich Nhat Hanh did not speak for the next hour. Demonstrating the peace he has spent his life working towards, he just sat in the middle of all the downtown chaos, eyes closed, face relaxed. It was as though he was letting the city speak for him, allowing the crowd gathered there to feel what they needed to feel, and work through what they needed to work through.

While sitting in Copley Square before Thich Nhat Hanh I heard it again, that echo: “I am here, I am here, I am here.” Seeing this gentle man and this gentle crowd of all ages shapes and sizes, I saw life and beauty before me. Feeling the pulse of the crowd and the many onlookers and passersby, I felt life and beauty behind me, looking up at the planes just taking off from Logan, and the seagulls circling round, and the bright afternoon sun moving between clouds, life and beauty was above me. Watching the ants rush round my feet, feeling the rumble of the subway train underground, life and beauty was below me. And when I stopped to listen, and worked through my initial aversion to it, I felt it, and I heard, “I am here, I am here, I am here.”

“Breathing in I am aware of my entire body” Thich Nhat finally spoke, breaking our buzzing silence.

Breathing out I smile at my entire body.”

He repeated.

“Breathing in I am aware of my entire body.”

Breathing out I smile at my entire body.”

“Breathing in I am aware of my entire body,

Breathing out I smile of my entire body.”

Silence. City silence.

“We all want to be loved,” He continued. “Go home to yourself and feel the love you have gathered there. This is love we have, this is love we can share.” The little monk then paused, smiled at us, and remained quiet for several minutes.

“True love,” he said, “is to be there. When we love someone we tell them we are there with them. When we need love, we need someone to be there with us. We all want to be loved.”

Silently, smiling. The crowd sat together.

“To show love and to feel love, there are three things we can say:

Darling, I am here for you.

Darling I know you are there and I am so happy.

Darling, I know you suffer, and that is why I am here.”

He paused again.

“Tell this to your mother.

Darling, I am here for you.

Tell this to your father.

Darling I know you are there and I am so happy.

Tell this to your spouse and your children. Your friends and enemies.

Darling I know you suffer and that is why I am here.”

He laughed,

“If it makes you feel nervous to say this, call them and just leave this message.

Darling, I am here for you.

Darling I know you are there and I am so happy.

Darling I know you suffer and that is why I am here.

Just let them know you are here, and they will feel your love and you both will feel peace.”

Our pastoral care action team at Follen has invited us to spend this October together in compassion. They have compiled a calendar of daily exercises to engage our compassion - for ourselves, for others, for the world around us. What a perfect way to spend this dark

and getting darker and cold and getting colder month. Today's exercise is to give a sincere compliment to ourselves and say it out loud. I invite you, before completing this exercise, smiling at your entire body, to pause at some point today and see if you can hear, feel, see, taste, smell, what is here – what is here, what is here.

“Whatever is foreseen in joy,” Wendell Berry writes, “Must be lived out from day to day. Vision held open in the dark.”

In the darkness that is seeping in during these shortening days, may we hold out the joyful vision of love. A love that is alive, that is gathered together before us and above us, beside us and below us, here, with us. In us. Echoing always, “I am here, I am here, I am here. Darling, I am here.”