

January 6, 2019

Stewardship sermon

Worship Theme: Presence

### **Call to Worship:**

Our worship theme this month is “Presence.” Together over the course of January we will explore what it means to be present. Today, I’ll talk about what it means to be present to yourself—to have integrity within. I’m mashing that topic up with the beginning of our annual stewardship campaign—yes, today is the Sermon on the Amount. Next Sunday, I’ll reflect on how we can be present with another—in friendship and relationship. We’ll have a guest preacher, Rev. Ian White Maher, on the 20<sup>th</sup>, and then on January 27<sup>th</sup>, as we celebrate the closing of what I presume will be a ridiculously successful stewardship campaign, I will reflect on what it means to be present in a community.

Today, I call us to consider who we are. The person we are behind our eyes. The only person we get to be in this lifetime. Yourself. In the immortal words of a woman who may secretly be a bodhisattva, Dolly Parton: “Find out who you are and then do it on purpose.” May we be

present in this space, so that we may be more fully present in our lives, and may we do it on purpose. Let us worship together.

## Reading: “Freedom” by Denise Levertov

Perhaps we humans  
have wanted God most as witness  
to acts of choice  
made in solitude. Acts of mercy,  
of sacrifice. Wanted  
that great single eye to see us,  
steadfast as we flowed by.  
Yet there are other acts  
not even vanity,  
or anxious hope to please, know of—  
bone doings, leaps of nerve, heart-  
cries of communion: if there is bliss,  
it has  
been already  
and will be; out-  
reaching, utterly.  
Blind  
to itself, flooded  
with otherness.

## **Sermon: Man in the Mirror**

“Blind to itself, flooded with otherness.”

How do we stay present to ourselves?

How do we separate out what it means to have personal integrity, a sense of self, from all the otherness—culture, oppression, commercialism, fear, peer pressure, greed?

As Dolly said, “Find out who you are and then do it on purpose.”

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor has a great exercise for helping sort through this static.

Divide a piece of paper into two sides. You can even use the margins of your order of service.

On one side of the paper, list all of the things you know give you life that you never take the time to do, or that you feel you cannot do. ...

The things that give you life that you don't do.

On the other side of the paper, make a list of all the reasons why you think it is impossible for you to do those things.

That's all there is to it. Just make the two lists, and then keep the piece of paper where you can see it. Also, Taylor adds, promise not to shush your heart when it howls for the list it wants.<sup>1</sup>

What we do is who we are.  
Find out who you are and do it on purpose.

They say every preacher really only has one sermon that they keep preaching in different ways.

My very first sermon here at Follen was about authenticity, being true to yourself—so, I'm guilty! My faith and my people—you—hold me to a life of integrity.

Am I who I say I am, who I want to be?  
I have to ask myself that all the time. I hope you do, too.

Perhaps we humans  
have wanted God most as witness  
to acts of choice  
made in solitude.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Altar in the World*, pg 138

Like many Unitarian Universalists, I find God's presence in the watchful, caring eye of human community.

Here is a story about a choice made in solitude, yet seen by a holy eye. It is the story of the "widow's mite."

Are you familiar with this story?

The widow's mite is "m-i-t-e" not "m-i-g-h-t" as in power. A mite was a small bit of money, about a penny's worth.

In the story, Jesus is taking a little break from teaching. He's inside the courtyard walls of the great temple, and he sits down and leans his back against the sun-warmed stones, and watches the world go by.

He's sitting across from the treasury, where all people, rich and poor, go to give their offerings to the temple.

Rich people come and put in large sums.

Then he sees a solitary woman come by and put in her two little copper coins.

Noticing this, Jesus calls to his disciples and tells them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them

have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This poor widow is a *hardworking* widow.

Yes, she shows up, pennies in hand, for every single stewardship sermon in every Christian church.

The widow is always held up as the example, the role model for giving.

She gave all she had! She begrudged not!

Her selfless heart! Etc.

But this story has a surprise ending, which is rarely offered in churches that use the traditional lectionary.

After seeing the widow give her offering,

Jesus stands up and walks out of the great temple.

Running to catch up, one of his followers marvels at their surroundings:

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

I imagine a certain naivete in this person’s voice, like Little Red Riding Hood: “My, what big stones you have!”

But Jesus sees the wolf at the door.

Jesus throws back a question, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.”

Jesus is saying that the temple will be destroyed—and from history, we know it was.

Interpretation. Yes, Jesus is praising the widow’s generosity. He sees, and makes the people around him see, that being generous is not just for the rich.

He also, by the way, does not condemn the rich people’s generosity.

(He does condemn pompousness, grandstanding, and hypocrisy, but that’s different.)

Jesus values generosity, and he does show his approval of the widow’s generosity, but he does not say the thing he often says after a teaching: “Go and do likewise.”

No, he doesn’t think the widow should have given more than she could afford to an institution so large, so powerful, that it didn’t notice or respect her.

When Jesus watched the activity at the temple he saw things other people did not:  
he saw a large powerful institution built on hypocrisy;  
he saw a religion staffed by priests who claimed righteousness yet worked with the government to oppress the poor and murder the rebellious;  
He saw stones that seemed eternal yet would crumble into nothingness.  
It's a complex statement in just a few lines.  
And generosity is a complex practice.

Whether we are rich or poor, I think we want to be generous people.  
It's rare to find the person who wants to be  
Before Scrooge (before the visits from the ghosts):  
the Scrooge who is hated by his employees,  
has no friends, lives in a cold house,  
and whose name has literally become a curse word for miser.  
I think most of us want to be  
After Scrooge, the January Scrooge,

the one who laughs, who loves children and is loved back, who rejoices in the sounds of bells and in the act of giving, the Scrooge who is beloved by all, whose name has become a blessing.

We want to be generous, and we want to be generous in ways that matter.

We don't want to give to the temple that will be torn down. We want to give to the faith that is being built up! That thrives! That lives! That has integrity!

One thing that is important for me and Ben in our planned giving is to be focused: give more to smaller institutions. There are lots of grand temples doing quite grand work out there: the Red Cross, the United Way, you get the idea. But smaller organizations doing local work are much more affected by my level of donation. And yes, we focus our giving to one main organization: Follen Church.

Our congregation does not receive any money from the denomination, the way hierarchical religions do. That makes us very different from, say, the Catholic Church...just one of the many ways we are different.

Our congregation does not receive money from a huge longstanding endowment, because this congregation does not have a history of 300 years of colonial wealth the way, say, the churches on the green in Lexington center do. Our endowment was grown relatively recently to a relatively modest size, and we use it very judiciously.

So our organization is almost completely funded by the people in this room. Every year, through a sheer act of will, we recreate Follen Church.

From individual choices of mercy and sacrifice, made in solitude, is born the beating heart of Follen.

Some ministers don't pledge at all to the church they serve. But this is my faith home, it is my family's faith home, and for me it is important to have the integrity of knowing I am asking you to do something that I do myself. I want to be who I am on purpose.

At this point in time, Ben and I pledge just over \$3,600 a year to Follen. That is around \$300 a month.

For us, that is a seriously meaningful amount.

It is an amount that we have to be intentional around, have conversations about, and set aside an auto-pay in our bank account—in the same way we have auto-payments set up for child care, mortgage, and retirement savings.

We give small, token amounts to a couple other causes we believe in, but the primary focus of our generosity is here.

This year at Follen our temple is gone and our faith is still here. We are the temple. Many acts of mercy and sacrifice that have made this building project possible.

Yet there are other acts:

leaps of nerve, heart-cries of communion;  
out-reaching, utterly.

Now we reach out to the future.

I imagine standing in our new building, and hearing sounds emerging from new rooms:

--Shouts of laughter coming from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Our Whole Lives class. Kids learning about bodies and respect in a #MeToo world.

--Harmony coming from the choir practice, a scale that measures something weightless.

--A murmured hush coming from a Covenant Group, the sound of one voice being deeply listened to.

--Chewing sounds from an Action Team meeting—that one must be the Finance team, they always have the best snacks. Kind and forthright conversation, laughter, listening.

--the ding of an elevator as two elders emerge, followed by a parent with a stroller.

Just a few sounds out of many.

I want us to fill our new space with the same life and heart that caused us to tear down the old space.

And that will take money.

It will take generosity to keep our excellent new staff, and pay them a right wage.

It will take our generosity to do new exciting things, not just the same old stuff in a new space.

I hope that as you reflect on who you are, and how you can do it on purpose, you think deeply about your pledge to Follen.

Now I'll get specific with a few suggestions.

For first time pledgers we suggest you give \$1200 a year. That's \$100 a month.

If you have already been giving \$100 a month could you add a \$20 bill to that monthly gift?

If you give, say, \$2000 a year, \$166 a month could you add \$34 a month to that?

If you give, say, \$350 a month, what if you added two \$20 bills to that, and then rounded up by ten more dollars?

If you give \$50 a month, what if you added \$5 to that?

And, to make sure you get the most for your money, I invite you to attend church every Sunday.

Over the past 6 years, each stewardship season Ben and I kept adding to our monthly gift. Sometimes we can't add much, but every year we can add **SOMETHING**.

Over time, by upping our monthly donation by varying amounts, we got to \$300 a month. That's our mite.

It might be small to some, it might be enormous to others.  
It is the amount we give that feels generous and possible.  
It is us giving out of our abundance,  
and giving all we can.

I know you are too smart to give more than you can.  
No one here is like the widow in the story, giving all she  
had to live on to an institution that did not recognize her  
sacrifice. And that's a good thing!

I know there are people who cannot set Follen as their  
primary recipient of charitable giving, because you are  
taking care of other priorities—like family members,  
health care needs, or just getting by.

I'm not interested in stealing the widow's mite out from  
under her. I think you know that.

I'm interested in being truly worthy of that widow's gift.  
Worthy of her trust. Of all the people's trust who gave  
from their abundance on that day, as Jesus watched.

Follen is worthy of your heart, your trust, and your gift.  
There are a few undercover bodhisattvas in this room,  
though.

We are not perfect, or at least, I know I'm not.

And yet, we strive for integrity.  
This church's heart beats with warmth and love, with  
possibility and forgiveness, with opportunity and hope.  
We are the stones that hold up this faith.  
We are the heart that beats with the lifeblood of this place.  
I believe in this place, and I believe in you.  
I wouldn't give to this church if I didn't.

Whether a mite or mighty, however you express your  
generosity matters, because it is you choosing to be who  
you want to be. It is you living with integrity.  
May we all find out who we are, and do it on purpose.

*Amen.*