

Change What?

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First Parish in Brookline

Let me start by saying three things before my sermon begins.

First, Scott Ullrich has been my tireless partner in all things technological and social media... slides during worship and Facebook to name just a few. Scott couldn't be with us this morning and so he asked if I would say something in my sermon for him. I said "of course," and what better thing to say, than a big old, thank you! *Thank you, Scott!!*

Won't you join me in thanking Scott for everything that he has done?

Secondly (again), we will be concluding our service today, after my sermon followed by a closing ritual that the Transition Team prepared for us, by singing our closing hymn as a recessional. We will sing as we process outdoors to the back yard for the church picnic where we will have plenty of time for goodbyes and fellowship.

And finally: you may have read in this week's Weekly Update that when a minister leaves a congregation there is a period of two years where we are not to be in touch with each other. That includes Facebook. This period of separation allows you to move fully into your new ministry and me to move into mine.

As hard as this is, trust me, it is essential. Therefore, as of July 1st, I will be unfriending folks on Facebook, my sermons will come off the website, etc. I will be available for pastoral emergencies between the 1st and the 15th of July.

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What a way to start a sermon, right!? I know; *and*, honesty and transparency are essential to good relationships.

So there you go.

Let me begin:

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Dear Ones, friends, loved ones, congregants, teachers, students, and *all* of what we are to each other,

Where do I start and how can I end? How can I end something that I think I'm not ready to end? How can I end when I'm uncertain of what comes next? How can I end when it feels so good, so right and comfortable? How can we end?

How can I love when I believe that loving is making me more vulnerable than I care to be? Than I can bear to be? Than my ego wants me to be? And yet, *yet*, how can I be anything other than what I am? Who am I?

How can I be anything other than grateful, thankful, and in love with you? With Us? With who we were and became together.

Right now, I am sad, grieving. Right now, I am touching all those unhealed parts of me, as grief does to us—even though I want to say that it is not true.

Right now, I am resistant to what is. I am both ready to go on (because the pain is getting very uncomfortable) and disbelieving that this is actually happening. Right now.

The thing about right now, is that it is everchanging. The right nows that we are living in will not, do not, *cannot* last forever. Even this. Even now.

It's the good news and the bad news. When something is hard, we must know that it will not last forever. When something is good we must stay present, for it, too, will not last forever.

The Buddha's teachings centered around the Four Noble Truths. These truths are particularly helpful to me in times of pain. The first truth is that life always involves suffering, big and small. A death, an ending, a contest not won, an appointment unkept.

Once we know this and accept it, we can stop trying to resist it, outwit it, or transcend it. We can accept that if we live we will have pain, and we can instead look to understand the cause of suffering and asking ourselves how best to respond to it.

The cause of suffering, or the second noble truth, stems from craving, or desire, and ignorance, or misunderstanding. When we crave, we are seeking to satisfy desires that will never be met. We seek to fill the hole in our soul with food, sex, material goods. We seek to stop aging through exercise, supplements, and cosmetic changes. All craving is seeking to stop what is unstoppable or finding meaning where meaning cannot be found; all craving leads to suffering.

So, too, misunderstanding or ignorance is when we do not see the world as it is. We believe that we are a separate, independent, being, in need of no one, nothing outside of ourselves.

The third and fourth noble truths are where we begin to see clearly that there is an end to suffering, and that once we discover that path we can continue on the path and strengthen that way of living. The end of suffering comes when we let go of craving, or clinging to anything, and accept what is. This is when our mind clears, we see things differently (which you may remember is how I understand a miracle: “A Change in perception that results in hope.”).

Another way to understand this is to say that we “wake up.” We wake up to what is. We realize that we are not separate; rather we are connected, deeply connected. The fourth truth reminds us

then that by “living ethically, practicing meditation, and developing wisdom, we can take exactly the same journey to enlightenment and freedom from suffering... We too can wake up.”¹

Let’s go back for a minute and overlay these four noble truths onto how I started this sermon. Quoting my own words:

Where do I start and how can I end?

Do we end? Really?

Or our lives inextricably interconnected?

To quote Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King: “In a real sense all life is inter-related. All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...”

How can I end something that I think I’m not ready to end?

Is it true that I am I not ready, that we are not ready?

Or am I, are we, clinging to what we think we need? What if we have no idea what we really need?

In the rooms of recovery, we say, “Everything that I have ever let go of had claw marks all over it!”

How can I love when I believe that loving is making me more vulnerable than I care to be? Than I can bear to be? Than my ego wants me to be?

Sounds like I answered my own question there.

Do I still carry that outdated, patriarchal belief that vulnerability is weak? Or am I willing to embrace the work of Brené Brown who writes that “Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage...vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.”

Right now, [I said] I am touching all those unhealed parts of me, as grief does to us—even though I want to say that it is not true.

Yes.

One loss touches all losses that are within us. Each loss makes us more human, more kind, and more loving.

¹ <https://www.lionsroar.com/what-are-the-four-noble-truths/> accessed June 8, 2018.

“Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things,” writes Naomi Shihab Nye, in my favorite poem, entitled *Kindness*:

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things ...*

*you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, ...you must know sorrow as
the other deepest thing.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore....*

Right now, I am resisting what is. I am both ready to go on (because the pain is getting very uncomfortable) and disbelieving that this is happening.

It sounds like clinging isn't working so well anymore. It sounds like it is time to let go, to see things differently. To believe once again that all things have possibilities, both good and bad.

To know that, as our reading this morning said, “in the midst of a broken world unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide. Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty and this rage.”

Right now. [I went on] how can I be anything other than grateful, thankful, and in love with you? With Us? With who we were and became together.

How can I be anything other than thankful, grateful? For who we were and what we gave to one another? How can I be anything other than joy-filled for all that we've been through?

My life is so much richer for having loved you.

Rumi said that our task “...is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

This love, this love that we have shared. It is us, *and* it is beyond us. You all carry that love within you. You are responsible for seeing that it continue... continue to grow and grow.

Continue to grow until the light shines so darn bright that people come from miles around to see what the light is all about.

Let them wonder.

Let them come.

Invite them in and take yourself out.

Out into the world, where your love is so desperately needed.

Do not hide your light or doubt your light. Do not let your lives be anything less than beautiful, meaningful, and kind.

And now my dear friends as we draw to a close, I offer you a blessing, a challenge, and a prayer.

My blessing to you all:

May you be filled with loving kindness.

May you be well.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

May you know Love.

My challenge to you is to change – change what?

Everything that stands in the way of your being loving and kind. Remove, dissolve, let go of everything that stands in the way of your being loving and kind. For action stemming from love and lived in kindness, *that* is your next step.

My blessing to you: may you be filled with loving kindness, and my challenge: remove everything inside of you that stands in the way of your being loving and kind.

And my prayer:

May you be blessed every day of your life, and may you have eyes to see it, and the heart to feel it. May you be courageous and brave, may you speak when you must, listen to all people, speak only your truths and honor one another.

May you embrace the legacy of our shared ministry fully by becoming even greater—more loving, more diverse, more awake, in all ways, than you ever were before. May our love be a springboard, a kickboard, and a buoy.

May you outgrow our ministry by growing into who you are called to be, individually, collectively, and as this beloved community. May you be a haven for all who seek it, an inspiration for those who need it, and a sanctuary emboldened and embodied in Love.

Traveling mercies my friends. God bless, and may Life hold you in the palm of her hand.

Amen and Blessed Be.