

The Implanted Word That Has the Power to Save

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Psalms 1:1-3; James 1:17-22, 25-27; Mark 7:1-2, 5-8, 14-15, 21-23

Call to Worship: The purpose of this service—like all religion—is to help us live, to help us understand the meaning of life and meet whatever happens in ways that express ideals like compassion and love of God and neighbor, and to help us access the Holy Spirit’s comfort, guidance and power that we can learn to find within and all around us. Ultimately the purpose of religion is for the Spirit to help us live for the Spirit’s sake. We live to serve the Spirit helping all life to live, especially those lives that are struggling, hurting or vulnerable.

We each have our own way of serving the Spirit because we each have our unique gifts and interests and situation in life, we each have our own calling in our deepest heart. The Gospel of John says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things came into being through him... What has come into being in him was life.” That Word or Logos is in us all—as Paul said, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me—it is our truest and best self, the life that the Spirit created us to live. The Spirit created us to fulfill this inner word because that is the only way that the life God created can survive and thrive. God needs all things to speak the word that the Spirit has created them to be.

This is not easy for humans to do without getting thrown off course by self-doubt or temptation or outer obstacles. That is why we have had religions and wisdom traditions. So the service today challenges you to open to the Spirit and let it speak through you in this crucial moment of history when the life God created needs all the help it can get. What is your particular inner word, what is this congregation’s, and how can we speak it?

Let us worship together...

Time with the Children: Good morning! I heard about a church potluck one summer where there were 27 households and 27 potato salads, and that was all—everyone brought the same thing. But even within those 27 I am sure there was diversity—some put hardboiled eggs in their potato salad and others did not, some used onions and some did not, some parsley, cilantro, countless differences in ratios and minor ingredients. Every human in those 27 households was 99.9% genetically identical to all the others, as are all humans around the world, but even 100%

genetically identical twins have differences in taste, and have different callings in life. Let's do an experiment: if you could learn to cook one dish so well you became the best in the world, what would be that one dish you would most want to make? Sourdough bread or roast fennel or ice-cream sandwich perhaps? Shout out a few... Or if you could learn to play any musical instrument as masterfully as Annemieke plays the piano, and you could learn it as quickly as you want and have nothing but fun doing it, what instrument would you choose? The Apostle Paul said we are each a different part of the body of Christ. In the church are you called to be a hand or an ear, vision or voice? Paul says, where would we be if everyone were a foot? Science may someday be able to identify all the genetic and environmental differences that make one person choose to be a Deacon and another a Trustee, but it will not change the fact that we need people to make all the different dishes at the feast, we need all the instruments to make up an orchestra, we need all different roles in the body of Christ, potluck cooks and treasurers and musicians. It is essential that we each listen to the innermost word in our heart that whispers what we feel gladdest to do so that we play the role that we have been given. We don't always know what the gift is that we can contribute in a situation, what we can bring to the potluck of life, but there is something we can do that helps us listen more carefully and wait more patiently and see more clearly so we know "where our deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger." What helps us hear our inner truth? Can you guess?

Prayer! Especially when we listen more than talk. Let us pray the Lord's Prayer...

The Implanted Word That Has the Power to Save

Psalms 1 uses the beautiful image of trees planted by streams of water for those who seek to understand the law of the life-creating Spirit that flows through the universe.

What we turn to in our hearts can be a matter of life and death. Wes Jackson is a wise elder of both the spirit and the land. He was interviewed for the film *The Eleventh Hour* where he said, "The deterioration of the environment of our planet is an outward mirror of an inner condition. Like inside, like outside."

Jesus agreed, it is what comes out of our heart that defiles us and defiles the world around us.

Wes Jackson has spent his life proving that we have more than just a destructive, toxic stream flowing within us, we have a sustainable, harmonious, sacred stream of living water.

How could anything be more important than finding that stream, that word of the Spirit flowing within us, and making sure that our outer lives are as pure an expression of it as we can?

The book of James says that our job is to welcome with meekness the implanted word in us that has the power to save us and save our world, and then to be a doer of that word.

Meekness is important. Thomas Keating, the Trappist monk and great teacher of Centering Prayer, talked about returning ever so gently to the sacred word. He was talking about a sacred word that we use in Centering Prayer to remind us to be silent and open to God's presence within us, but his advice applies to the implanted word of our calling as well.

Gentleness or meekness is important because to find that inner word is like an archaeological dig. Our egos are clumsy and heavy handed. They can muddy a clear stream and bury the implanted word beyond our ability to find. We need to be humble in order to hear and do that word.

Thomas Merton was the Trappist monk who inspired Thomas Keating. Merton invented the phrase Centering Prayer for the silent meditation of Christian contemplative tradition. Merton said, "If you want a life of prayer, the way to get to it is by praying.... In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there."

Before we can be a doer of the word we need to be a hearer of the word. Jesus talked about people having ears to hear—even in his day most people could not hear God's words of compassion and justice and peace coming through all the other noise within and around them.

If it was true before radio and television and the internet, before decades of ceaseless advertising, it is exponentially truer now.

The first thing we need in order to be a doer of the word is to tune out all the words of the ego and consumerist cultural conditioning and become attuned to the word of the Spirit, the still, small voice within our deepest hearts.

This reorientation of human consciousness is the crucial struggle in our society today, as Gus Speth and many others have pointed out. It is the struggle congregations like ours need to engage in as we see massive forces in the world acting in opposition to love of neighbor and care for God's creation. It is the struggle we each face with our own self-doubt, or despair, or

countless inner or outer obstacles that keep us from fulfilling our calling. We urgently need to free ourselves to hear and do a new word.

James referred in today's passage to "the perfect law, the law of liberty." Mark Kutolowski has called our most important task in life a process of spiritual liberation.

We do not need to add anything to ourselves, we need to free what we already are. We need to lose life to gain life, we need to lose the life full of noise and distraction in order to hear the word that is our innermost truth at the core of our being, and then do that word.

This can be a struggle, but it is tremendously joyful in the end because as James says, the God of Light has given us each gifts and a yearning to share them generously with the world. We each have our own form of light that we were born to create and shine. We each have something we love to do and people we feel drawn to serve with our love. Our purest, most undefiled love goes out to those Christ loved and served the most, the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed, even our enemies. To feel our God-given, true gifts flowing through us in the service of love is to experience the greatest joy life offers.

And it is also to wield the greatest power in the universe. Gandhi said the force of our inner word of truth is the only power on earth greater than the atom bomb. An influential historian of human civilization, Arnold Toynbee, said "Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."

The good news is that it does not take many people wielding the power of love to revolutionize the world. Arnold Toynbee's study of civilizations affirmed what Margaret Mead said, that a small group of committed citizens is what has made the difference at every turning point in history.

We can shape the future. We can transform the world by listening for God's word and being doers of it, as individuals and as a church. Meekness is our superpower. God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. God's wisdom looks to the world like an implanted word of foolishness in us. So if you feel meek, weak and foolish in response to this sermon, congratulations! You are the tree planted by the stream of living water! Now rise and be a doer of that word... Let us pray together in silence, opening to hear the silent word that the Spirit is speaking. Let us pray...