

To Save Life, Part II
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
September 19, 2021 Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost,
Annual Meeting Sunday
Ezekiel 33:7-8; James 3:13; 3:16-4:1; 4:7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Call to Worship: We are here because two thousand years ago a thirty-year-old Jewish carpenter heard his wild cousin calling people to undergo an evolution of consciousness and transform their lives and the society around them to be the realm of God on earth, and he set out to do it.

The church has been many other things, but when our lives or societies are most lost and we look back to the teachings of Jesus for direction, we hear Jesus calling us to follow him and empty ourselves, lose our materialistic, self-oriented life and gain the life of the Spirit that is our deepest, truest life.

The church has collected thousands of years of wisdom and creative expressions of it that are designed to help us undergo spiritual evolution and accomplish social transformation. It is hard to imagine an institution humanity needs more right now than local spiritual centers offering these teachings, tools and practices.

So let us celebrate this church and give thanks for all who have served it with their time and skills and gifts, and passions and hopes and dreams. We can rejoice that after 200 years this congregation is still here to comfort us in our hard times and help us discern what the Spirit is calling us to be and do. Let us celebrate the meaning and purpose we find when we join together as a loving, supportive community to help one another fulfill the Spirit's calling for our individual lives and our world.

Bill Coffin liked to quote G.K. Chesterton who said "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." Chesterton wrote our first hymn as a call to a lost people to be transformed and create God's realm on earth. He uses the word sword metaphorically for bold action. Let us worship together singing, "O God of Earth and Altar."

Time with the Children: Good morning! Last week we wrestled with a really big, hard question, and yet every child knows the answer who has passed through our Sunday School or

Spiritual Exploration. The question is, what does humanity need to stop being and doing and what does it need to start being and doing in order to save the world?

Our children know the answer in part because of the superb teachers this congregation has been blessed with over the years leading up to and including Danette Harris and Joey Hawkins. Imagine if all humanity were guided by the wisdom of these women, imagine if the world were in their hands, or in the hands of the children they taught. Imagine what our world could be.

Our children have explored with Joey and Danette what the Golden Rule means in all the different religions, and what it means to love our neighbor as our self, and who our neighbor is, and what great saints and spiritual teachers and heroes of our time have done and taught.

Our children know that humanity needs to stop being selfish and doing harmful things to other people and the earth. Just stop it.

Our children know that humanity needs to start putting compassion and love for neighbors above all else, meaning fair and kind treatment of everyone and every creature and earth itself. They know that you cannot practice doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, unless you know who they really are and what they want and need, because we all want to be understood and respected. So they know that paying attention and listening carefully to others is crucial. They know that Jesus calls us to help create this loving world on earth, using whatever gifts we have.

They know something else, too, that they learned here. They know that they are loved, and they are not alone.

And finally, they may have questions at times about the path ahead, they may not see how to get humanity to change its ways, but they know a tool that can help guide them to the answers they need... Prayer! Prayer helps us discover answers from the source of wisdom within us by turning and opening us to the Spirit. So let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Sermon: To Save Life, Part II

This week a New York Times article began, "The first cave art. The dawn of agriculture. While these are among the most crucial moments in humankind's beginnings, our most dramatic origin story starts 66 million years ago. It was the apocalyptic instant when a rock from outer space slammed into Earth, terminating the age of dinosaurs and eventually offering a bountiful

new world to our mammalian ancestors.” (9/13/21 “The Rock That Killed the Dinosaurs” by Becky Ferreira)

The article talks about recent studies that explore the surprising life-giving qualities of life-destroying asteroid impacts.

This week in our Heartfulness Circle we talked about the book *When Things Fall Apart* by the contemporary Buddhist teacher and nun, Pema Chödrön. She writes about the asteroid that dropped into her life when her husband left her, and how life-giving that life-destroying event became.

She also writes about a man dying of AIDS who described how every moment and every person had become precious. “Something that was horrifying...had turned into a gift.”

She found the same thing in the wake of her marriage falling apart. She tried hard to get her life back together, but in the end, she says, “Instinctively I knew that annihilation of my old dependent, clinging self was the only way to go.... To stay with that shakiness—to stay with a broken heart, with a rumbling stomach, with the feeling of hopelessness and wanting to get revenge—that is the path of true awakening. Sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos, learning not to panic—this is the spiritual path.” (Chapter 2, pp 9-13)

The Christian contemplative teacher, Richard Rohr, shares the same wisdom in his book *Falling Upward*. He writes, “You will remain largely unconscious as a human being until issues come into your life that you cannot fix or control and something challenges you at your present level of development, forcing you to expand and deepen. It is in the struggle with our shadow self, with failure, or with wounding, that we break into higher levels of consciousness.”

Last week we heard Jesus say, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” We need to allow our self-concerned ego to have an asteroid land on it and lose the life that the ego dictates. Then we can save our life by letting it follow the Holy Spirit, “sticking with that uncertainty, getting the knack of relaxing in the midst of chaos” and letting the Spirit lead us to “expand and deepen” and “break into higher levels of consciousness.”

Jesus confronted the selfish ambition of his disciples in today’s passage. It is a beautiful illustration of what it means to lose life to save life.

“He said, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’”

Losing our life to save our life means that our goal in life is what the Vermont contemplative poet David Budbill described with his usual self-effacing humor in his poem, “On the Road to Buddhahood.”

Ever plainer. Ever simpler.
Ever more ordinary.
My goal is to become a simpleton.
And from what everybody tells me
I am making real good progress.

But losing life to save life also means changing the world so that the most marginal and vulnerable people and creatures of earth and earth itself can be saved. That is what the child represented to Jesus.

We need all humanity to lose life to save life now, in a world where eighty million forcibly displaced people are fleeing wars and wildfires, deadly droughts and dying democracies. So the question that haunts me is how can we move enough people to lose life quickly enough to save life?

I keep returning to the list Gus Speth compiled of the six ingredients needed to change the consciousness of a society. They are:

1. raising awareness of the calamity;
2. cultivating wise leaders;
3. articulating a new narrative and positive vision;
4. building a unified social justice and environmental movement;
5. putting out effective social marketing;
6. developing models of a new way of living.

Today I am thinking about the role our congregation has played and can continue to play in all six.

First, raising awareness of the calamity as sentinels is what Ezekiel says we must do or else the suffering from those calamities is on our hands. Our congregation has helped organize groups in Strafford to raise awareness of the climate crisis and of racism, but unlike most other groups, the church focuses on the calamity behind those calamities. We have a message to spread

that is anti-selfish and anti-materialistic, and pro-Golden Rule, pro-love of neighbor, pro-compassion for the vulnerable and suffering.

Second, we have cultivated generations of wise leaders, as you can see if you look at the children who grew up in this congregation and the roles they are playing, small or large. As adults we are trying to increase our wisdom through our conversations together and through contemplative practice.

Third, we have a compelling narrative and positive vision to articulate. The vision of God's realm of love on earth may be as old as the Hebrew prophets, but to our society it is still shockingly new. We need to get over the reluctance to speak boldly as a church because of the shame we feel at how other churches have preached holier-than-thou exclusivism.

And that leads to Gus's fourth point, to build a unified movement. We need the opposite of exclusivism, we need to join with all who share the vision of the Parliament of World Religion's Global Ethic, founded on universally endorsed principles like the Golden Rule and love of neighbor. Those underlying principles form common ground where we can stand with those who differ from us, as we have found here.

Fifth, Gus says we need to be effective in social marketing to change the consciousness of a society.

Every person in this congregation has a voice, and has people who respect her or him. We have gifts as individuals that we can pool as a congregation to reach far more than our own personal circles of influence.

The art we produce, the teaching our teachers do, the resources our stewardship efforts mobilize and manage that support our work—every person here contributes to making our collective voice effective.

Gus's final ingredient is creating models of a new way of living. James says, "Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.... willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits."

This congregation models the realm of God both by being a loving community and by the countless ways that each of us lives out what love of neighbor means every day.

We model it also by making sure that this building stands for a way of being that loses life to save the lives of those who are most vulnerable and in greatest need of our care. Our Mission Committee models this beautifully.

Jewish wisdom says, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” African wisdom says that the results of our struggle are out of our hands, “so let us celebrate the struggle.”

It is a joy and an honor to be on this journey in this church together. Let us pray in silence, asking the Spirit’s blessing and grace and guidance for the year ahead...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The rain, the rain, it raineth down.
It wets my head
and it wets the town.