

"Love Even This"
A Sermon of Thanksgiving
Rev. Lilli Nye
November 21, 2004

If I remember correctly, I was having a very bad day. And for me, the worst kind of day is one in which I find not only circumstances, other people, and inanimate objects to be excruciatingly trying at every turn, but even worse, my very own self is the most intolerable factor in the mix, the most difficult of difficult people to live with.

So I was having that kind of day. I was pretty miserable. I was pretty grumpy. Yes, even ministers get into vile moods. And this particular vile mood was extreme enough that I finally had to send myself to my room for a time-out!

After quieting the inner storm a bit, and after some conversation with my warring insides, and some conversation with my higher power, I arrived at an insight. I saw quite clearly that my misery was not coming from circumstances or conditions, inner or outer, but from my unwillingness to love and accept what was. Impatience, intolerance, aversion, even hatred, were the source.

I knew somehow that the larger part of me had to hold whatever was intolerable in love. The larger part of me had to be able to hold the smaller part of me in love. If I could do that, then I would be free. I would be free.

So, as each wave of disgust rose up, as I thought of this awful thing, or remembered that intolerable thing, or felt frustrated or impatient, I would think: "Love even this ... and love even this ... and love even this. Love what seems unlovable."

So that became my mantra for the day: "Love even this."

I was running errands on foot that day. And it was a raw, rainy, gray day in Boston—it must have been February. It was the kind of weather that captures the essence of banality. Weather that truly inspires self-pity and grouchiness.

But as I felt the cold rain sting my skin and soak my shoes, I kept saying my mantra. And as I noticed the trash and dog poop embedded in the dirty snow in the bushes, and interacted with the sullen cashier at the grocery store, and remembered the things that kept my life from working, I kept saying, "Love even this."

And something began to happen.

Gradually, the pressure-cooker feeling in my chest dissipated. I began to feel a lightness, even a giddiness. My heart began to open and soften. I found myself loving people I did not know.

Every time a tightening and irritation crept in, I would breathe and say to my body: "Love even this." Gradually, my insides began to expand. I felt spacious, as if there were a sky inside me—as if I were a moving vessel of open sky. I saw so much pain around me, others who were suffering with the demons of their lives, and my heart went out to them.

To my total surprise, I began to feel as if I were in love. The raw, magic, aching feeling of being in love, only it was with everything.

Now, I don't want to exaggerate this too much. It was just glimpse of something, something the mystic Rumi describes as "being a true lover"—when you see the Beloved's face in everything.

But it was enough of a glimpse for me to know that it is possible to rest within life exactly as it is, to be whole within life exactly as it is, to be thankful within conditions just as they are, not because they are good or because they are what we wanted, but because peace and wholeness and thanksgiving are all dimensions of the same experience of having an open heart.

Some might consider this a dangerously naïve state, leading to complacency. Does it not deny the reality of pain or injustice or danger? What motivates us to strive to change things for the better if we are contented?

As in all things, we have to hold the paradox together: on the one hand, a profound gratitude for life, and a peacefulness toward what is, and on the other hand, the energetic effort to improve ourselves and ease the suffering of others.

My own experience is that when I am restless with my own appetites and needs, I am much less able to recognize the conditions of others. And so the practice of contentment actually opens my eyes to what is really needed.

There is a growing awareness in those circles of people who connect environmentalism and spirituality that there are too many of us living on the planet for all of us to have everything we want, materially. With human patterns of consumption, waste, and population growth continuing as they are now, we are taxing the earth's bottom-line ability to provide the raw materials for our consumption and to absorb waste products of our living. America is, by a large per-capita margin, the most consumptive and the most wasteful of all the nations of the earth. Yet the eyes of the developing world look in this direction, toward our standard of living, as the model to which they aim.

The earth simply cannot do for 6 billion (going on 7 billion) people what it has done for us. Herein lies a complicated set of tensions between old models and emerging new realities. I don't want to focus on those complexities right now, but I wanted to get to another point:

I believe that we, in this wealthy nation, are being called to something that is alien to us culturally: We are being called to voluntarily self-limit. If our lifestyle is the model of affluence that the developing world strives for, then we need to start offering a different model.

Voluntary self-limitation, or what has become known as the Voluntary Simplicity Movement, is a philosophical and spiritual practice of contentment with simpler things—the curbing of appetites, the awareness of richness in the midst of the ordinary. It is a practice that helps us to be more peaceful and happy with our lives, and that embodies Gandhi's philosophy of "living simply so that others may simply live."

Or, as the 17th century poet Thomas Traherne expressed it:

"You never enjoy the world aright until the sea itself flows in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars, and perceive yourself to be the soul heir of the whole world... You never enjoy the world aright till you see all things in it already so perfectly yours that you cannot

wish them any other way; and you are convinced that all things serve you best in their proper places."

We have in our hymnal a beautiful old American folk hymn that we'll sing together in a moment: "I Walk the Unfrequented Road." It is a song of mystical wholeness, sung from the perspective of one who is nourished by a simple bounty and who walks with an awareness of the miraculous. From that spiritual fullness the singer is fed and remains free. He or she reminds us to leave a light footprint on the earth because, if we could fully recognize and love the abundance around us, we would realize that we are already rich beyond measure.

I walk the unfrequented road
With open eye and ear;
I watch a-field the farmer load
The bounty of the year.

I filch the fruit of no man's toil
No trespasser am I,
And yet I reap from ev'ry soil
And from the unmeasured sky.

I gather where I did not sow,
And bind the mystic sheaf,
The amber air, the river's flow,
The rustle of the leaf.

A beauty spring-time never knew
Haunts all the quiet ways,
And sweeter shines the landscape through
Its veil of autumn haze.

I face the hill, the streams, the wood,
And feel with all a-kin;
My heart expands;
Their fortitude
And peace and joy flow in.