

October 20,2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: Glad and Generous Hearts
Text: Acts 2:43-47



I've been gone two weeks. The first week away, I was at Mount Carmel, a Carmelite monastery in Ontario. I was there for the third session in my two year certification program for spiritual director. The first speaker on the first day started us off with the words, "you are going to die." She was not referring to the course difficulty; she was introducing her topic; Death and Spiritual Direction. She talked about our need to be comfortable with death and even recommended an app for our phones called "We Croak"- five times a day she gets a ding from her phone reminding her of her mortality. Why such focus on death? As famed sociologist Elizabeth Kubler Ross said, "because death gives meaning to life." If you have 5 minutes left to live- do you fight the inevitable (it won't change the outcome), do you prefer not to know- or do you spend it consciously amazed and in wonder. You have five minutes right now. Then she said, "people die the way they live" It can be in fear and regret or in peace and acceptance. you choose to live in scarcity or in abundance. As in life, so in death.

After my week of classroom, chapel and spiritual direction training, I accomplished the #1 item that's been on my bucket list for decades. See New England in the fall. So something you should know about me. I prefer to travel solo, and I will choose a state park over a Hilton Marriott every time. I will trade continental breakfast buffet, the ding of elevators and clattering of ice machines down the hall for hikes along trails, sunrise, sunset and stars over campfire smoke twirling skyward every time.

My trip through New England gave me 68 hours of windshield time on the road. In my drive time, I was accompanied by applemusic and audible books. I listened to two of Elaine Pagel's books while driving- *Why Religion?* and *The Gospel of Thomas*. The first was not what I expected at all. In stead of an academic religion book on the nature of religion, it was an autobiography of her spiritual journey including how the prolonged death of her young son and sudden death of her husband occurring only months apart impacted her faith and posed the question, Why religion? We are all going to die.

I listened to *The Untethered Soul* by Michael Singer who spent 6 hours and 11 minutes reiterating the necessity of letting go of the irritants that block us from fully living in awareness of divine goodness. When the chapter titled, "Contemplating Death," was announced I had to laugh as gratitude and generosity of spirit became his focus.

I listened to Brene Brown share her book *The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone in Braving the Wilderness* in which at one point she notes the path through the wilderness and contemplating death creates a generosity that leads to true joy in living.

At the campsite, after the fire had dwindled, I read myself to sleep. Among many books in my traveling library, I was drawn to journey in *The Book of Joy* by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu. Both increasing in frailty of heath, they shared their contemplations on what brings true JOY to living from a Christian and a Buddhist perspective. They agreed, confirmed by scientific research, that "the three factors that seem to have the greatest influence on increasing our happiness are our ability to reframe our situation more positively, our ability to experience gratitude, and our choice to be kind and generous."

Everywhere I turned, whether in class, on the road, or by the campfire, I heard the same message of generosity of spirit and abundance of life.

My travel had no predetermined plan or reservations. I just go where the spirit leads. My only itinerary was see New England; I had five days or so to wander. Driving through New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, I could hardly believe it. After years of wishing, I was actually there in

New England (bonus points for being there in the fall - and catching peak foliage week by chance). My longing for this trip goes way back and my visions were no disappointment. Vistas of colorful trees spread across hills and valleys before me awe filled my heart.

One morning, I looked at the map and pondered my course, I realized that I was about an hour and a half from Concord, Massachusetts. I knew where I was going that day. In my former life, (as second career ministers say), I taught 11th grade students American literature. My own high school English teacher and taught me deep appreciation for literature, and I loved teaching as well. One of my favorite teaching units was in October when I opened the doors to the New England transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and especially Henry David Thoreau. Maybe that's what etched the New England trip onto my bucket list. When the movie *Dead Poet's Society* came out in 1989, professor Robin Williams led his own students in these New England authors- perhaps I secretly longed for my students to stand upon their desks and recite "O Captain, My Captain" at my departure from the classroom. Thoreau has been my source of inspiration and life since.

When I awoke a short drive away from Walden Pond, my soul soared. I paid my admission fee. I spent too long and too much in the gift shop/book store buying yet another copy of *Walden* and poetry of Emerson- then I stepped upon the path to circumnavigate the pond. It was cloudy day with a crisp chill in the wind, but my feet were actually on the path where Henry David Thoreau walked. Be still my beating heart! Half way around the pond, I came upon the spot where Thoreau built his tiny cabin in the woods. In solitude, I stood where he stood at his cabin doorway and saw the sun briefly filtering through the trees ..." O morning star..." I was transported... back

I was back in the windowless cement block classroom D106 first hallway to the right at Gregory Portland High School. I turn the lights off and stand beside the film strip projector. It was archaic even then, but perhaps fitting that it was a simple, brittle filmstrip to flash images of New England fall vistas inscribed with words of Thoreau into that darkened south Texas classroom. I offering Thoreau to 17 year olds who were more focused on football and homecoming dates than the great transcendental movement of America. Nonetheless, each year I lay before a new gathering, the pearls of great literature, philosophy, religion, politics all in one ,Thoreau.

As I stood on shore of Walden pond, the words drifted back to me over the decades. I spoke them aloud.. "to be awake is to be alive... I never met a man who was fully alive, if I did how could I look him in the face.

I advanced the filmstrip on each imbedded chime. ding.

"Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star."..... ding

I went to the woods To live life deliberately and not when I came to die to discover that I had not lived... ding....

Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplicity, Simplicity, Simplicity! Let our affairs be as two or three not a hundred or a thousand...ding

If you have built castles in the air.... your work need not be lost, now put the foundations under them.... ding

If man does not keep pace with his companions.... ding.

While in Concord, I visited the graves of Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott, for as we live so we die. Before me were lives of meaningful living, purpose, passion, intentionality, generosity, concern for others. The wisdom of the ancestors and wise ones wafted through the air in lives deeply rooted in gratitude for simply living.

In the words of Jesus, "I have come that you might have life, and have it to the fullest" (John 10:10). That is what our scripture for today reveal to us, people living life to the fullest:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were knowing salvation.

These were living abundant life. that Jesus promised.

Some say this passage was an early attempt by Jesus followers to live a communal lifestyle and the experiment didn't work, so in essence saying, 'we Christians tried communal living, it failed' gets us off the hook. Instead what if we read it as these early followers knew most intimately what it meant to be Jesus followers, so they did it, and we can too. They understood his message and teachings. The same teachings that others have understood and have lived and still live and share with us in lecture, books and more about union with all and care for all - and living life of simple abundance. They understood awe and wonder of life. They praised God for all life, and they broke bread with one another in awe and wonder with glad and generous hearts.

The Christian church lost our way. We gave up the true way because it's easier to make our faith about believing a certain thing and getting to heaven, than it is about living mindfully each day aware of the gifts and bringing heaven among us today. Jesus followers live with glad and generous hearts - glad and generous spirits - toward God and themselves and others.

What does a glad and generous heart look like to you? How does a glad and generous heart sound to you? Is it complaints about what is not and what one does not have or praise and sharing from what one does? How do glad and generous spirits sound when speaking to your spouse, child, co-worker? Is it harsh and resentful full of complaint or with gladness and generosity of spirit full of joy?

A glad and generous heart within gives thanks for each day which pundits teach is the source of true joy and abundant life. A glad and generous heart acknowledges the gift of life, its frailty and brevity making every moment a breath of praise and thanksgiving. A glad and generous heart is free from fear of scarcity and insecurities.

We are in the season of giving in churches. Churches ask for indications of next year's giving to plan next year's programs and ministries. But our season of giving is much more than making a budget. It is calling us to mindfulness and meaning and hopefully joy.

We give for a lot of reasons. Some give out of guilt and some duty. Some give as tradition to carry on the work of those who have gone before. Some give to keep the institution going for its value in their lives or in the lives of others; some give in fear of what might happen if all the churches had to close their doors, some give in defiance that the message of Jesus not get drowned out by the message of self or hate. Some give as resistance to clinging to money for identity, and as resistance to greed and idolatry, consumer culture of insatiable want. Some give in order to be part of that movement larger than themselves.

Whatever your reasons are for giving, I pray that your giving is with glad and generous heart and spirit knowing that your giving changes lives and the life it changes most is yours.

May it be so.