

CONSUMING THE SPIRIT

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
2 MARCH 2008

READINGS

We offer a single reading in two voices this morning. Pray for Peace by Ellen Bass

Pray to whomever you kneel down to:
Jesus nailed to his wooden or marble or plastic cross,
his suffering face bent to kiss you,
Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
that she may lay her palm on our brows,
to Shekinah, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
to Inanna in her stripped descent.

Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, Record Keeper
of time before, time now, time ahead, pray. Bow down
to terriers and shepherds and siamese cats.
Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,
each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

Make the brushing of your hair
a prayer, every strand its own voice,
singing in the choir on your head.
As you wash your face, the water slipping
through your fingers, a prayer: Water,
softest thing on earth, gentleness
that wears away rock.

Making love, of course, is already a prayer.
Skin and open mouths worshipping that skin,
the fragile case we are poured into,
each caress a season of peace.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.
Pray to the angels and the ghost of your grandfather.

When you walk to your car, to the mailbox,
to the video store, let each step
be a prayer that we all keep our legs,
that we do not blow off anyone else's legs.
Or crush their skulls.
And if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheel chair, each revolution
of the wheels a prayer that as the earth revolves
we will do less harm, less harm, less harm.

And as you work, typing with a new manicure,
a tiny palm tree painted on one pearlescent nail
or delivering soda or drawing good blood
into rubber-capped vials, writing on a blackboard
with yellow chalk, twirling pizzas, pray for peace.

With each breath in, take in the faith of those
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace,
feed the birds for peace, each shiny seed
that spills onto the earth, another second of peace.
Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk.
Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child
around your VISA card. Gnaw your crust
of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter.
Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling
your prayer through the streets.

SERMON

From the third chapter of Exodus in the Torah:

Moses ... led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the Mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.... [God spoke to Moses and said,] "I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" ... But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." ... "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM sent me to you."

This past week I was up in Tacoma for minister's meetings before the Pacific Northwest District annual meeting, staying at a very newly remodeled hotel with some interesting amenities. Under the glass top of the desk, right by the phone were two cards. One was the "Pillow Menu."

It said, "We want to ensure that you feel at home with the perfect pillow – soft, medium, firm, extra firm, U-neck or Body. Touch the 'Help Me' button on your guest room phone to request any pillow of your preference." Right next to it lay the "Spiritual Menu." "We are here to provide you with choices – the Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Mormon, Books on Buddhism, the Holy Bible King James Version, the Koran (various versions), the New American Bible, the Tao te Ching (various versions), the Torah (various versions). Touch the 'Help Me' button on your phone and we will bring up your book of faith." No Gideon Bible stuffed in a drawer in the modern hotel.

While I appreciated the wide embrace of many faith traditions, I think I'd have been less icked-out if it hadn't been on a "Spiritual Menu" or better still hadn't been right beside the "Pillow Menu."

Last week I spoke with you about how it has become so commonplace for us to be called consumers that we don't even blink. It seems we are a great super power because we are such great shoppers. We forget that the verb consume means to use all the way up, squander, waste, swallow, devour. We too easily forget the implications of consumption.

This consumer mentality seeps into all our interactions. You get what you pay for and paying entitles you to be treated with respect. The sense that we deserve respect by virtue of our humanity – our inherent worth and dignity – gets lost in all the transactions.

And we bring this buying and selling attitude to other arenas in our lives. It seems we have become spiritual consumers as well. Religion is another commodity that we buy – or order by Room Service. But what does it mean when we bring a consumer mentality to church? We may think we don't. We may indeed resist, but it creeps into everything.

My friend and colleague, Rev. David Maynard at Eastrose Fellowship in Gresham wrote this in his Christmas newsletter. "In the past few months, I have come to realize that our Fellowship, along with nearly all other religious congregations has sometimes become a commodity, too. This awareness hit me as I reflected on some members and friends who have moved away or dropped away from Eastrose. Although they may have pledged money toward the programs of the congregation, on leaving they simply drop their commitment. There seems to be no memory that a tight budget was constructed around their gifts. Rather the sense is that if we are not attending the Sunday service or education programs and getting our money's worth, we'll just stop paying. In a commodity transaction, one does not expect to pay for goods not received.

"My belief is that what Eastrose Fellowship offers spiritually and educationally goes beyond a religious commodity. I believe we Unitarian Universalists affect society in positive ways and that we bolster family and individual life to make each day richer for our presence. I believe that, while certainly circumstances may change, the "goods" delivered by Eastrose do more than just add to our pile of possessions."

Religion as commodity shows up in many ways. We talk about seekers who are church shopping. We worry that our "branding" needs to be clear and effective to bring more people through the doors. There is much that we can learn from corporate culture, but we must do it with great care or church can end up as just another commodity.

I fear that church too easily becomes something we add to our pile of possessions, stacking up in our lives as just one more thing to do. One more demand on my time and energy in my very busy life. Am I getting what I pay for? I'm a very busy person, you know.

Thinking of church as a commodity or service to be paid leads us into a scarcity model which is what capitalism is built upon. The thinking that there is only so much time and money in the world, and I must be a wise consumer – even of my church.

But our bottom line – if it can be called that at all – has more to do with relationship and transformation. Such things don't fall into easy profit and loss statements. They are of another order, another nature altogether. They are not transactions or commodities. They exist in another realm. A realm that I think most are seeking when they walk through our doors. A realm where we may find freedom from lives ruled by transactions and a fee for service mentality.

Certainly we both give and receive in the church, but what if the giving and the receiving that happens at church were not really related to one another. What if the giving were an end in itself? What if the receiving were an end, too?

People sometimes come up to me quietly, somewhat embarrassed and say that while they don't have much money to give, they want to make up for it by giving of their time. It breaks my heart for there is nothing to make up for.

Church doesn't work that way – or at least it shouldn't. It's not about giving to receive. It's not about giving and getting your money's worth. It's not a place where time is money and one substitutes for another.

Church is about generosity – about giving, not about paying for.

Everyone who is committed to this congregation, everyone who is grateful for what it stands for and how it transforms lives, everyone who is committed to this community should always be giving as much time and as much money as they can – all the time. If giving time "makes up for" giving money, it implies those with more money can essentially pay for the privilege of not volunteering. It doesn't work that way – and really you don't treat it that way.

And what of the times when people have neither time nor money. Would it were that life didn't work out like that, but it's all too often true. *Those* are the times we need the church the most – when life is so overwhelming and means are so short that we need the refuge of a caring community. So it is all the more heart breaking to me when people say *those* are the times that they pull away from church because they feel so badly that they have so little to give. Just when they might need a community of love and support most, they pull back.

Our church is not a fee-for-service institution. If it becomes so, we lose our center, our entire reason for being. Our church about transformative relationship. It's about commitment and connection. It's about generosity of spirit. The first thing we ask of you is your gifts of love, your gifts of humanity. All our lives are enriched when people can bring us the power of their love, their fullest humanity. That creates a spiritual generosity that flows – like water – in all directions at once.

The roots of the word generosity has its roots are in the Greek *gene*, and the Latin *gens*, meaning to give birth, to beget. It is root for the words kin, genius and pregnant. For genesis, generate, gentle, and kindergarten. Generosity means essentially to create more kin, more connection, more family. Generosity makes more of itself, it is generative, creative. Its resources are not limited, requiring strict accounting. The more you give, the more there is to give. It throws a mighty wrench into a consumer, fee-for-service mentality. It can be hard to wrap our minds around, and it is precisely the kind of higher truth we come to church seeking.

This is clearly not a transactional relationship but a generative one. Giving begets more giving. Giving is not done so that we can get. Giving is done to create more. This church only exists because of the wild and faithful generosity of its members and friends. You are generous not because of what you get, but because of what *we* create.

In its oldest sense, *gene* and *gens* means becoming.

When Moses encounters God in the burning bush – a fire that burns but does not consume – he asks God what name he can give to this experience, what name he can bring back to the people. God says to Moses, "I AM who I AM," you can tell the Israelites, "I AM sent me to you." Now Hebrew is a notoriously nuanced language, and that phrase can be translated in many ways. I AM that I AM. I will be who I will be. I am becoming who I am becoming. The Hebrew word for God has a generative, creative quality to it.

Thus even the name of God has the sense of a dynamic, living, creative relationship with the people. It is not about giving and getting. It is simply an on-going, unlimited presence.

Our lives in church are supposed to carry us beyond a limited giving and getting, beyond fee for service, beyond the question, what I am getting out of this? It's supposed to carry us into a more creative, less quantitative relationship with one another and with the Holy – what Rev. Forrest Church calls "that which is greater than all yet present in each." A dynamic presence within and among and beyond us.

Church is supposed to help us move through the world with greater commitment and connection. To render every act a prayer. To help us move in the world so that we pray, pray for peace with every step. Perhaps your presence, your constancy, your prayer is the first step toward peace. What if your church life, your spiritual life, your prayer helped create peace? Such spiritual connection is a gift beyond measure.

And if so, then perhaps we ought to pray, however we can, in whatever form works for you. Prayer as simple as living. The poet tells us,

Make the brushing of your hair
a prayer, every strand its own voice,
singing in the choir on your head.
As you wash your face, the water slipping
through your fingers, a prayer: Water,
softest thing on earth, gentleness
that wears away rock.

What if you did something as radically dissonant as fold the photo of a dead child – a child you knew or the picture of an Iraqi or Somali child – what if you folded that picture around your Visa card? How might it change your relationship to how you spend your money?

What if "with each breath in, [you took] in the faith of those
who have believed when belief seemed foolish,
who persevered[?]
What if, "With each breath out, [you found a way to] cherish[?]"

What if every act of generosity in this church in your life reminded you of your humanity and not your role as a consumer?

How might we change the world.
How might we create peace.

Amen. Blessed Be.