

“Cracking Up” ©

Sermon by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick

Nov. 5th, North Parish of North Andover, MA

Reading:

“To Savor the World or to Save It”, by Richard Gilbert

I rise in the morning torn between the desire
To save the world or to savor it—to serve life or to enjoy it;
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor;
To celebrate life with exuberant step
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty
Clouds the sky of my vision;
When the glow which lights my every day
Illumines the hurting world around me?

To savor the world or save it?
God of justice, if such there be,
Take from me the burden of my question.
Let me praise my plenitude without limit;
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!

No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.
What is that you say?
To save, one must serve?
To savor, one must save?
The one will not stand without the other?

Forgive me—in my preoccupation with myself,
In my concern for my own life
I had forgotten.
Forgive me, God of justice,
Forgive me, and make me whole.

Sermon

“Cracking Up”

Has anyone here ever grown an avocado plant from an avocado pit? It’s one of my favorite things to do. I currently have 4 avocado plants growing in my apartment as we speak.

If you are not familiar with the process, to get an actual avocado plant to grow, you can’t just bury the pit in some soil. First you have to get it to sprout. You do this by submerging the hard seed in water for a few weeks. My preferred method is to stick three or four toothpicks around the sides of it, and place it in a glass of water. The toothpicks catch the rim of the glass and suspend half the seed above water, so it doesn’t sink to the bottom. This way the roots are given plenty of room to stretch out into the water below and grow strong.

While, it’s nice just having living, growing plants around the house, I particularly like growing avocados. Not only, because one must first eat an avocado in order to grow one, but also, unlike other house plants, with avocados you can really watch the whole growing process take place – from fruit, to seed, to sprout, to shoot, to leaves.

Unlike with other seeds whose growing process is hidden under soil or in opaque pots, if you soak your avocado pit in a clear glass, you can watch –patiently – as the hard seed slowly transforms before your eyes.

The skin around it peels off, the two sides of it split, and a tap root, that looks a bit like a tail slowly begins to peek out at the bottom. Week by week, this root grows longer, and wispy off shoots begin to sprout from it. Soon your glass of water becomes home to a complex root system, and what was once a stone-like pit, is now a tender, delicate bulb, nearly unrecognizable from its former self.

After a month, the roots should be pretty well structured and you can go ahead and bury your avocado bulb in soil. You will be surprised, at least I always am, at how quickly a stalk will shoot upwards from your germinated seed and begin forming leaves. It can happen in a matter of days.

Recently I attended a talk given by an Australian Buddhist Nun. Her name is Venerable Robina Courtin and she is renown for her work in prisons across the world where she teaches meditation and other pacifying skills to inmates. While all of her energy goes, essentially, into making peace, Ven. Robina herself is quite rabble rouser. With a mouth like a sailor, a piercing gaze, and brazen fondness for calling people out on their BS, experiencing Venerable, I find tends to churn my waters, rather than pacify them. I think this is a good thing though, I think it means that she is teaching me something new, something that I need to hear – but am not necessarily comfortable with yet. It feels like change.

Meeting with Venerable Robina in person after her talk, she told me briefly about her life before becoming a nun, “I was a radical punk, then a radical feminist, then a radical lesbian, then a radical atheist, and then I was a radical punk feminist lesbian atheist, and when I say radical, Hillary, I mean radical. So now I’m a nun.” I like Venerable Robina – honestly, when it comes to nuns, what more could you ask for than a radical punk feminist lesbian atheist?

The overarching theme of Venerable’s teachings that week dealt with the issue of reputation, something it seems she knows a bit about. She spoke specifically about suffering that comes from our attachment to reputation.

In Buddhism there is the belief that we humans suffer in many different ways – one of the main ways though, is attachment. We tend to get attached to stuff – people, places, routines, avocado plants –pretty much anything, – we even get attached to stuff we don't like and we relish complaining and ranting about it. We're like big strips of duct tape –just adhering our minds and bodies to stuff all the time and holding on, believing that what we attach ourselves to will not change.

And such is the nature of the suffering that comes from attachment – we get attached to things, and we get attached to them being a certain way – and then they change, and we don't want them to, and it hurts.

What we are most attached to in our lives is ourselves: the way we are – our face, our job, our strengths, our weakness – we're attached to all of it. Like a long twisted up piece of duct tape, we're just stuck all over ourselves.

We are also attached to our reputation: that is - the person *we think* other people think we are. This is a form of suffering. Why? Because it causes us to resist the change that naturally comes from being alive. We tend to spend our lives within the bounds of prescribed sets of rules that we think make us who we are – be it minister, mother, vegan, or Ivy League student. We find the bounds of our cultural reputation and we try to fit there and stay the same. Because, ah! What will people think if we don't? –What will people think if we change?!

We don't know – and that's really scary. But is just holding on to this hypothetical self - based off what we think other people think and what we think other people want- really a way to live?

Venerable Robina explained attachment to reputation by way of an acorn metaphor. She said we were all like acorns, and that we are all spending our lives trying to be the best, shiniest, hardest, and neatly capped acorn we can possibly be, without ever giving much thought to the fact that acorns are supposed to grow into oak trees. Grand, strong, all weather, fully present and available oak trees.

By being attached to our reputation – and working only to meet the ongoing requirements of that static self, we are ignoring and resisting all the possible selves available to us at any given time on any given day. We are closing and hardening, rather than cracking and sprouting.

While taking on the undemanding project of growing an avocado plant can serve as a great reminder of all the beautiful ways things change, another very simple practice is to just make a fist with our hand.

This is like our attachment to our reputation.

It's hard. It's tight. It feels really powerful right. Hold up your fist for all to see! Make it really tight! Woah! Don't stop! Tighter! Keep holding it – is it starting to kind of get uncomfortable?

What can we do with our fists? We can swing 'em around and pound 'em on stuff – show people how tough we are. Try to pick up a hymnal though and turn a page. What happens when we try to hold someone's hand? Or scratch an itch? What would happen if the only hand gestures we made were with a fists? Would it limit our personality? Our skills? Limit the way people thought about us? Would it influence the points we were trying to make with our words.

Keep holding that fist. Look at it. It's like that acorn we are trying so hard to be. Rock solid, strong, unchanging, no space to let anything unpredictable in.

Now – slowly start to crack your fist open. Feel that physical sensation of letting go. Look at your hand. Fingers fully extended. Move them around a bit. What a beautiful piece of our body. Notice how we can move one at a time, how we can wiggle them really fast, how we can totally relax it and just let it hang limp. Notice how we can also still make a fist if we want, but how we can stop and do something else when that fist becomes uncomfortable.

Like our lives, we can do many things with our hands. Can you imagine if we just used them to make fists? What a waste! How foolish when we can do so much with each individual finger!

Crack open your acorns! And see what sprouts up!

Now, like most of our attachments in life, we are never going to completely free ourselves of our reputation. Arguably, being a little attached to our reputation and what people think of us can have beneficial results – causing us to honor the needs of those around us, the requirements of our daily duties, and the expectations of our beloved communities. We don't need let go of everything, but we also shouldn't hold on to it all too tight.

As I was writing this sermon this weekend, I thought a lot about this time last year. Remember the first week of November last year?

The presidential election was just days away, and I don't know about you, but I was counting down those days, certain in the echo chamber of my liberal enclave that on November 9th, Donald Trump would just go away and at last a woman (with my name!) would be president.

This past year has been strange.

Our theme for this month is abundance, and though the concept fits well with our perennial Thanksgiving festivities, I can't help but think of it in terms of the past year and the abundance of opportunities we all had to crack open and grow –to educate ourselves on racism, immigration, and sexism, and finally begin hear the many marginalized voices who stated repeatedly that this year was no different than any other year for them.

Opportunities to crack open, root down, sprout up, and grow this year were abundant.

Alongside these opportunities for growth however came many excuses to harden. To harden really, really hard. Oooh, I got so angry so often this year, and not in a good and change-making way. I experienced brittle, unfeeling, unchecked anger, that lost all sight of the living, breathing, reality of

other people's lives and needs. It was easy to get attached to this anger, addictive almost, and an exhausting way to live.

So I come to you all this morning, asking, wondering - how can we pay attention to these moments of hardening? And when we feel ourselves start to tighten, to shut out the complexity of the living world around us, how can we get our little acorn of a self to keep cracking open and letting spontaneous, uncertain, sometimes wonderful, sometimes terrible life in?

The same way we get an avocado to sprout, I think, – the same way we do any good work in the world, with love.

Last week during worship we practiced in a loving kindness meditation together. Along with the children, we took deep energizing inhalations of air, and in our exhalations imagined we were sending golden, loving, light into the world. We took many breaths and then repeated the lines –

May you happy,

May you be healthy,

May you live in safety,

May you live with ease, together.

When the headlines are disheartening, when conversations become arguments, when a car goes by with a bumper sticker that says something and sends you through the roof.

I know it sounds cliché, or useless, try taking a breath and holding one of these verses in your mind. And just notice if you soften, ever so slightly. You might not – but you might. And it might feel really good – and powerful.

You could take the advanced method here and direct that loving kindness to the driver of that stupid car, or to that bully of a person who just doesn't get it, or to those politicians implementing whatever terrible new regulation. Or you know, you can start where you are and just work on

taking a breath when you feel yourself checking out and getting upset - and just say one of these lines to yourself. That might be the place that needs love the most, some days.

You could come up with your own loving kindness mantra, even! What a great faith formation assignment! Perhaps we can all share them on a bulletin board this month, showcase the abundance of our loving-kindness efforts in this hard world.

What might your line be? What do you need to hear? What do you need to say to the ever hardening, ever opening world around you?

This November, in the time we spend reflecting on the many forms abundance takes in our lives. I pray that we will be willing always to change, and connect, and re-connect, and re-connect.

I pray that we will be willing always to participate fully in this broken world, hands open to our selves and to others, challenging their thinking, and allowing them to challenge ours.

I pray that we tend to our communities as they crack up, root down, shoot out and become...something different.

And in the meantime, I hope that we all can get together, make some guacamole, and grow some avocado trees.