

YEARNINGS

Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

Dayenu

(Yearning for Happiness)

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
March 28-29, 2009 • Fifth Sunday in Lent
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalms 51:1-12

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be purer than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

***“Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.”***

Psalm 51:8

As Christians and as Americans, we tend to wield our “blessings” loosely. You are never quite sure what is meant by a “blessing.” Is it politeness masquerading as contempt or pity? Is it sincerity laced with sarcasm or fear? One never really knows. For instance, a bright and promising young woman marries a real loser of a guy, and we say “Bless her heart.” A veteran of the War with Iraq returns home struggling with a traumatic brain injury and suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and we say “Bless his heart.” You tell your colleague at work about your brother’s drug addiction, or you tell your neighbor about Bob and Sue, and their recent discovery that their daughter, Samantha, is not a woman anymore, but Sam, and all they say is, “Bless their heart.”

This past week I attended the annual Mayor’s breakfast for the faith leaders over at the Golf Club at Yankee Trace. Mayor Mark Kingseed is always such a kind and gracious and welcoming host. He’s become a trusted friend to me in this community. (Let it be noted today that I have spoken kind and supportive words about a Republican office holder!) Well, no sooner had I walked through the door when I ran into the Rev. John Bradowsky, pastor of the very large Epiphany Lutheran Church on Far Hills Avenue. He is also the “Chaplain” to the City of Centerville. Why we have or need a government appointed “chaplain” here in Centerville, I do not know.

You may remember that Rev. Bradowsky and I sat on “different sides of the aisle” a few years back when the Centerville Washington Diversity Council sponsored an event called “A Community Conversation:

Gay and Lesbian Issues at the Intersection of Faith and Society.” To say the least, we don’t see eye to eye and we have deep differences on these matters. But let be clear, to his credit, Rev. Bradowsky was the *only* minister in this town who was willing to talk about our differences publicly. All of the of the other ministers in this town who are not supportive of the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in the church or in society would not even return phone calls or e-mails seeking their participation in this discussion, or, they conveniently had other things to do on that particular night! Many of these same ministers will pontificate and proclaim the evils of homosexuality from their pulpits, even post their sermons to their web pages, but they don’t have the guts to enter into a public dialogue outside the safety and control their little kingdom. Rev. Bradowsky was not one of them. He gladly welcomed the invitation for public discourse. He is certainly a minister confident in his convictions. And on top of all of that, he is a personable and winsome man.

When I ran into Rev. Bradowsky at the Mayor’s Breakfast, he reached out his hand and welcomed me with a gracious smile. As he shook my hand he said to me, “Bless you” or something close to that. Of course, all I heard was “Bless your heart!” I really don’t know exactly what he meant by those words of greeting, but knowing our recent history together, I felt like he was politely saying, with great piety I might add, “Bless your heart, you poor, misguided, gay man who thinks he is a Christian minister.” But whatever he meant, or whatever his intentions were, it just didn’t feel right. And although his words were polite and sincere, I didn’t feel *blessed* by him!

Jewish wisdom has a very different notion about blessing. Rabbi Kula notes that the word for “blessing” was first used by a desert people. Imagine the experience of coming across a reservoir of water in the middle of a barren wilderness and then kneeling before that pool to drink fully. The ancient Israelites saw water as a blessing, and blessing as a spring of happiness. So the word for blessing was born of a sensual yearning, out of thirst and the wonder that comes from quenching it. In other words, the pool is a symbol of life itself, and blessing connects us to the energy current that sustains us.

In Hebrew, the blessings are called “blessings of enjoyment.” Pleasure is God manifested... Blessings are a way of contextualizing pleasure, a reminder of the source of everything. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote beautifully about this: “When we drink a glass of water, we remind ourselves of the eternal mystery of creation, ‘Blessed are You...by whose word all things came into being,’ whether a trivial act or a supreme miracle. When we wish to eat bread or fruit, to enjoy a pleasant fragrance or a cup of wine...on noticing trees when they blossom; on meeting a sage in Torah or in secular learning, we are taught to evoke Him great name and our awareness of Him...This is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living; to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.

The *practice* of blessing is designed to raise our consciousness to the good things that are all around us; to celebrate the beautiful and the delightful and the pleasurable with great intention. Blessings are offered to stir in us a profound appreciation for the good that is before us and provoke in us an even more powerful yearning that goes beyond us. From the mundane to the extraordinary, blessings are to be named and celebrated. And if possible, blessings are to be said *before* we indulge, not after, so as to give us a shot of gratitude as a way of enhancing the pleasurable experience as we are having it. We bring the anticipated pleasure to the front of our consciousness in order to feel it fully and bring intention to the act of satisfying it.

And in Jewish practice, blessings are said for all things pleasurable, from putting on a new pair of jeans, “Blessed are You who cloths the naked,” to eating an exquisite piece of bread with melting butter, “Blessed are You who feed the whole world.” There is even a blessing for going to the bathroom, “Blessed are You, who fashions the human body with wisdom and created in him orifices...and completely knows that if one of these holes or orifices should open all the way or close all the way we would not be able to live or stand before You who heals all bodies in wondrous ways.” Rabbi Kula said his grandmother would say, “Eat, sleep, eliminate!” remembering that it is all blessed! Blessings are numerous because the goodness of life should never be taken for granted, so that all good things are recognized as a source of joy and happiness. Blessings abound for waking, for standing up straight, for walking, even for seeing a crowd of people, “Oh, my God, look how many stories there are!” Seeing life in all of its fullness, in all of its awe, beauty, wonder, and surprise are all deeply pleasurable.

I was particularly struck (agitated is more like it) by Rabbi Kula's discussion about food. He said that eating offers a great opportunity to practice the intentionality of blessing and living into the sense of enough. Kula says

We are meant to be gourmets, not gourmands. When we exclaim over the chocolate, "Oh, it's divine!" it really is. But if we immediately take another piece, the pleasure will decrease. A gourmet is enthusiastic – which means infused with God's spirit. A gourmand can never get enough. When we don't savor, we want more.

He then goes on to say

A doctor friend of mine refers to the practice of blessing as a satiation diet. He calls the epidemic of obesity in this country "malnutrition of happiness." ...I find it hopeful that the latest research is showing that nutrition is not about low fat or high protein. It's about feeling full. In other words, it's about feeling blessed.

After reading those words, and knowing that I need to lose a number of pounds, I wanted to say "Well, bless his heart!"

Friday evening, we gathered in this very room to watch the movie *Life is Beautiful*. The film won three Oscars and has received numerous other awards. I had never seen this film before. I had heard many people speak highly of it and I was excited to see it. The film is in Italian with English subtitles. After we had all shared in a delicious meal prepared by our resident Italian, Liz Roaden, and after we offered our own words of blessing, "Blessed are You who allows us to enjoy Liz's spaghetti, homemade meatballs and bread," we got some popcorn ("Blessed are You for the wonder and joy of popcorn!") and then settled into our comfortable chairs to watch the movie. The film began with these words:

This is a simple story, but not an easy one to tell.
Like a fable, there is sorrow,
and like a fable, it is full of wonder and happiness.

I said to myself, "Happiness!" There it is. This is a perfect film! Our theme for this weekend of Lent is "Yearning for Happiness." I offered a blessing to our Lenten film series selection committee who obviously had done an outstanding job of pairing this movie with our theme. So right from the beginning of the film, I was hooked.

The film is set in the late 1930's in Italy. A Jewish man and poet named Guido is full of life and happiness and uses his unmasked joy of life and cunning wit to win over an Italian schoolteacher named Dora. Dora was set to marry another man, but Guido ended up whisking her away on a green horse (don't ask!). Guido and Dora live happily in Guido's uncle's home, bringing up their 5 year old son, Joshua.

World War II rages without interrupting their life too much until one fateful day when the Germans arrest Guido and his son and transfer them to a concentration camp. Dora demands to be taken too, thus Guido is devastated to see his non-Jewish wife board the train.

Protecting his son from the unthinkable truth of what is happening, Guido tells Joshua that they are just on a big holiday, and he turns the camp into a big game for Joshua, claiming that they must win 1000 points to win a real tank for a prize and leave. Guido must complete "tasks" for the camp "moderators" (i.e. the Nazi SS), while avoiding the impending fate with everything he can offer. His quick thinking saves Joshua from the truth when a German officer requires a translator. Despite not speaking a word of German, Guido steps forward and makes up a story from the German officer's body language, claiming that tanks, scoreboards and games of Hide and Seek litter the camp, while cleverly stating that Joshua cannot cry, ask for his mother or declared he's hungry, resulting in the loss of the "game."

Joshua later refuses to take a shower, and unknowingly escapes being gassed, so Guido hides him with the help of other Italian prisoners, since there are no other children left.

Throughout the movie, Guido even finds ways to send beautiful messages of love and hope to his wife Dora, who is kept a prisoner on the other side of the camp.

With the help of Guido's former German friend, Herr Lessing, Guido is able to hide Joshua amongst the German children, while waiting tables for the German Officer's meals. With the days becoming steadily

worse, Guido realizes that time is short and that he must make certain sacrifices if his son is ever to see the tanks roll over the hills, and be reunited with his mother.

Joshua is at times pessimistic, and doesn't believe that there are any real tanks or games, but Guido's abounding joy and energy convince Joshua to keep playing the game with gusto. On that final night, when the Nazi's are preparing to flee the concentration camp because the American's are coming, Guido risks his own life to hide Joshua in a junction box for the last time, telling him that everyone is really looking for him because they all know he is about to be the winner of the game.

And then, in a failed attempt to free Dora, Guido is led away to his death. But even as he is being led away at gunpoint, Guido has to pass by the box where Joshua is hiding. Guido sees his son peeking out of the box and gives him a happy wink and then begins to march on in a silly, animated, toy soldier, playful sort of way. The boy laughs as if he is in on the joke and knows he is really about to win the game. But Guido is led away and killed.

The next morning, after the Nazi's have fled, and after the remaining Jewish folk in the concentration camp begin to limp away in stunned silence, Joshua immerses from the box, alone. And soon the Americans burst into the seemingly deserted camp, led by a tank. When Joshua sees the tank, his face lights up and he shouts with joy, "It's true." He has won the game, just like his dad had said. The American soldier motions Joshua to climb up on the tank and Joshua rides out of the concentration camp triumphant. Along the way, Joshua spots his mother, they are reunited, and the film closes with these plain and simple words:

"This is my story.
This is the sacrifice my father made.
This was his gift to me."

Of course by now, I, and everyone around me, was bawling. We all sat in silence for a long time. I couldn't help but think about how terrible this story was and yet, how beautiful it was. The film left you with the extreme of both perspectives...both feelings. And I couldn't help but ask, "What is this gift that Guido left Joshua?" What is this blessing that Joshua could name, even years later as he told his story that shone forth in spite of such a horrible and tragic experience? And the words of the psalmist rang in my ears, "*Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*" (Psalm 51:8)

Now let me be clear: I don't think for a moment that God caused the pain and horror of the Holocaust, or any other kind pain or horror for that matter. But there is this truth, that joy and happiness is found in the midst of our pain and suffering and difficulty and messiness of life, never apart from it.

Happiness is never something we seek after. If we do, we find that it escapes us. Or, as Kula noted in the research of John Stuart Mill, the search for happiness for its own sake "is one of the chief sources of unhappiness." Happiness is not just a mood or an emotion, but a profound and intentional connection to the world. It doesn't depend on feeling good and life being without its problems, pains or worries, but it is an ability to reflect on and to name what is worthwhile and good in life. And the messy truth of the matter is that "there is not happiness without sadness; no pleasure without pain; no fullness without loss. They are inseparable."

And for Jews, this is always made clear at a Jewish wedding. At the very end of this most joyous of Jewish celebrations, a glass is stomped on and shattered as a reminder of the destruction of the ancient temple in Jerusalem and the fragility of everything precious in life. When the sound of the glass breaking is heard, all those celebrating the marriage ceremony erupt with shouts of "Mazel tov!" or "Good luck!" Thus marriage begins with the notion that the brokenness of life must always be brought into the circle of joy. Happiness is about embracing the cycle of life, in all of its ups and downs, and experiencing it to the full. It's about naming blessings and savoring them for all their worth, even in the midst of sadness and brokenness, trusting that the goodness and blessings that are named and experienced, are enough... more than enough to sustain the day.

In Jewish tradition, there is a song that is sung at every Passover seder. It is called "*Dayenu*," which means "it is enough for us." Rabbi Kula says

The song is a remarkable and deceptively simple teaching about embracing the present, while having a keen awareness of the past and yearning for the future. It's about feeling longing and gratitude; triumph and tragedy. It's about celebrating every single step along the way and yet fiercely longing for the fulfillment of one's dream.

The song acknowledges fifteen major Biblical events, asking us to sing *dayenu* after each one. If God had brought us out of Egypt but not divided the sea for us, *dayenu*; it would have been enough for us. If God had led us to Mt. Sinai but there had been no encounter, *dayenu*; it would have been enough for us. If we had had the encounter at Sinai, but had not made it through the desert, *dayenu*; it would have been enough for us.

And on it goes. As I watched the film *Life is Beautiful*, all I could think was *dayenu*:

"This is my story.
This is the sacrifice my father made.
This was his gift to me."

Dayenu. It was enough.

Rabbi Kula adds,

The song can be sung multiple ways: with joy and gusto – *dayenu* as a declarative, an affirmation that every moment in life is a gift, that it really is enough; or slowly and mournfully—*dayenu* as resignation that, given the cycle of life, it would have to be enough. Or as a protest—it's not enough! *Dayenu* also can be a question; would it ever be enough for us? There's an inherent tension and edginess in the song—there's both comfort and challenge... "*Dayenu*" urges us to go for it, to long for the ultimate and to know that regardless of what happens, every step along the way is enough. When we become proficient at gratitude and longing, when we experience the fullness of *dayenu*—as affirmation, lament, protest, and question—our happiness will be so much richer and more real.

I have been wondering this week, how would I sing *dayenu*? How would I name and appreciate the steps along my journey? How would I sing my story and craft my myths? How would I name that all that has happened in my life is a cause for deeper joy and gratitude? How will I live so that I center myself in the joy and energy of life and not be afraid to risk, to venture on, to yearn?

Here's my attempt at my own *Dayenu*:

Had God brought me out of the land of Southern Baptists to the place of freedom and wholeness, of being "out" and honest, without allowing me to serve another day as a minister in Christ's church –
It would have been enough!

Had God led me to the extravagant welcome of the United Church of Christ and to the task of starting a new congregation with a few friends who were committed to the dream without ever seeing that dream come to pass—
It would have been enough!

Had God allowed me to learn and grow beyond fundamentalism through seminary and to finally discover the energy and passion of a more progressive, life-giving Christian faith without ever having a community of faith by which to share that faith—
It would have been enough!

Had God allowed me to enjoy the gifts and graces and messiness of marriage to Dan Carl without us ever receiving all the rights and privileges afforded by the government for marriage –
It will have been enough!

Had God led Dan and I into a relationship without the wonder and struggle of raising children –
It would have been enough!

Had God allowed me to be out and proud, to be a partner, and a parent and a pastor as an openly gay man, without my parents love and acceptance all along the way –
It would have been enough!

If God allows me to serve as pastor of this church for God only knows how many years and we never meet our budget or accomplish all that we hope and dream, and I never get a salary that reaches “Conference Guidelines” –
It is enough!

If God allows to us to only dwell in this building as a church and we never get to expand to a building that is architecturally stunning, aesthetically delicious, and big enough to do all that we want and need to do –
It is enough!

If I don't get to see full equality and justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in my lifetime; if I only get to say what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And [God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm **happy**, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any [one]. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;”
if that is all I get to say and see –
It is enough!

If I stop right here and never add another verse to the list of blessings and goodness of my life—
it will be enough! *Dayenu!*

Well, I've said and sung enough for now! I think you get the point.

But I am wondering, how would *you* sing your *Dayenu*?