

Sermon, Reading and Meditation for September 15, 2024

By Magdalen Lindeberg

MEDITATION

What if There is No Need to Change, by Oriah Mountain Dreamer
What if there is no need to change?
No need to try to transform yourself
Into someone who is more compassionate, more present, more loving, or wise?
How would that affect all the places in your life where you are endlessly trying to be better?
What if the task is simply to unfold,
To become who you already are in your essential nature:
Gentle, compassionate, and capable of living fully and passionately present?
What if the question is not
'Why am I so infrequently the person who I really want to be?'
But 'Why do I infrequently want to be the person I really am?'
How would this change what you think you have to learn?
What if becoming who and what we truly are happens not through striving and trying
But by recognising and receiving the people and places and practices
That are for us the warmth of encouragement we need to unfold?
How would this shape the choices you make about how to spend today?
What if you knew that the impulse to move in a way that creates beauty in the world
Will arise from deep within
And guide you every time you simply pay attention
And wait.
How would this shape your stillness, your movement,
Your willingness to follow this impulse
To just let go
And dance?

READING

As the world fights to figure
everything out, I'll be holding doors
for strangers, letting people cut in
front of me in traffic, saying good
morning, keeping babies entertained
in grocery lines, stopping to talk to
someone who is lonely, tipping
generously, waving at police, sharing
food, giving children a thumbs-up,

being patient with sales clerks,
smiling at passersby, and buying a
stranger a cup of coffee.
WHY? Because I will not stand to live
in a world where love is invisible.
Join me in showing kindness,
understanding, and judging less.
Be kind to a stranger, give grace to
friends who are having a bad day, be
forgiving with yourself.
If you can't find kindness, BE
Kindness.

SERMON

This past August Keith and I took a trip to Maine and on the return trip stopped in Boothbay Harbor. We were sitting at an outdoor restaurant surrounded by other summer people eating lobster when a patron walked by in a tee shirt carrying the words "Do your job". I later discovered that this is a reference to the New England Patriots. But in that moment lacking context it struck me as a really profound question. What is my job??? Had I been at work I would have looked at my to-do list for the day and had an immediate answer. But in Maine, on vacation, it felt like a profound question. Here I am. At age 58. Planet earth in the fall of 2024. WHAT is my job?? What am I being called to do?

Our nation and our world feel so unsettled right now. Changing climate, fraying of our social fabric, violent conflicts around the world that are causing almost unimaginable suffering, and an upcoming election with enormous implications for the future direction of our country. I'm hesitant to call this unprecedented. My early experience was shaped by the cold war, the 70s energy crisis, and Richard Nixon's attempts to undermine our democracy. But what feels different this time is the sheer scale of the information coming at us, the speed of with which things are changing, and how inescapable it all feels.

This year we are once again using the Soul Matters themes to shape our Sunday services and the theme for this month, as Jens said, is INVITATION. That word really appeals to me as another way of looking at my job. Not just asking my job but what I am being invited to be or invited to do. It reminds me that I have agency no matter what is happening around me. When I reframe the cacophany of voices, events, information as invitations I can center my inherent right to accept or decline. What invitations do I choose to accept? Where do I choose to engage and how?

Last week we drove to Syracuse and back three times because of various family travel. On one of these drives I was really really astonished by the bumper stickers I was seeing on the other vehicles on traveling with us on route 81. Multiple vehicles had bumper stickers using the F word. F "insert name". F your feelings. And then the ultimate – an illuminated hand with the middle finger extended that the driver flicked on while passing us. My family members thought it was preferable to honking, but I was

like, that's not the point! We're on a highway of the enraged! I could feel my blood boil - F*** my feelings? Well F*** YOUR feelings! And everyone like you in your blankety blank blank trucks!!

I could feel that invitation to let my own rage loose. It can feel so energizing in the moment and hard to decline the invitation to leap into the cultural rage machine whether on the highway or on social media.

So what is my job in world where drivers on the highway are telling me my feelings don't matter? For one, I can still choose the constructive anger that fuels genuine change. Psychologist Bill Crawford makes the distinction between rage and constructive anger moral outrage:

"Rage is an out of control, primal reaction that can have us making decisions that we would not recommend to someone we love. Moral outrage or constructive anger is a natural, normal, healthy response to an outrageous event. The opposite of apathy or indifference, it can serve as the foundation from which we work for real and lasting change."

To paraphrase some of Crawford's writing, A sense of moral outrage invites us to make choices that are purposeful and effective. And probably most importantly, consistent with the person we want to be – in my case I really don't want to be the person hurling profanities at other drivers on the highway. And that is not the person I want to model for my children.

On two of our trips to Syracuse, I spent the time writing get out the vote postcards to Georgia (which I got from Liz Einstein) while Keith drove. Its pretty tedious, but it is far more aligned with the person I strive to be, than raging at bumper stickers or on social media.

So I ask again, what is my job in world where drivers on the highway are telling me my feelings don't matter? More fundamental than constructive anger, this is an invitation to connect, to tend and nurture our social fabric one strand at a time in whatever way we can. Do I always feel like doing that? No! It can be a real struggle sometimes to see the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. But I don't want to stop reaching for that goal.

After dropping our son off at the Amtrack station in Syracuse, we went to the large farmer's market that is just a couple blocks away. If you haven't gone there, I highly recommend it. Fall produce was at its peak in addition to cheese, local meat and prepared food. Shoppers and vendors speaking in many languages. Keith stopped to talk with an Amish cheese seller we'd met before - raving about the cheese and talking about his business model. A woman who raised red deer filled us in on raising them as a low fat grass fed meat source. We walked back to the car with a lot of cheese, a small amount of venison, corn, peppers, and tomatoes, following a woman majestically swathed in African fabric, balancing a 20 lb bag of apples on her head. Strands of community coming together to celebrate the bounty of a beautiful fall day in upstate New York

One of things I most value about our community here is that it is both a place – a sanctuary to invite others and accept the invitation to be our best selves. A place to find

paths for directly our moral anger without losing ourselves to rage. A place to practice creating new connections and strengthening old ones.

A few weeks ago I went to a gathering at work. A young fellow across the room brightened and walked over to me. "I'm so glad to see you. You were the first person who greeted me when my mom dropped me off on campus and I didn't know how to get where I was going. I mention this not because my action was special – in fact, I had no memory of this person at all. But it reminded me of the significance of small gestures wherever we live and work.

Connection doesn't always require words and conversation (my disclaimer for introverts). We can weave and strengthen the bonds that connect us by sharing of ourselves and our diverse gifts - by art, music, feeding one another, working together. That evening in Maine, after dinner we walk through Boothbay Harbor looking to escape the bustle of tourists, restaurants, and t-shirt shops, when I heard the sound of music a couple blocks away, and discovered a community band playing out on the steps of the town hall. The band was around 20 people – lots of gray hair with the exception of the drummer who looked about 13 and was doing a surprisingly good job given that he was staring up at the evening sky. And they were playing "Stand by Me", sharing their gift of music and inviting a growing crowd of passers by to stop and share a moment of connection with strangers.

CLOSING WORDS

The Richness of Our Differences (Julianne Lepp)

We seek our place in the world

and the answers to our hearts' deep questions.

As we seek, may our hearts be open to unexpected answers.

May we be reminded that all beings are whole, sacred and worthy.

Let our hearts be welcoming of multiple truths,

not holding hard or fast to closed mindedness or judgmental thinking.

What can we learn from each other in the richness of our differences?

May the heart of compassion help us recognize the sacred in each other and bridge differences in these challenging times.

May each of us be held in relationship, accountability and the power of beloved community.

This is our job. This is the invitation extended to us