

A Sermon given by Rev. Peaches Gillette titled "Hope Often Chooses Us" at First Unitarian Society of Ithaca, December 14, 2025

Sometimes I feel I have to apologize when I speak and when I listen, thinking perhaps I invest too much emotion into my words, always wanting them to feel thoughtful and not superficial at all.

This is not because I can't be humorous, lighthearted, or even "kitchy," and comical, but because I consistently think about the human condition as it has manifested throughout history and as it is in our present day. The empathic part of who I am, the truths I see, and the day-to-day suffering of individuals and numberless others, never leave my mind.

The other day, I watched an old movie, made in the 90s, set in the late 70s, called "Sleepers"—a movie as closely based on a true story as possible. It was about four boys from an area of Manhattan called Hell's Kitchen. Hell's Kitchen In the 1970s was a particularly tough, working-class neighborhood in Manhattan, known for its Irish-American roots, mob crime, extreme poverty, and gang activity. The boys' lives were very hard as they dealt with the harshness of the area, the self-hate of their parents and an era where the rights of women, "their mothers," and children were just beginning to pass through the most turbulent part of the "eye of the storm."

The boys - "street boys," altar boys - ended up pulling a prank on a hotdog cart vendor that ended in a criminal tragedy. The boys, ranging in age between 12 and 16, were sent to reform school where they endured every manner of brutalization from the male guards including rape, being burned with cigarettes, severe beatings, starvation, and solitary confinement. There was no help for them, no concrete, realistic vision for a better life. Young

boys, lost in a darkness, an actual “hell” from which they could see nothing, nothing hopeful or reminiscent of life as we all want it to be. The movie, like I said, was a true horror story, it reminded me of the countless numbers of women, girls, and boys sold and trafficked.

I think, as the person I am, as an ordained, educated, trained, veteran chaplain, what could I have said to them. Whatever I would say, would not be any type of catchy greeting card-like phrase.

My personal experiences and my experiences as a witness to the merciless, emotional, psychological, physical pain of others make it very difficult for me to think only from within my relatively privileged and comfortable life as it is now.

As I take in world news, struggle with the foster care system, watch my grandsons move from the physical abuse of their home into the dreadful, negligent abuse of another broken system run by the state, and watch them struggle to remember what love felt like, or speaking with elderly people whose bridges between them and their adult children are burnt while one illness piles onto another, no matter what their ages, as if suffering never takes a day off, I am intensely moved.

These experiences also make me aware that nothing in our safety, our comfort, or our freedoms are necessarily guaranteed.

Perhaps when I speak, I take my own words too seriously. I want my love, my empathy, my compassion to feel meaningful and relevant, taking into consideration the specific circumstances of others, and who they are as people. I am not talking about politeness, but meaningfulness.

If I don't know what someone is going through, I want to find out within the moment or over time. I want to be able to customize what I say to the particular person.

My mind, my thoughts immediately encompass the broader spaces in the world and the cracks that people fall into and the complexities of life in general.

So I must confess, when I hear expressions like "Choosing Hope," I balk and ask who is our audience for such an expression? Are we thinking broadly with our considerate lyrical ways? Are we making others feel we care deeply about the details of their lives? Do we want to?

Do not misunderstand me. Our expressions of kindness and caring have their places, but at times they need to stretch further into the reality of who each person is. And, when we think about the epidemic of loneliness and hopelessness that is rampant in this world, maybe we need to revisit how we speak as a loving caring community, a faith community, trying to invite people into our hearts.

Here is a poem by Megan Minutillo:

Our Words Matter.

When we're little, we're taught
the golden rule. *To treat others
the way we want to be treated.*
To choose words with kindness,
or not to say anything at all.
We're taught this not to stifle,
or manipulate, or try to mimic
some other person's thought —
we're taught this because our
words matter.
Our words matter.

It matters what passes our lips
when we speak to another soul;
The phrases we choose, the way
we say it, the utterances that flee
our lips in times of stress, and
excitement and joy and despair
and anger all matter.

It matters when you spew fiction
over fact, hate over love, and
fear over hope. When you do this,
you light the flame of destruction
on parched ground.

When you do this, you invoke
paranoia, and disillusion, and
chaos and violence.

When you do this, you do not
cause a mere divide, you seek
to deepen a chasm of destruction
and hate.

Our words matter.

So when you see democracy attacked,
what words will you choose? When
you see hatred scaling the walls, and
ripping down flags, and seeking to
cause chaos and despair, what will
you say?

Our words matter.

They have always mattered. And
even as the dust settles, and the
fire ceases to burn, and the hearts
remain broken — the words you
choose to speak matter.

What words will you choose?

Here is a collection of Motivational Mantras, or slogans:

Be happy.

Don't worry.

Find your joy.

Never give up.

Be your best self.

Just do it.

Keep smiling.

Create your own sunshine.

Always stay present.

Choose hope.

We should all write for Hallmark.

There are worlds and conditions that people live under where there are no choices. I know it is hard to imagine, but I am referring to the defining of the decision, gathering a list of possibilities, weighing the pros and cons, envisioning the future, the better future.

Hope for some is simply waiting for some outside force to break their torment. They wait for something other than pain and death to enter to relieve their torture. Sometimes, only death becomes their savior.

Often the motivational mantras we use can cause greater despair by making people feel they are failures in not attaining a sense of positivity. They are to blame for not putting affirmation into action, that they are not living up to the optimistic standard that most people seem to live up to.

OF COURSE use kind mantras, just don't allow them to be the only way you relate to another. Authentic words of caring are the cornerstone of beautiful relationships and effective, thoughtful, compassionate communities.

Our words are a bridge that allows access into one another's lives. They matter. We all matter. Use your words wisely and with great concern for those who are waiting.