

October 19, 2025, A Sermon by Rev. Janet Shortall titled “Tending the Hearth of Compassion.”

Opening Words:

As we arrive in this space,
let us set down what concerns or worries we've been carrying.
Feel the steadiness of the ground beneath you,
the breath that brings us here.
Together, we kindle a quiet place of care—
a hearth of compassion that lives within and among us.

Meditation:

Tending the Hearth of Compassion
In the quiet glow of embered flame,
we gather—
hands outstretched,
hearts leaning toward warmth.
This hearth is not built of stone,
but of patience,
of listening,
of the steady work of love.
Take a breath and notice the quiet fire
within you.
Even if you feel numb or weary in these
times,
know that a single spark—
a soft thought, a gentle act—
Here, every small kindness
is another log laid gently,
another spark encouraged to live.
Even when the fire flickers low,
the breath of care revives it,
reminding us
that compassion is not a gift we give once,
but a fire we tend together—
day by day,
soul by soul.

Return to it again and again,
and let its warmth meet you,
and through you, the world.

Reading: From “For One Who Is Exhausted” by John O’Donohue

When the rhythm of the heart becomes hectic,
Time takes on the strain until it breaks;
Then all the unattended stress falls in
On the mind like an endless, increasing weight.
Weariness invades your spirit.
Gravity begins falling inside you,
Dragging down every bone.
...Take refuge in your senses, open up
To all the small miracles you rushed through.
Become inclined to watch the way of rain
When it falls slow and free.
Imitate the habit of twilight,
Taking time to open the well of color
That fostered the brightness of day.
Draw alongside the silence of stone
Until its calmness can claim you.
Be excessively gentle with yourself.
...Gradually, you will return to yourself,
Having learned a new respect for your heart
And the joy that dwells far within slow time.

Sermon: Tending the Hearth of Compassion

This summer and fall have brought a series of personal losses in quick succession, leaving me feeling disoriented—and at times—drained of energy and focus.

I know I'm not alone in this.
Many of us have felt the heaviness of this season—
through personal grief,
and through the strain of a harsh political climate
where cruelty seems to prevail,
and uncertainty feels ever-present.
Our private sorrows intertwine
with a deeper ache for the world—
for the fraying threads of democracy,
of compassion,
of our shared humanity.

And yet—even in the midst of this heaviness—
the world continues to offer quiet mercies.
The gold and crimson beauty that envelops us this time of year,
the deep peace of living in our beautiful region—
these are small sanctuaries of beauty and rest.
For a while, I've felt gratitude and stillness settle in my spirit.

But soon enough, the heart reminds us—
sorrow and splendor live side by side.
Just as I begin to find my rhythm again,
grief rises unexpectedly,
demanding my attention once more.
At times, I've felt called to step back from community—
not out of rejection, but as an act of care.
A turning inward—toward silence and stillness.
There is sacred power in that withdrawal.
Solitude opens space for the spirit to breathe,
to listen deeply,
to gather strength for the days ahead.

And yet—healing also asks us to return.
To sit among others, to be held in the kindness of presence.
At our water service in September, grief came suddenly—
fierce, cleansing—a grace I hadn't known I was longing for.
And in that circle of care, something in me was set free.

Since then, I've carried that lesson gently:
that we need both—the quiet of solitude
and the embrace of community—
and the wisdom to know when each is needed.
It is this rhythm of turning inward and reaching outward
that sustains us through seasons of beauty and burden—
held together by one another, and by the living world that restores us.

I've seen that same rhythm at work in the lives of my sons.
Both live in Chicago—their beautiful city under siege.
They are deeply troubled by the violence and unrest around them
and have been discerning how to respond in ways that honor both their wellbeing and
their desire to help.
One son and his partner have joined mutual aid efforts—
bringing meals to neighbors too frightened or too vulnerable to step outside—
even to walk their dogs—while tending carefully to their own limits.
My younger son, whose coworkers are mostly Latine immigrants,
plans to join a protest at the Broadview ICE facility this week.
Yesterday, they—and everyone they know—
were among more than a hundred thousand
who filled the streets of downtown Chicago.
Each of us must remember:
generosity of spirit must be grounded in self-awareness.
Care for the world and care for the self
are not opposing calls—but parts of the same sacred practice.

The truth is—none of us is untouched by the weight of these times.
Each of us, sooner or later, comes to the edge of our own strength.
The body has its limits.
The heart, too, can only hold so much
before it must rest and release.
Even the most steadfast among us
bend beneath the strain of grief and exhaustion.
This isn't something to overcome—
because our need for healing is part of our design.

It cannot be rushed.
It moves in its own rhythm.
And so—patience becomes the quiet grace we must learn to trust.
A gentleness that keeps us from hardening into despair.
It reminds us to rest before we are spent,
to breathe before we break,
to listen to what our bodies and spirits ask for—
and to honor those needs without guilt or haste.
In doing so, we safeguard ourselves
from the slow burn of exhaustion,
and we make room for healing to take root
in its own time.

The natural world teaches us
that renewal always waits beneath the surface.
The breath we cannot hold forever—
will always, eventually, release itself.
I love the image of fire that looks like ash,
yet still holds hidden embers.
With time, with care, with rest—
those embers glow again,
and the flame rises.
This is the rhythm of life pulsing in us:
contraction and release,
emptiness and renewal,
heartbreak and the stirring of hope.
With rest and healing,
our capacity to re-engage returns—
naturally, like breath itself—as surely as flame rekindled from embers.
Our heartbreak, then, is not an obstacle to overcome,
but a vital ingredient in our lives.
Heartbreak opens us to deeper compassion—
to tenderness that connects us more fully

with one another, and with the world.

Rest gives us strength

to live with that tenderness

without being consumed by it.

When we practice generosity with ourselves—

offering space, kindness, and rest—

we create the conditions for healing.

The ember glows. The heart breathes again.

Hope rises quietly from beneath the weight of sorrow.

Even grief carries within it

the seed of beginning.

We live in times that ask much of us.

Each week brings new griefs,

new demands, new urgencies.

No wonder we sometimes feel overwhelmed,

or afraid, or disconnected.

Mary Oliver names this ache:

“Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.”

Her words remind us

that our inner lives must be given space

to tell the truth.

When my inner fire burns low,

I look to the courage of others for solace.

Their witness reminds me

that even in darkness,

new life may be forming.

As Valarie Kaur writes,

what feels like the end

may in fact be

the labor of a new beginning.

Her words help me trust

that grief and hope can coexist—

and that resistance itself can be a source of power,

sustaining us when inspiration feels distant.

Perhaps many of you

who took to the streets yesterday

felt that same power—

knowing that millions across our country

joined in solidarity.

Hope does not blaze alone.

It becomes a living fire

when we carry it together.

Tending fire is a collective act—
each person strengthened
by the shared responsibility of care.
I return to the image of the hearth:
not one great blaze,
but a steady, enduring fire
that warms and sustains.
Some may remember—
in 2008— when our town was visited
by the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers,
elders devoted to Earth, to human rights, and to peace.
During their visit,
people gathered in shifts, day and night,
to keep a sacred fire burning—
a living symbol of life's continuity,
community devotion, and spiritual guidance.
That shared flame teaches us
that tending the fire
is not a test of strength,
but an act of devotion—
a quiet, steady presence.
So too our inner fire depends
on care and connection.
It lives through attention and trust,
through our willingness to return,
to breathe,
to notice—
even when the light feels small.

Friends—
I know some of you may be listening
and feeling depleted.
Weary of words,
weary of carrying more,
weary even of trying to care.
If that is you,
hear this: numbness is not failure.
It is your heart's way of protecting itself until tenderness can return.
Even if your fire feels like a hidden ember,
know that it still lives within you.
And here— no one is asked to tend the fire alone.
Yesterday, I witnessed truth in motion—
song, laughter, and steady steps
reawakening our spirits

and renewing our resolve.

We were not only inspired—

but equipped—

given real, practical ways

to rejoin the work of love and justice.

Hope does not blaze alone.

It becomes a living fire

when we carry it together.

This is why we gather: to share the keeping of the flame,

to trust that when one grows weary, another will tend.

The strength we seek is not solitary, but shared— a living current of love

moving through us all.

Together— we keep tending the fragile flame of hope.

May it be so.

Closing words: Hearth of Compassion

May the quiet flame within you

find shelter in your heart.

Let every act of kindness

feed its warmth,

for you and those nearby.

When embers fade,

remember—a single glow

is enough to begin again.

May compassion rise in you,

steady as breath,

strong as love,

warming the world wherever you go.