

SERMON FOR TJMC UU MARCH 29, 2020 by Rev. Alexandra McGee, MDiv, BCC

“Elephants and Birds: Truth-telling, Comfort, and Generosity”

Good morning everyone!

You’ve found the video sermon created for March 29 for the UU congregation in Charlottesville. I’m Rev. Alex McGee, serving as Assistant Minister.

CHALICE LIGHTING

I will begin with our chalice lighting. This is the chalice lighting that I wrote for the community during this time when the decision was made a few weeks ago to close church’s shared worship in physical space. *Light.*

May this light of love give us comfort.

May this light of hope help us dwell creatively in the present moment.

May this light of truth help us act wisely for the common good.

STORY

The story for today can also be found in a video on our website, acted out in SpiritPlay style with felt characters, led by Caroline Heins. You might enjoy watching that, too! She created that for our young children who are coping in their own ways, and the story’s wisdom relates to this message which I’ve created for adults dealing with complex and painful issues these days.

The story is of the blind mice living in the jungle, enjoying the local pond each day. But one day something mysterious arrives and they leave in fear. Each day, one of the blind mice ventures forth to investigate what might this thing be. Each day, each one comes back with a different report, but each equally sure of what they felt. Each comes back with different types of caution or encouragement:

“It is a rope, there’s no problem.”

“It is a spear---sharp and dangerous.”

“It is a cliff---very confusing in the middle of the pond.”

“It is a tree trunk---we’ll be okay.”

“It is a large flappy old palm leaf—don’t worry.”

The mice were not sure what do do with all these confusing different reports. Each of them knew what they had felt.

Then, one of the wise old mice ventured out to the pond and realized it was a living creature.

The wise old mouse spoke, and said “Can you tell me what you are?”

“Yes, my friend, I am an elephant. Some creatures think my tail is a rope; some think my large body is a cliff; my tusks seem like spears; my ears can feel like large palm leaves; and some have said my legs seem like tree trunks to them.”

And that is the tale of how the blind mice in the jungle learned about many different parts of the truth, many different perspectives, many different feelings making up one whole.

DIFFERENT TRUTHS

We, too, are like the blind mice in the jungle. In recent weeks, each of us has felt different things, each a piece of the whole truth about this challenging time.

For example, when we heard the call to “Stay Home” to slow the spread of the virus, we can ask what does the word “home” mean?

Some people are living in an institution against their will and will be staying there, virus or not. Some people do not have an easy choice to stay home if they are to fulfill their commitment as medical workers or food providers or cleaning spaces for others.

Some people are in a stage of life where they are in-between homes.

Children may find home a safe place, or not.

There are many truths to the reality of what home means.

So, when we say “Stay Home” perhaps we can replace it with “Be as safe as you can.”

As another example, when we heard the mandate to simply stay close to family, we can ask what family is.

Again, if a person is living in an institution, they were already probably separated from family. Or, some have chosen to live in large communal groups or to live a life of solitude, such that family isn’t a clear framework for them.

Some families are living split, or in the process of splitting, or in the process of reconciling.

Some farmworkers are in the fields harvesting food and living in barracks, and creating temporary family.

There are many definitions of family.

I encourage us to listen for the many aspects of the reality of what it means to prevent the spread of the virus by just staying with family.

As a third example: just as the mice experienced different parts of the elephant, there are many different definitions of security.

Is security for you a place to dwell?

Is security for you a loving relationship?

Is security for you the knowledge that income will be arriving soon?

Is security a sense of having a job, a role, a sense of purpose?

Is your security a quiet place inside?

During times when the world is shaken up, our notions of security may change.

BIRD BY BIRD

Surely, this is a time when things can feel daunting. What used to be simple tasks might feel entirely different. How can we proceed?

I am inspired by a metaphor offered by the writer and spiritual essayist Anne Lamott. She describes a moment in her childhood when her brother was overwhelmed by a homework assignment. He was supposed to do a science project about birds. He put it off. He got frustrated. He didn’t know how to proceed. Her father watched his son feeling overwhelmed, and said, “Hey Buddy, let me help you. How about if you don’t look at it as one big

assignment, but lots of little assignments. ... Just write about one bird. Then the next. Then the next. Bird by bird.” That is the title of one of her books: *Bird by Bird*. I call it to mind when I find myself in a situation when I feel overwhelmed. Can I take things one at a time, one moment at a time?

SPIRITUALITY

Indeed, this is the very essence of the Buddhist approach to life.

If we focus on the past, our energy is drawn up into regret or memory.

If we focus on the future, we may be in fear or fantasy.

But, if we focus on this present moment, we have a lot more power.

Quite literally, the brain and physiology can respond to what is happening here, now.

MAYO CLINIC FIVE

And, so, I invite you my friends, right now, to try something.

Look around you and find *five* things that your eyes can *see*, and name them. Probably one of them is a computer screen. Perhaps another is a window. Perhaps another is a floor. Can you name find two more things to name that your eyes can perceive?

Next, use your sense of touch. What are *four* things you can *feel* right now? A chair? Your clothing? Two more?

Third, how about your ability to *hear*, right here, right now? What are *three* things your ears perceive?

Next, a little harder, maybe...can you *smell two* things?

And finally, is there *one* sense of *taste* for you?

This exercise is one way to bring yourself into the present moment. Use it anytime you like.

HORROR

Here is what I think is very important for us to understand right now: Staying in the present moment will help us face pain so that it does not become suffering.

This is another Buddhist principle: resisting the present moment leads to unhappiness. Just like the idea earlier: the past may have been painful, but the present may be pleasant. Accept that. The present may be painful, but the past was pleasant. Accept that. No matter what is in front of you, no matter what you are sensing, try to accept it, but not dwell in it, so that you can not get stuck.

Here's the thing: we are in a new paradigm right now. Things that didn't make sense a few weeks ago might make sense now. And that includes how your spirituality leads you to make decisions in your relationships, your heart.

I have heard some people say some things this week that might sound horrific, but in the current context are very true and real:

Here is one example. “*Dear husband, although I always told you I wanted you to come stay with me in the hospital if I was sick, please know it is different now, and I will be okay if I die alone.*”

(deep breath...)

Another thing I heard this week that is painful, but true and loving:

“Dear sister: Although I always told you to ask for life-support for me, now I’d rather you not, because other people probably need it more.”

Truth-telling can be an act of love. It may be painful. But it may prevent suffering.

GOOD NEWS

We also can address the pain with comfort.

I have seen comforting facebook posts, seen comforting cards go out in the mail, heard about comforting phone calls, and heard about people delivering comforting food. I have heard parents describe new ways to give their children reassurance, and the discipline to save certain news until younger ears aren’t the room. I have heard about school principals and school teachers who comfort not only children but parents by keeping a routine and celebrating the regular. I have heard friends comfort a friend whose relative died from the virus.

Comfort soothes and eases pain. Comfort tends to basic needs.

Also, we can address the pain with generosity.

I have seen generous donations to the church so that we can keep being a source of hope and sustenance for the community. I have seen generous and careful planning by church leadership so that we can safely host people in Summit House this spring who otherwise might not have a place to safely sleep. I have seen generous offers to help create worship on Sunday mornings---we might be sharing in worship with Rev. Pam Philips and the Blacksburg community one Sunday soon.

This is my message to you today:

Acknowledge the many parts of the truth, just like the elephant.

Take things things one present moment at a time, like bird by bird.

And address the pain with honest truth-telling, and comfort, and generosity.

Blessed be.

Let us have a moment of silence for reflection.

Sing breathe in breathe out

PRAYER

Please join me in prayer.

CLOSING READING

John O’Donohue *To Bless the Space Between Us*. Pp. 202-203.

EXTINGUISH CHALICE and BENEDICTION

Go out into the world in peace. Have courage. Hold on to what is good. Return to no person evil for evil. Strengthen the fainthearted. Support the weak. Help the suffering, and honor all persons. It is finished in beauty.

Return often to let your cup be refilled. The chalice is extinguished but the flame of hope, truth and love goes with us.

Extinguish chalice.

See you next week. Our Sunday mornings are unfolding in new ways, and we will keep journeying together.