

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, February 23, 2025

“Love and the Kingdom of God”

Young at Heart Message

I would like to start today's message by reading a story I found recently in a book by Cynthia Bourgeault called *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*.

The story she shares she calls “Acornology.”

It goes like this:

“Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree.



“Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy... and they engaged in a lot of self-help courses.

“There were seminars called “Getting All You Can out of Your Shell.” There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree.

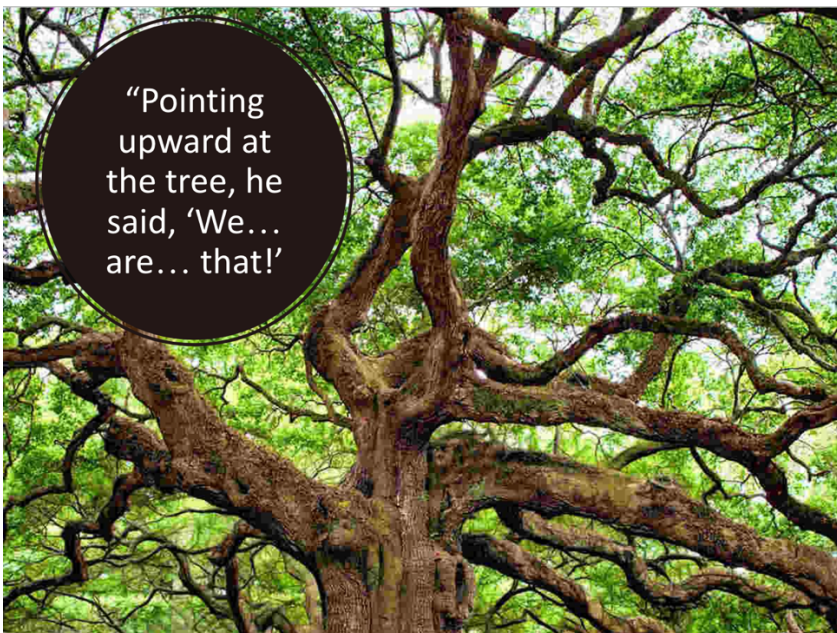
“There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.



“One day, in the midst of this kingdom, there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped “out of the blue” by a passing bird.

“He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns.

“And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale.



“Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: ‘So tell us, how would we become that tree?’

“ ‘Well,’ said he, pointing downward, ‘it has something to do with going into the ground... and cracking open the shell.’

“ ‘Insane,’ they responded. ‘Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn’t be acorns anymore!’ ”



The point of this story, of course, is that an acorn is only a seed.

Its true destiny – its True Self – is to become an oak tree.

But, when you are an acorn looking around at other acorns, it would be impossible to believe that any one of you could grow into a mighty oak tree.

The size difference alone makes it impossible to believe!

The Message

How do we apply this parable, if you will, to ourselves?

We assume that the person that moves around the world making choices and doing our thing is *who we are*.

But, really, that person is the acorn. Inside the acorn is a vastly more majestic destiny and a True Self who lives within it.

But this oak tree of ourselves can only come into being if it lets go of its acorn.

But, this journey toward full selfhood is more than just an awakening. It involves a letting go that is also a dying.

This sounds an awful lot like Paul's words in the 1 Corinthians passage we heard today: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies."

In other words, the seeds you plant cannot not come to life unless they die.

The seed – the acorn – in its natural form, must "die" in order to grow into its full and True Self.

Paul says our bodies are planted as our natural bodies, but raised as our spiritual bodies.

He goes on to say that if there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that, the spiritual.

Finally, he says "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

Our "natural selves" – the acorn part – the seeds of our True Self cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. Only our spiritual selves – our True Selves – are able to do that.

From the same book, Cynthia says, "The 'Kingdom of Heaven' is not a place we go after we die, but is a way of being present here and now that makes us transparent to the light."

But what does this mean?

The Sufi mystic Rumi explains it this way:

*The Mystery of "Die before you Die" is this:
That the gifts come after your dying and not before.
Except for dying, you artful schemer,
No other skill impresses God. One divine gift
Is better than a hundred kinds of exertion.
Your efforts are assailed from a hundred sides,
And the favor depends on your dying.
The trustworthy have already put this to the test.*

The acorn must "die" in order to become its true, destined, manifested self. And, we must "die," too, to become our True Selves.

Essentially, what Paul is referring to, is *surrender*.

This idea of surrender is the transformation from the “acorn self” to the “oak tree self,” brought about by an act of letting go.

Contrary to popular opinion, surrender is not cowardice.

Surrender is an act of spiritual power because it opens the heart directly to wisdom and energy.

We must let our attachments to things, to patterns of behavior, and to old ways of thinking die. We must surrender ourselves to the possibility of new ideas and new ways of being in the world.

And of course, like most of the things that Jesus and other prophets and teachers in the Bible and throughout history suggest, surrender is not easy.

Surrendering to this type of dying requires presence and awareness that we are often blind to.

Let me offer an every day example of this type of surrender.

One day when I was still living back in Wisconsin, I'd had a stressful day and had a lot on my mind.

I was waiting for a friend, and they were running late, so I decided to go for a walk through a nearby marsh.

I was annoyed and having a hard time letting go of the negative feelings I had toward the day.

I was caught up in my own “stuff,” not really paying attention to anything at all.

Then, suddenly, I walked near the marsh and stopped dead in my tracks.

All I could hear around me was a cacophony of sound – the marsh was consumed by the sounds of water, bugs, frogs, birds, wind, etc. I had never heard so much noise happening at once.

I was mesmerized. In an instant, every worry and concern I had disappeared as I listened to the noises in the marsh.

I stood there listening for at least 10 minutes, until my cell phone ringing brought me out of my trance.

I hadn't even realized that much time had passed, and now I was late to meet my friend!

I had surrendered in that moment to the delight of the life-giving sounds of the marsh.

And, I was able to relax enough to notice the life quite literally buzzing all around me.

This is a small and simple act of surrender – a dying of sorts to the negative energy I was holding which allowed space for a truer, more delightful and positive energy.

It is a small example of what Paul is trying to convey to the Corinthians.

Remember, the Kingdom of Heaven is not a place we go after we die. It's a way of being present here and now that makes us transparent to the light.

Sometimes, being present to our own realities can be quite difficult.

I was stressed and grumbly and, quite frankly, I was not particularly happy to be "present" in that moment fully. I would rather have been somewhere else.

In fact, I probably had wished several times that I could be somewhere else.

But, that marsh drew me back to my present.

Perhaps I had a glimpse of this notion that the Kingdom of Heaven is a way of being present here and now.

I wonder how much the 1 Corinthians passage and this new thought about the Kingdom of Heaven ties into the Luke passage we heard today about loving our enemies?

In the world today, it seems that loving our enemies has become harder and harder to do.

Jesus tells us to "do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

This can, at times, feel difficult or even impossible.

And yet, we are reminded to be fully present in the moment. Fully present with our negative feelings toward our enemies, while at the same time blessing them and praying for them.

Whew! That's tough!

But I'm reminded of a body prayer I learned recently that can help when we're feeling some heavy feelings of negativity toward our enemies, or toward life in general.

Some of you may remember the prayer that I offered back in October when I was sick with COVID and we met online.

I'll share it with you now as the conclusion to this sermon. We'll do it together 3 times, so feel free to join in from your seats if you wish.

The prayer is a reminder to be present in the moment, just as we are, just as the world is. Even if we come with bad feelings toward someone or something. Even if we are feeling down or defeated like I was that day at the marsh.

This reminds us to be fully present and to be open to surrender so that we can see the world for what it is, even as we are feeling bogged down with our own worries and cares.

The prayer goes like this:

1. Here I am... as I am
2. In the world... as it is
3. Supported by the earth
4. Floating in the cosmos
5. Awake
6. To the heart of love

Repeat 3 times

May you be fully present and alive as you leave this place and you go about your business this week.

May you see yourself as the acorn, ready to be planted and fulfill your destiny as the mighty oak.

May you love your enemies and find yourself in the Kingdom of Heaven – not a place to go after you die but instead, a way of being present here and now that makes you transparent to the light.

Amen!