

First Unitarian Church

November 19, 2017

In a vocational first, I am preaching not one but two sermons today, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving. The first, here at these worship services at First Unitarian. The second, at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service this afternoon, at Congregation Albert, where our choir will join choirs from several Jewish and Christian congregations.

In that service, I'll be talking about the history of Thanksgiving and about immigration justice. I invite you to grab some lunch and join us over there at 3pm. Congregation Albert is near the corner of Montgomery and Louisiana. It's pretty moving to see interfaith clergy and choirs coming together, and the music will be beautiful and lively.

But first: Gratitude. The topic of this message. Since we don't have a Buddhist congregation—a sangha—represented this afternoon in the interfaith service, I thought I'd start off with a Buddhist parable. It's a story from the Pali canon. That's the collection of sacred texts and stories written in the Pali language. This story is part of a genre within the Pali canon that is known as the Jataka tales.

Jataka means "birth history." Jataka tales are parables told about the Buddha's previous lifetimes. They depict the Buddha in a previous life before he was famous. They may tell of him living as a king, outcast, animal, or other character, but always with characteristics of an enlightened one, and the story has something to teach. So, from the Pali canon, here's a parable about the Buddha in a previous life.

This Jataka tale begins with the son of King Brahmadata of Benares.ⁱ This son, a prince, is an incredibly unpleasant person. He is mean. He puts people down. He bullies them. He is constantly trying to prove he is stronger and tougher than other people. He is judgmental. He is quick to anger, like a hissing snake. And, according to tradition, every time he opens his mouth he lets loose a string of profanity. He could be standing next to his grandmother, and he'd still let it rip.

In the translation of the story that I read, it said, "People inside and outside the palace ran from him as they would from a starving man-eating demon. They avoided him as they would a speck of dirt in the eye." I thought that was a funny pair of sentences. A man-eating demon seems much more serious than eye irritation.

At any rate, this prince is *no bueno*. Like Prince Joffrey, for the Game of Thrones fans here.

One day, he decides to go swimming. He drags a bunch of servants with him, who do their best to maintain their dignity while in the prince's company. They are standing on the shore when suddenly the sky gets dark. A huge storm begins to blow, making the water go wild.

The prince, who has an almost compulsive need to prove his manliness and toughness, decides he isn't going to let a storm stop him. And he orders his servants to take him to the middle of the river and bathe him. Right then.

The story doesn't say how they get there, whether on a raft of some sort, or maybe there is a little foot bridge low down to the water, but when they get to the middle, they see the opportunity before them, and they throw the insufferable fool right in.

As his servants disappear back to shore, the churning water tosses the prince about. He chokes and gasps, then finally gets a lucky break and is able to grab hold of a floating log. At this point, the story says, he is crying like "a terrified helpless baby."

The story goes on to say:

It just so happened that, not long before, a very rich man had died in Benares. He had buried his treasure hoard in the riverbank, along the same stretch of river. His fortune amounted to 40 million gold coins. Because of his miserly craving for riches, he was reborn as a lowly snake, slithering on his belly while still guarding his treasure.

At a nearby spot on the riverbank another rich miser had buried a treasure of 30 million gold coins. Likewise, due to his stingy clawing after wealth, he had been reborn as a water rat. He too remained to guard his buried treasure.

Just as the prince on his log floats by, the snake and the water rat are washed into the water by the storm, and they, too climb onto the log. A little further down stream, a cotton tree is blown down, and a parrot that has been roosting in it is also knocked into the water, and also climbs up on the log.

Got that picture? A bawling prince, a snake, a water rat, and a parrot are all on one log in the river, and the storm is still raging.

A little further down, there is a little hut, inhabited by an enlightened man. Although he had been born into wealth and high status, he had given it all away and come to live humbly by the water.

As the log and company float by in the storm, the man hears the prince's cries. His compassionate loving-kindness is such that he cannot ignore any suffering. And so he runs out to help. Jumping into the rushing waters, he grabs the log and swims with all his might. With surprising strength, he brings them all to shore.

He takes the prince, the snake, the water rat, and the parrot back to his hut and builds a fire. Because he is led by compassion, he tends to the weakest creatures first—the little animals—gently warming them by the fire before making room for the prince.

When he breaks out some fruit and nuts, and *feeds* the animals first, too, the prince burns with anger. "This man has no respect for me, a prince!" he thinks. "Instead, he

puts these dumb animals above me!" The prince begins plotting to turn his resentment into revenge.

After a few days, the four recover their health. The snake, lifting his head from a coiled posture, and bowing reverently, says,

"Venerable one, you have done a great thing for me! I am grateful to you, and I am not a poor snake. In a certain place I have a buried treasure of 40 million gold coins. And I will gladly give it to you — for all life is priceless! Whenever you are in need of money, just come down to the riverbank and call out. "Snake! Snake!"

Likewise, the water-rat, who as you will recall has 30 million gold coins buried, bows his head and thanks the enlightened man, saying,

"Whenever you are in need of money, just come down to the riverbank and call out, "Rat! Rat!"

They are grateful, and their gratitude inspires generosity in them—you would never know they had been so selfish in their previous lives.

The parrot is not rich like the other two, but he does know how to get some delicious red rice for the man, anytime. So the parrot also gives thanks, and extends this offer.

Finally the prince speaks. Also addressing the man as "Venerable One," the prince tells him that when he becomes king, the man should come to the castle, so that the prince can show his gratitude, too. Then the prince returns to Benares, where he does in fact soon become king.

After some time has passed, the Venerable One decides to pay visits to these four. The parrot, water-rat, and snake greet him with rice and riches, just as they had promised.

The prince on the other hand has other plans when he sees the humble man coming. Still resentful and afraid of looking weak, he does not want to give the man a chance to say out loud—in front of other people—that he saved the prince's life. Noting that the man is begging for alms food—as is traditional for Buddhist monks—the prince instructs his servants, saying

"This worthless beggar must be coming to ask for something. Don't let the good-for-nothing get near me. Arrest him immediately, tie his hands behind his back, and whip him at every street corner. Take him out of the city to the execution block and [off with] his head. Then raise up his body ... and leave it for all to see. So much for lazy beggars!"

The servants do as they are told. But even as the Venerable One is whipped, he retains his dignified manner. He just quietly repeats one thing. After each lashing, he says, "It is as the old saying goes, it is more rewarding to pull dead wood from a

river than to help an ungrateful man.” Finally the servants are too curious to ignore him. They ask what he is talking about. And he tells them this story.

Maybe they’ve just finally had it up to here, or maybe they are appalled that the king has involved *them* in inflicting his cruelty. Whatever the reason, this time the people decide they aren’t going to take it anymore.

They form a mob, attack the king with arrows, knives, clubs and stones, and then they throw his lifeless body into a ditch.

You didn’t see that coming, did you? Why didn’t they just remove him from office?

This is a terrible parable!

The people make the enlightened man their new king, and he is generous and compassionate, and everyone loves him. The end.

If you thought only the Abrahamic scriptures contained vengeful violence—the Torah, and Christian Bible, and Q’uran, well, that’s just not the case. If you thought Buddhist was all peace and compassion, this parable has just disabused you of that notion. Sadly, the violence against Rohingya (**ro**-hin-ja) Muslims in Myanmar, inflicted by Buddhists, is also a rude awakening for our romantic American stereotypes.

Here in the United States, Buddhism is often adopted in the form of core teachings and contemplative practices. It is stripped not only of its lived, all-to-human-cultural context in the east, but also many of the elaborate practices that accompany it in there.ⁱⁱ And, it is often separated from its thousands of sacred texts.

We aren’t exposed to Buddhist scriptures very often, so we don’t know what to make of them. Like most Abrahamic texts, Buddhist scriptures offer clues that they aren’t meant to be taken literally. In this one, for example, the name of the king, Brahmadatta of Benares, is not the name of any specific king. Rather, it refers to many kings who are called by that name in stories. So in this way, to invoke this name is to say, “once upon a time,” and not to invoke a specific time or place.

Like the Abrahamic scriptures, Buddhist stories sometimes contradict each other, too. In one, the Buddha (in a previous incarnation) may be nonviolent. In another, he may kill a man. The story of the evil prince even seems to contradict itself, with one wise character saying that all life is precious, while the narrative kills off someone else with no hint of regret!

Buddhism is by and for human beings. Just like any other tradition, it’s meant to be wrestled with, and practiced in community where we hold each other accountable for the fruits of our faith.

One thing I appreciate in this parable is the role humility plays. The water rat and the snake, having lost their high status in the world, no longer feel entitled. They

notice, and are surprised and grateful, when someone is kind to them. Their gratitude in turn, inspires them to be generous.

Gratitude does that—it nurtures in us a sense of abundance, inspiring us to give back or “pay it forward.” The sociologist Georg Simmel called gratitude “the moral memory” of humankind.ⁱⁱⁱ It nurtures human connection.

This week I learned that the Poor People’s Campaign, led by the Rev. Drs. William Barber and Liz Theoharis, plans to organize in New Mexico before the end of the year. If we’re going to launch a moral mass movement to set this country on a better course, which we *are*, we’re going to need a lot of human connection, right?

It won’t be enough to just be angry about how things are. We need spiritual reservoirs of strength, connection and hope within us to sustain that kind of movement. Gratitude is one of the practices that fills up those reservoirs.

In contrast to the animals, the prince, with his sense of entitlement and need to compete with everyone, is constantly unhappy and leaves a trail of unhappiness wherever he goes. He is unable to feel gratitude because of his lack of humility. Even the preciousness of his own life is lost on him. He takes senseless risks, and thinks nothing of it when his life is saved.

Gratitude itself is life affirming. I don’t just mean in a spiritual way. Many research studies have now shown that people who practice gratitude report fewer symptoms of illness, including depression. They experience more optimism and happiness.

They have stronger relationships, and are more generous, than people who do not.^{iv} People who make gratitude an intentional practice have stronger immune systems, and are less likely to report being lonely or isolated.^v

The studies are so striking that a while back, the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California and its partners awarded \$3 million in grants for fourteen more studies, exploring the impact of gratitude on things like heart health, brain function, and aging.^{vi}

There are three parts to gratitude. First is *noticing*. Noticing goodness. Noticing that there are good things in the world, what church people call “blessings.”

They may be actual things (as in objects), or they may be phenomenological things (things we experience). A choir song. A stunning sunset. The feel and scent of cool morning air in autumn. The taste of roasted green chile. Love. Awe. Delight. Your very own wild and precious life. Noticing is the first part.

The second part is recognizing that these things come from beyond ourselves. Other people, or the interdependent web of life, or the source of being itself, however you might name that, have provided these things.

The third part is expressing thanks. In words spoken aloud, in song, in a card or email, or thank you gift that you give someone as a sign of your gratitude. You can

express thanks by paying it forward—doing some random kindness for another person or creature, out of your own gratitude.

Noticing good things or blessings, recognizing sources beyond ourselves, and expressing thanks.

Sounds easy, right? But how often do you go through a day without ever stopping to think about it?

Do you have a regular practice of giving thanks before eating a meal? What a simple way to build an intentional practice of gratitude, and—if you are raising a child—to pass it along to the next generation, too, to nurture their wellbeing and inner resources.

It doesn't have to be fancy, or even addressed to God as traditional mealtime prayers are. You can just give each person at the table a moment to name something they are thankful for. You can do this even when eating alone.

You can build a moment of gratitude into your day when you wake up, or when you are going to sleep. You can keep a gratitude journal, on paper or on social media.

You can leave notes for yourself, prompting you to practice mindfulness at certain times. When you get dressed, for example, you can think about each item as you put it on, and about how much each piece reflects your interdependence.

Most of us would not know how to grow cotton or raise sheep, turn raw material into thread, and design and manufacture our own clothing. And forget about shoes and accessories! It takes a lot of people to make clothing.

I worked in a garment factory in the 1990's, and it took about five people just to piece together a pair of shorts, using different machines. As you dress, you can imagine and give thanks for each participant, from the grower, to the designer, to people who sewed your garment, to the truck drivers and sales people.

You can do the same thing with the components of a hot shower with a shower curtain, towel, and soap; or a meal; or your bicycle, bus, or car as you travel from one place to another—you get the idea.

What would it be like to express gratitude to someone you are so used to, you might accidentally take them for granted? Like a family member. The postal worker. Or someone who touched your life a long time ago. Maybe they don't even know it.

A national day of Thanksgiving is itself another thing we can notice and experience with gratitude. It's a complicated holiday, to be sure, with its connection to a myth about this country's founding. I'll talk about that at the Interfaith service today.

But along with an opportunity to examine this nation with a prophetic eye, Thanksgiving also offers a gentler gift: a time to deepen in the spiritual practice of gratitude. Open it! And be sure to pass your gift along to others.

ⁱ Find the whole story on the Buddha Dharma Education Association's BuddhaNet site: https://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/bt_20.htm

ⁱⁱ The sociology and religion scholar Wendy Cadge wrote a fascinating study of eastern vs western Buddhism in her book Heartwood. University of Chicago Press: 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ Qtd. on <https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/gratitude/definition>

^{iv} [https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what we do/major initiatives/expanding gratitude](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/major_initiatives/expanding_gratitude)

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[https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what we do/major initiatives/expanding gratitude/about project](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/major_initiatives/expanding_gratitude/about_project)

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[https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what we do/major initiatives/expanding gratitude/gratitude research grant winners/faculty grants#laura redwine](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/major_initiatives/expanding_gratitude/gratitude_research_grant_winners/faculty_grants#laura_redwine)