

## Sermon Pursuit of Happiness

The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

April 12, 2015

10:30 a.m.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

We *were* endowed with certain unalienable rights. The Hebrew scriptures tell us God gave Adam and Eve a garden and the capacity to name the beasts and birds and plants and creatures of the sea. God gave them dominion over these things, but not dominion over themselves. They received but they did not give.

They gained without effort.

They experienced but they did not choose.

They acted but they bore no consequence.

They perceived but did not know.

They lived but they did not love.

They were innocent but not righteous.

They did not know good from evil,  
and thus did not know what made life precious.

This they had to seize for themselves at great cost.

God endowed Eve with the aspect of curiosity.

God created the serpent to be shrewd.

God created Adam to yearn for something more.

And God created the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to taste good.

All these things combined to set in motion our endless journey of discovery and purpose.

The allegory of Eden is that God created us because God needed something more in order to know the quality of creation – and that something more was suffering. After cursing them with the pain of love and toil, God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife and clothed them before banishing them from Eden.

What did God know of love and pain and toil and cold before Adam and Eve knew good and evil? What did God know of rejection and compassion? We were created to lose Eden and gain freedom. We were created to lose Eden so that we might try to find happiness. Eden could not bring us joy – we had no power there, no agency. We became agents of our own destinies – as much as our circumstances would allow.

Which brings me back to the present, and a certain daredevil Patriot’s quarterback. For those of you who don’t follow Tom Brady on the internet, a short recap. While on vacation in Costa Rica with his wife and children, Mr. Brady jumped off a cliff into a pond below, saying to his wife and the world “I think I gotta do it.” His message to his followers: “Never doing that again! #AirBrady.”

Some of his fans responses to the stunt are unprintable, but run along the theme of how dare he?! We pay him all these millions to entertain us by putting his health and longevity on the line for our viewing and betting pleasure, and he has the nerve to risk the entire franchise for a stunt! The parent in me is thinking if I had teenagers and lived near a quarry, I know what they’ll be yearning for come July. They’ll want to look like Tom Brady flying down a hundred feet straight as an arrow.

And that’s the crux of the matter this morning. If we are lucky, if we are old enough or young enough, we have the power and the responsibility to choose how to live our lives, to take risks, to find that which gives us happiness.

To fall through the brilliant air and feel the wind roaring in our ears and a scream in our throat and our heart pounding until we cleave through the icy water and bob up again with just the ripples to mark the adventure. A carnival ride without the restraints. Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid in one long gleeful moment.

We have moments in our lives when we have to overcome fear to grow. We have to overcome fear of losing what we've got in order to get more, feel more, gain independence, be happy. We have to leave the safety of Eden to be who we were meant to be, if we are lucky and powerful enough.

But the parent in me and the child in me says couldn't you find some other way to be happy? When love enters the picture, when the bonds of love enter the picture, suddenly there's a balance on the scales of excitement and possibility. And that balance is stay safe, stay with me; let me know your love for me is more important than anything. It is harder than losing one's breath to let our loved ones go. Imagine for a moment that it is God speaking to us through this morning's reading:

To "let go" is not to cut myself off;  
it's the realization that I can't control another.  
To "let go" is not to "care for," but to "care about."  
To "let go" is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.  
To "let go" is not to deny, but to accept.  
To "let go" is to fear less and love more.

Suddenly it puts scripture in a new light. We were created to leave Eden, by a Creator who mourns our leaving with anger and compassion. And that we can understand. If we live long enough, we will understand.

Jolene Brackey, the author, shares something in common with me; both of us had vibrant, independent mothers who gradually lost their independence but not their vibrancy. Her book "Creating Moments of Joy" is an account of her coming to terms with her mother's decline. Our mothers both wanted to do more and be more than they could in the last years of moments of their lives. Brackey struggled as I did to find a place to love her mother and be loved by her in the moment. And each moment was precious for that struggle until finally dementia claimed them both.

There are many of us in our communities who are loving as best they can, not just parents, but also spouses and siblings and perhaps most heartbreaking of all, children. We are loving those who are slowly losing what we think of as the fullness of their lives by illness or infirmity. Sometimes that infirmity is an addiction to those things that will carry them back to Eden – where they will have no choice, no effort, no consequence, no love no agency no life as it was meant to be.

The hardest lesson for us to learn, for me to learn, is to fear less and love more. Loving more may mean accepting where our loved ones are in the moment.

The struggle is to find a place from which to act, and a place from which to love without fear. What divine insight, what strength, what compassion can help us to do that? It is the power to let go of power. It is the power to let go of fear, of failure, and just to be with birds in the dawning of time.