

“BENEFACTIONS: BRINGING WHAT WE HAVE TO LIFE”

The Sermon at the First Parish in Wayland, Massachusetts
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
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The director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York recently said of one of the Museum’s supporters, David Rockefeller, no less, the former, long-time president of the museum’s Board, “He’s the lifeblood of the institution. Of course, his benefactions range from the hundred million he just pledged us to the great Cezanne ‘Boy on a Red Vest,’ but his greatest gift to the museum, I think, is his constant belief that the future is going to be at least as interesting as the past. It’s amazing, to be ninety years old and that curious.”

There are a number of sermonic paths I could take from that opening – for instance, the idea that the future could be as interesting as the past. Or the idea that we could try to have that idea. Or a celebration of curiosity. Maybe another Sunday.

But what struck me was the reference to Rockefeller’s benefactions. His benefactions.

Wow, what a great word for a sermon title, thought I, and so I’ve been planning to preach on “Benefactions: Bringing What We Have to Life,” playing on the ambiguity in the phrase, “bringing something to life,” which could mean either making it come alive, awakening what is inside us, or taking it into the world. And, in fact, that is just what I’m going to do this morning, even though I realized – not at first, but eventually -- my message would come close to echoing an ad slogan of General Electric, which says they “bring good things to life.”

It is an important change from the broader, “bringing what we have to life,” because not all our potentialities are worth bringing to life – indeed, some of them are well worth stifling. The Catholic Church identifies seven cardinal sins, for example. You could look them up with an internet search when you get home, if you do that sort of thing. At least on my search engine, the top two sites were both about the seven cardinal sins of saltwater aquaria aquariums.

They were different than those named by the Catholic Church, which are pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. I suspect I might be capable of one of those, maybe even two, and that a few of you are,

too. But let's not see if we can bring them to life, at least not in all their negative forms. I say it that way because I have a sermon I'm working on for a Sunday soon called, "The Right Kind of Sadness, The Right Kind of Anger." But there are all kinds of anger well worth suppressing.

And of course there are other undesirable impulses, some even more awful. "Be all that you can be" is not the best advice to anyone who could be a bigot, an abuser, a killer. "Free to be you and me," "Be yourself," "I've got to be me" – nice sentiments all, but only up to a point. There are no doubt things that any of us could be that we shouldn't. "I did it my way" – that is not always a good thing. Some people's own ways are hurtful. Repression is not always a bad thing.

I have a story that illustrates the point, and then I'll move on and not be so negative. After all, ours has always been a tradition that emphasizes the positive potentials of human nature and of every person. Calvin said humans are by nature depraved. Channing said human nature is divine. But even Channing knew that humans have tendencies to violate that divinity. And among other Unitarians of his time, there were those like Melville and Hawthorne whose views of human nature were much less rosy.

Still, we go on being inclined to think people are pretty great, but in part because they don't give in to every inclination that seems to be innate. Here's my little story, of the sort that probably everyone has many of, memorable glimpses, however minor, of human perverseness:

When I was in seminary, I had a class on human relations that included a weekend on the Cape learning how to lead small groups, in particular T-groups, popular at the time. In one exercise, the group formed a circle, facing inward, toward the center, and one by one members of the group walked from person to person, each of whom was to interact in some way with the person walking around. You could stare into the person's eyes, touch his face, whatever. One of the teachers, a kindly middle-aged Mennonite, was walking around the circle when he came to one of my classmates (not a UU, a Methodist) who interacted with the teacher by punching him in the stomach, pretty hard.

When the exercise was over, there was a discussion, and the teacher, whose feelings seemed to be hurt as much as his torso, asked the young man why he had done that. The student was unfazed, quite nonchalant, in fact. "I felt like it," he said. That's what he felt like doing, so he did. Now that was in 1969, and there may have been even more emphasis on expressing oneself freely, not being repressed. But that way of talking has not gone away, even though "just be yourself" is not always the best of advice.

But most of the time, it is. Bringing the good in us to life, helping it thrive – what a crucial spiritual thing to do – our compassion, our kindness, our creativity, our wisdom, our powers of discernment, our wonder, our amazement, our gratitude, our love. The days after Katrina, especially the days after the failure of the levees, saw some of the ugly side of human nature take over in some people. But it saw a lot more, a lot more, of people bringing to life their courage and caring, both among the victims and those who were trying to help.

Those of you who have attended memorial services here have heard me say a final prayer, written by I don't know who, that says "The love we can no longer give to our beloved, help us, to give to those who still need it. Save us from frozenness of heart. Make our compassion deeper, our sympathies wider. Melt away any bitterness and let our sorrow teach us to be gentle. Since so much that is precious can from us be taken, let us cherish the more what remains; and let us be the nurture of things precious in the lives of others."

There is so much good in all of us either to bring to life; or if it's already alive, to help it grow; or if it's already fully grown, to tend and preserve it.

But I said at the beginning, "bringing good things to life" has another meaning than making place in ourselves for our better selves to dwell. It also means action, bringing those things to the life of one's family, community, congregation, workplace, country, and world. That memorial service prayer asks for deeper compassion and wider sympathy. But there's more: it asks that we give our love, not just feel it, that we nurture the precious things in the lives of others.

It's not enough to have inside the most virtuous of feelings, to sympathize, to wish things well, to want peace and justice. It's great, but there's more. It's the difference between benefaction and benevolent, although in common use the difference is probably lost. Both words come from the Latin word "bene," well or good. Benevolent pairs it with the Latin word for "to wish." To wish well. Benefaction pairs it with the word for "to do." To do good.

To return to our opening quotation, about David Rockefeller, his forward-looking attitude may have been his greatest gift, but only because he put it into action. If Rockefeller hadn't served on the Board, the director would have no idea what were his beliefs, except perhaps from cocktail chatter, and that only counts for so much. But there's more. There's the service he put in, not to mention the hundred million dollars – though I think it should be mentioned. The guy had the potential for doing that ... and did.

Now I know, many of us don't have a hundred million dollars to give to our favorite museum or the First Parish. But we have our own ways of engaging with life on behalf of the best things in us, our hopes, our caring, our values, our ideals, seeking to have some impact, to cast our weight however modest on the side of what we believe to be right, kind, and true.

And the thing is, most of you have found some of those ways, over and over, and you go on finding them. I am continually impressed at all that people in the congregation do to live out our values, in how many ways you bring good things to life.

Among the many ways available to any of us are ones here at First Parish, more in fact than any of us could take part in at our most alive. You may have noticed that references have been made in the order of service and elsewhere about sign-up sheets in the vestry. That's the room under this one. There is a big table there.

On the table are two chances to donate to very worthwhile causes, a chance to buy a book for a study group or to fill out a Green Sanctuary survey, and chances to sign up for the Alliance Fall Dinner, a course on diversity, the Equinox Ritual, a sharing group, or to serve coffee after a service, do the chalice lighting some Sunday or donate the flowers.

In the course of the fall there will be chances to bid on a seat at a variety of dinners being held by other members, or on a quilt to raise money for another good cause. Throughout the year we will be preparing for our participation in the Interfaith Housing Network, and you can help, with that or the several other social action activities underway, like Partakers and meals for the needy.

Oh, and volunteers to teach in the Sunday school are always welcome, or to work with our youth, serve on a committee, sing in the choir, or play in the bell choir. Oh, and we've had a drive to send supplies to evacuees in Louisiana. (By the way, all the congregations in town and other residents will soon be taking part in an effort to assist a partner town in Louisiana.)

There is a two-part lesson to be drawn from that list. One, there are lots of ways of taking action as a part of this parish. And two, it takes some prioritizing, some decisions to do some things and not others lest the menu seem so overwhelming you can't even order.

Pick some because they help you bring good things inside yourself to life. And then pick some that turn those good things into benefactions. The bowls and the lists and the notices are ready and waiting.

And so is the rest of life, where each of us might be guide, healer, helper, builder, teacher, pioneer. Let us join in hymn 124 [Be That Guide].