Photo Credit: David St. John

“Enough, Already”

First Parish in Wayland
October 18, 2026

Rev. Lauren Smith

Sermon: "Enough, Already"
Given at the First Parish in Wayland
On October 18, 2026
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I shared with you earlier this week the wisdom of singer-songwriter John Mayer, who sings:

> *Twice as much ain't twice as good*
> *And can't sustain like one half could*
> *It's wanting more that's gonna bring me to my knees.*[1]

Many of us can relate to the spiritual paradox expressed in those words. So often we want more, even as we sense that the wanting is a trap from which we wish to be freed.
But how do we get free?
And how do we recognize "enough" when it's already right in front of us?

I went on a camping trip years ago, deep in the Tahoe National Forest in Northern California. The campground was on a beautiful lake hours from the nearest town. It was wonderful to get away, peaceful and lovely.

One of the things I remember most about the trip was driving back into the city at the end of the week. Re-entering civilization, I was immediately aware of advertising everywhere. On billboards and small signs, in radio jingles and on day-glo food packaging.

After a week in the wilderness, it was a shock to realize how much of the world I inhabited was labeled and branded, usually in ways designed to make me want things I didn't have. I was startled that day into awareness of what we now call the attention economy. That was when it dawned on me that TV and radio stations didn't sell entertainment. They sold advertisement, which meant their product was *me*. My attention. My buying capacity.

Which is not all bad, but it can become a problem. It *has* become a problem, especially in the present era when almost every aspect of our personhood from our health status to our hobbies can be tracked online and commodified.

For one thing, the experience of being a "thing" for sale, like an umbrella in a bin, is a little bit dehumanizing. And for another, our attention is usually sold to advertisers, whose goal is to make us want, want, want.

That can be incredibly draining. If we start indulging the ocean of longing that builds up in us, we can end up feeling spiritually and materially bankrupt.

There's a societal cost, too. Human beings are not, first and foremost, consumers. Human societies are not, first and foremost, markets. The Earth is not, first and foremost, a commodity, a

[1] John Mayer, "Gravity," 2006.

storehouse of resources to be extracted. When we allow market values to supersede human values, people, communities and the planet suffer.

In his wonderful book *Democracy Matters,* Cornell West writes that our nation's "largely unexamined and unquestioned dogma [of free-market fundamentalism] is a major threat to the quality of democratic life and the well-being of most peoples across the globe…. It leads to an obscene level of wealth inequality…. It also redefines the terms of what we should be striving for in life, glamorizing materialistic gain, narcissistic pleasure, and the pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations…."[2]

So what, exactly, is enough? And how do we recognize it in our lives.

If you ask people that question, the most natural answer is: "When I don't want anymore."

If you hang out with very young children, you might hear, "When I have more than anyone else."—which is not to say that adults don't think the same thing sometimes. They're just a lot less likely to say it!

But anyone who has stuffed themselves on sweets to the point of sickness knows that wanting can continue long past "enough." And anyone that's seen the show Hoarders the followed the lives of compulsive collectors—or anyone with personal exposure to compulsive hoarding—knows that gathering more and more stuff can deplete the soul.

When I was in my early 30's, I had a bad IKEA habit, which a total stranger helped me kick. I was a student at the time, and I used to go to IKEA every now and then, dutifully following the blue arrows through the store and dropping items into my bag. I didn't buy much, but I didn't have much to begin with. I was living on student loans and a $12 an hour part-time job.

It's no wonder that I liked IKEA so much. During those years, I lived in a large and beautiful but very run-down house in Berkeley, California with nine housemates. Ten of us shared six bedrooms, three bathrooms, two refrigerators, and a living room furnished with yard sale couches and chairs.

I was 34 years old, and I didn't like it much. I had left a good job in Boston and a nice apartment to go back to school. I missed having a car and a steady paycheck and the friends I'd left behind when I moved west. I had no idea how the leap of faith into seminary would end up, and I was scared.

So I went to IKEA, and I walked through the displays of bedrooms and kitchens, imagining myself in a place of my own, furnished and beautiful and filled with friends. I longed for the life all that stuff represented, and I translated my longing into a longing for the stuff itself. Since I couldn't afford to buy tables or couches, I spent my money downstairs in the market on coasters and glasses and plants.

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[2] Cornell West, *Democracy Matters*, 2004.

There's a children's section in IKEA, on the second floor. One day, as I followed the blue arrow path toward that section, I heard the shrill shrieking of a four-year-old having a tantrum. When I rounded the corner, there he was, held in his mother's lap, convulsively sobbing, reaching for something repeatedly, and screaming, "But Mommy, I want it. I want it, Mommy. Please can I have it?" then gasping for air and starting all over again. The mother just sat there holding the little boy in her lap, gently shushing him, saying, "No, sweetie, you can't have it," and curling him up in her arms.

I was mesmerized. I knew even then that it's hard to keep your cool when your kid is losing his mind in a public place. I was entranced by the mom's presence of mind and her gentleness in the middle of all those watchful eyes. She didn't give in to the boy's meltdown but managed to respond with kindness to his misery.

Frankly, it didn't seem to help the boy much. He must have kept pushing, because I spotted him again ten minutes later, hoisted onto his father's shoulder and on his way out the door. He was still sobbing but the words had changed: "Daddy, I don't need it anymore. I don't want it, Daddy," and gasping for air. I think he sensed that there was a tougher reprimand in store for him when they got to the car.

That mother may or may not have helped her son, but she single-handedly cured me of my IKEA habit. I looked at her child and thought, "How many of the rest of us in this place are walking around feeling just like you?"

How many of us here today feel like that sometimes?

My IKEA meltdown was fundamentally no different than the little boy's, except that mine was internal and I had a credit card in my pocket. The idea of responding to my experience with gentle awareness was a revelation.

I don't remember whether I bought anything that day, but my IKEA trips changed after that. I would go through the store as usual, dropping things into my cart. Then just before I reached the cash register I would stop and look over my potential purchases. It would be pretty clear which things I didn't need. I'd turn my cart around and go back through the store putting all those things back, sometimes emptying it altogether. (IKEA trips tended to take a long time during this phase.) After a while, I could pass through the store and avoid dropping unnecessary things in my cart at all. The same feelings consistently came up—loneliness, fear, and longing for a life different than the one I was leading, but slowly that longing had less power over me.

To this day, that mother's actions are still with me. I still feel a similar kind of ache when I enter certain stores or flip through some catalogs, but the feeling doesn't hook me so much. I'm much less likely to get swept away.

Stuff is a cheap substitute for human connection, beauty, freedom, tenderness, adventure. And cheap substitutes are almost never satisfying. They tend to leave us more hungry than when we began.

Beneath so much of this is our need to learn to work skillfully with craving when it arises in us.

As with most demanding spiritual tasks, this requires both wisdom and a healthy dose of compassion.

Wisdom means, in part, self-awareness needs we're trying to meet at any given time. My desire for a new set of dining chairs might stem from a functional need to replace broken furniture, a desire for more beauty in my surroundings, or longing for a more peopled life. It could be that buying things provides a moment of respite from chronic distress—a little hit of dopamine to take the edge off an unmanageable life.

Any of these needs—for a functional chair, for beauty and connection, for relief from distress might be at work. And they're all valid. But if we are going to learn to recognize enough, if we're going to learn to meet our deepest needs effectively, a little self-awareness is necessary.

One of the most compelling images in Buddhism that's used to teach about craving is the hungry ghost. A hungry ghost is a being with a giant distended belly and a tiny pinhole mouth who lives in a constant state of unsatisfied desire.

The character Gollum in the Lord of the Rings is a classic hungry ghost. Once a normal hobbit, he falls under the power of the One Ring. In time, he is wasted away by his hunger for the ring. Gollum is an extreme example, but I believe there is a little bit of the hungry ghost in every one of us.

There's another figure in Buddhist iconography, Kwan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion. In the Buddhist tradition, a boddhisattva is a little like a saint. Kwan Yin goes by many names and is depicted both as a man, Avalokiteshvara, and as a woman, Kanzeon or Kwan Yin. Usually, in paintings and statues, she holds a small container of water. It's said that the water she pours out has the power to quench our infinite thirst, to tame our hungry ghosts.

Kwan Yin's power stems from the spiritual capacities she represents: compassion, wisdom, generosity and presence. Just like the anonymous teacher I encountered at IKEA.

How do we recognize enough?

There's another layer to this question that extends past our individual lives. Good answers to this this question aren't just about us as individuals because we don't go through life in isolation. We are, in the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

The person who says, "I have enough because have more than my neighbor" might be misguided, but they're onto something important about abundance: "Enough" is always relational.

A few years ago, two dear colleagues, Rachel Myslivy and the Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd organized a national event for Unitarian Universalism. They led a multi-site Climate Justice Revival called "Re-Imagine Together: From an Extractive Age to a New Era."

During an interview about the Revival, Nancy spoke about the theological underpinnings of Unitarian Universalist social justice ministries, including climate justice. She spoke beautifully about the need to engage in justice work from a place of reverence for the planet and our fellow human beings. Drawing on our history, Nancy invoked Emerson, the Transcendentalists, and their emphasis on awe and reverence as a component of spiritual life. She said,

> Ralph Waldo Emerson… famously spoke of moving in the natural world with such awe that [he] 'became as a transparent eyeball,' just this great force of perception, of wonder and beauty and the connection to the natural world all around him…. Emerson and many of Emerson's pals …stretched the definition of religion… in their time to include reverence for nature and connection to nature [as] a deeply religious value.

Nancy goes on:

> Where it becomes complicated and where our [current] work [as Unitarian Universalists] evolves our tradition is that very often the Transcendentalists and the American Unitarian landscape understood their interconnection with the natural world in more deep…, nuanced and accountable ways than perhaps they understood their interconnection with their fellow human beings, including across economic and racial and gender differences.

She says:

> So our work today is to carry forward the incredible reverence for nature that our tradition gives us and to hold our relationships to and with one another … with exactly as much reverence.[3]

How do we recognize enough?

We take up the question as people in relationship, with other human beings and with the earth, attuned to the beauty of our planet and all her people, with care for our collective thriving.

We get to know ourselves, hungry ghosts and all.

Meeting ourselves with compassion, we grow in self-awareness about what we really want and need, honoring and accepting what we discover, growing in wisdom about what genuinely satisfies our souls.

I want to leave you with some words from writer Kurt Vonnegut.

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[3] Nancy McDonald Ladd and Rachel Myslivy, *Climate Justice and UU Values: Climate at the Intersections*, YouTube video, 2026

This is “Joe Heller,” a tribute poem Vonnegut wrote about a conversation he once had with Joseph Heller, the author of Catch-22. I thank Phil Giudice for sharing it with me earlier this week.

“Joe Heller”

True story, Word of Honor:
Joseph Heller, an important and funny writer
now dead,
and I were at a party given by a billionaire
on Shelter Island,
I said, “Joe, how does it make you feel
to know that our host only yesterday
may have made more money
than your novel ‘Catch 22’ has earned in its entire history?”
And Joe said, “I’ve got something he can never have”
And I said, What on earth could that be, Joe?”
And Joe said, “The knowledge that I’ve got enough.”
Not bad! Rest in peace![4]

Amen.

[4] Kurt Vonnegut, “Joe Heller” in *The New Yorker* magazine, May 16, 2005.