

Lovingkindness

The topic I was asked to address today is lovingkindness. Let me point out that neither Regina nor I created a typo in the order of service. I have seen “lovingkindness” written (1) as two words, (2) as a hyphenated word, and (3) as one word. I like treating it as one word, no space or hyphen, because it provides a way to highlight the term’s meaning of “a specific kind of love conceptualized in various religious traditions. . . as a form of love characterized by acts of kindness.” [Wikipedia]

I assume that my association with All Faith’s Friday morning meditation group is why I was invited to deliver today’s sermon, so I will take this opportunity to talk a little about meditation. I have been a part of All Faiths’ meditation groups for almost ten years, and I am still on a journey of learning about meditation. There are many kinds of meditation, and there are no rules, no right or wrong ways to meditate—at least in our AF groups. There are plenty of books and guidelines that have been helpful for others, but each of us can choose what works for us.

Many of us have found that commitment is required to develop our meditation, and participating in a group can be helpful. Being part of a group that meets regularly, reading books, and investigating websites helped me explore the many ways to meditate, from a few minutes with a voice guiding me to a totally silent twenty minutes or

more in which I seek the sometimes-elusive sense of living in just one moment and of being a part of the universe.

Many people have some reservations about meditation—maybe strongly negative feelings. Some Christians object to its association with Buddhism. Some scientists and intellectuals think meditation is soft and sentimental, a kind of superstition. And some atheists associate meditation with prayer. Meditation practitioners usually describe what they do as spiritual rather than religious. Many Christians ignore a long tradition of contemplative prayer that is very close to meditation. In recent years, meditation has become quite popular, and a body of scientific research now exists that validates physical and emotional benefits of meditations. I have noticed that its popularity and its sometimes overly zealous proselytizers might have actually had a negative effect, but interest in meditation is still growing.

I *will* get to my assigned topic today, lovingkindness, but I first want to talk about kindness. As I began to plan what I would say today, I focused for a while on love, thinking it is the head word in this combination. Then I thought more about kindness and how love inspires kindness. My mother preached the gospel of kindness from my earliest memory. When I saw a “Be kind” bumper sticker several years ago, I was inspired to put up a little sign—just a square of paper really— that reads, “Rule #1: Be Kind.” It’s taped to the door of a cabinet in my granddaughter’s play area. All four of my grandchildren know that when I ask, “What’s Rule #1?” I think they

aren't being kind. Encouraged by their mothers as much as by me, these six- and nine-year-olds *are* already kind most of the time.

The ordinary, everyday kindnesses are important. Sharing a toy. Looking someone in the face and smiling. Inviting someone with two items to move in front of you in the grocery line. Holding the hand of a friend who is facing serious surgery. Or a root canal. Not losing your temper when you are transferred to the ninth person with poor English skills and have to begin again to explain your problem. But there is a step beyond.

Finally, lovingkindness: The hymn we sang a few minutes ago is based on the Buddhist metta meditation, which can help us move from everyday kindness to lovingkindness—to add the altruistic love sometimes called by the Greek word *agape*. When I think of lovingkindness, an example comes easily to mind. I think of all that our members, Joan and Segundo Velasquez, have accomplished and inspired others to accomplish in Bolivia.

The word *metta* from the Pali language of India is translated “lovingkindness.” *Metta* means “an unconditional, inclusive love, a love with wisdom. It has no conditions; it does not depend on whether one ‘deserves’ it or not. . . . There are no expectations of anything in return. This is an ideal, pure love, which everyone has in potential.” [based on teaching by Stephen Smith; <http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/tree/loving-kindness>] The concept of lovingkindness is not exclusive to Buddhism. Loving

kindness, two words, is an English term coined by Myles Coverdale in his 1535 translation of the Christian Bible. It has been used to translate into English words in the sacred texts of Hinduism and Jainism as well as Judaism and Christianity. By the way, that last statement highlights the fact that many religions have valued lovingkindness.

A passage from Buddha's teaching is recognized as supporting metta meditation, something like the seed from which such meditation grows. Here is that passage, in part:

This is what should be done
by one who is skilled in goodness,
and who knows the path of peace. . . .
Wishing: In gladness and in safety
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born,
May all beings be at ease!
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,

So with a boundless heart
should one cherish all living beings. . . .
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

From this teaching of the Buddha, many variations on the metta or lovingkindness meditation have been written, all with the idea of focusing on different individuals with thoughts of lovingkindness. It is striking how many variations there are on the content of the meditations and the suggested use of those meditations. The hymn we sang shortens the message but is still in keeping with one written by Thich Nhat Hanh that I use in the following discussion.

Now I'm going to ask you to do something. I will read the first of a set of metta meditations. I invite you to allow this to be a guided meditation, allowing or urging your mind to follow the words I read and trying to feel the words, make them your own. Just sit comfortably and relax, perhaps placing your hands loosely palms up on your knees. You might close your eyes or you might watch the flickering flame in our chalice. I hope you will try to focus on the words as I read them. And don't be afraid of some change.

May I be peaceful and light in my body and in my mind.

May I be safe and free from accidents.

May I be free from anger, unwholesome states of mind, fear, and worries.

May I know how to look at myself with the eyes of understanding and compassion.

May I be able to recognize and touch the seeds of joy and happiness in myself

May I learn how to nourish myself with joy each day.

May I be able to live fresh, solid, and free.

May I not fall into the state of indifference or be caught in the extremes of attachment or aversion.

How was that? I think a guided meditation like this is the easiest kind to begin with. One of the things I like about this particular metta meditation is that its author says, “We begin practicing this love meditation on ourselves because until we are able to love and take care of ourselves, we cannot be of much help to others.” The American woman who became a Buddhist monk, Pema Chodron, says “Did you know before the heart sends out blood to the rest of the the body, it first feeds itself?” And Buddha said, “People usually think they love themselves. But because they are not mindful, they say and do things that create their own suffering. [*Teachings on Love*]

The other thing I respect about this particular version of the metta meditation is that it expects us to spend weeks or perhaps months of practicing with ourselves as the subject. When we have absorbed the lesson of truly loving ourselves, we can then focus on others, each time we focus on an individual spending as much time as needed, perhaps weeks or months. After ourselves, we address of wishes to someone we like but do not have deep feelings about. Next, focus on someone we love. And finally we are ready to focus on someone we think of as an enemy, the mere thought of whom makes us suffer or

feel angry. Sometimes a fourth focus is added to address “all beings” with thoughts of lovingkindness.

This process of spending weeks or months working through each stage of learning loving kindness is but one way to practice metta meditation. I have not yet committed myself to that length of time, but I find inspiration in shorter metta meditations, including ones that simply express a wish to be filled with lovingkindness, as does the hymn we sang earlier, and ones directed at “all beings.”

Being a product of an instant-gratification culture, as I prepared for today, I thought perhaps I could step quickly through focusing on a representative of each of these different groups. Indeed, some sources describe moving through the process in one sitting. Then I thought of a real challenge. After reading the meditation addressing lovingkindness to myself, I decided to take a a short cut. I would skip to the later stage of focusing on “an enemy” or someone I hate. The problem, which I have encountered before, is that I really don’t think or can’t admit, that I hate anyone, and I can’t think of anyone I consider as an enemy. Do you see what’s coming? That orange face popped into my mind, and I knew that *there* was a real challenge. Here’s how it went:

Mr. Trump, may you be peaceful and light in your body and in your mind.

Mr. Trump, may you be safe and free from accidents.

Mr. Trump, may you be free from anger, unwholesome states of mind, fear, and worries.

Mr. Trump, may you know how to look at yourself with the eyes of understanding and compassion.

Mr. Trump, may you be able to recognize and touch the seeds of joy and happiness in yourself.

Mr. Trump, may you learn how to nourish yourself with joy each day.

Mr. Trump, may you be able to live fresh, solid, and free.

Mr. Trump, may you not fall into the state of indifference or be caught in the extremes of attachments or aversion.

Please understand that I am not being flippant or attempting to be humorous. I hope that I do not seem to making fun of Mr. Trump (Another of my mother's admonitions was to not makes fun of anyone). I sincerely believed it would be worthwhile to address wishes of lovingkindness to Mr. Trump. I admit did find it easier to make him the subject of the metta meditation if I avoided seeing or hearing him on television news shows. I feel reasonably sure that my meditation hasn't changed him. The interesting thing is that I have changed. I feel moments of compassion for him, thinking about how unhappy and insecure he must be, how impoverished a childhood he might have had, how empty his life must have been of family and friends who loved and corrected him. I feel uncomfortable with my knee jerk negative reactions to him as negative. I haven't become a supporter of his, but as I speed walked through the process designed to be slow and thoughtful, I did achieve within myself moments of the lovingkindness that is the goal.

When I asked Lisa Leonhart to read my sermon and give me some feedback, she had a suggestion:

I am thinking about how wonderful it would be if we could get hundreds of protestors that just chanted the meditation from your sermon. No matter what group or individual you were protesting, it would change the narrative. It would probably drive Trump crazy if there was a 24-hour-a-day vigil around the White House, just sending him lovingkindness.

My earnest and naive alter ego thinks, “Why not? It could work.”

In *Teachings on Love*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes of his own experience with lovingkindness meditation. These are his words.

During the Vietnam War, I meditated on the Vietnamese soldiers, praying they would not be killed in battle. But I also meditated on the American soldiers and felt a very deep sympathy for them. I knew that they had been sent far away from home to kill or be killed, and I prayed for their safety. That led to a deep aspiration that the war would end and all Vietnamese and all Americans to live in peace. Once that aspiration was clear, there was only one path to take—to work for the end of the war. When you practice love meditation, you have to take that path. As soon as you see the person you call your enemy is also suffering, you will be ready to love and accept them.

The idea of “enemy” vanishes and is replaced by the reality of someone who is suffering and needs our love and compassion.