

**Mount Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church**

**“We Are/Not Enough”**

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We are enough. And, at the same time, we are not enough. Whatever we are, we are here together this morning in pursuit of these matters of ultimate concern. We are here, seeking together to answer the question, how are we best to live with one another? And we must take care that our comforts and accomplishments, which are the products of our desires and ambitions, do not replace or subvert the deeper quests of bringing forth truly beloved community; and working towards claiming the full potential of our individual personhoods. We must be held accountable to a higher good than just our own desires; and we must take our direction from a greater vision than just the growth of this community.

We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the kingdom of heaven. We are a gentle angry people, and we are singing for our lives. All of these expressions of community, solidarity, and firmness of common purpose have something in common with each other: each points to a greater source, an uplifting greater good, something greater than the sum of its parts. This is the meaning of the title of my sermon today: we are enough, because we are all we've got; and we are not enough because, to paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, without a star to hitch our individual and collective wagons to, we have a powerful human tendency to hitch ourselves to any flickering light we may happen upon.

And believe me, we need the constancy and power of a star or something like it to set a course by if we are to avoid the seduction of false idols and claim our potential, our common task, which I believe is to better learn to bless the world in the spirit of love. We are living in a paradox, where our hope and our struggle can appear the same, where we can help to save one another but can't do it without dedication to something greater.

What I want to talk about today is our endlessly creative potential for idolatry and addiction. Idolatry is a term that I originally found challenging and alien, but one that I came to find very helpful as I learned different ways to frame it. In my understanding, we do idolatry (as individuals and as communities) when some aspect of our life takes space and energy away from the things that are of true and lasting importance—when something in your life becomes more important than your life. Idolatry carries the danger of becoming addiction if it isn't recognized and transformed. Its immediate effect is a

kind of anesthesia, a distraction from the pain of living, an escape from what are not-so-helpfully called "negative" emotions. In the longer term, it can distort our dreams, it can take what is best about us, what will give our lives meaning and purpose and use them to take meaning away from our lives, to separate ourselves from the people around us.

It is important to note that idolatry, or putting the Good in place of God (in one formulation), is warned against across many religions. The first commandment that God gave to Moses in the book of Exodus was a prohibition against making and worshipping idols, and idolatry is a potent issue today for many Jews and Christians. There is a Zen Buddhist koan about the danger of idolatry: if you meet the Buddha in the road, kill him. The meaning is that any idea of the Buddha that can be conceptualized by the intellect, by the rational mind is a false Buddha, and will distract the practitioner from the path towards enlightenment. The Holy Quran categorizes idolatry as a wholly unique and egregious form of sin, calling it shirk. Shirk ranges from assigning human or animal attributes to God, to acting out of ego and arrogance, to worshipping gods other than the One God, and to denying the existence of God.

While I'm speaking of religions, I want to lift up, so as to avoid confusion, the difference between an idol and an icon. Icons are an important aspect of Hinduism and of Eastern Christianities, for instance, and are images through which the divine can be directly present to the worshipper. Maybe one way to think of them is as true idols rather than false idols.

But our purpose right now is to explore the distractions, the false stars that have the power to pull us away from the spiritual growth we are called to, and that the world needs. There is a huge, interesting and seductive universe full of false stars out there. Some of them we fool ourselves into following, some are remarkably like the real thing, and all of them draw their seductive power from their resemblance to a true human need or pleasure.

We can be seduced by a sense of ourselves as powerful, competent, or necessary; we can be seduced by alcohol, drugs, or sex; we can be seduced by a sense of ourselves as powerless, weak, foolish, or irresponsible; we can be seduced by food, or television, or video games, or the internet—we humans have the amazing creative power to be distracted and consumed by just about anything we set our minds to. We have to be aware of our human tendency to over-pursue our personal satisfaction and pleasures. And this is another paradox, because those pleasures and satisfactions are the very things that make life worth living. But in the same way that too much spice and salt can ruin a lovingly prepared meal, idolatry can make our lives unpalatable.

In her book *Amazing Grace*, author and poet Kathleen Norris writes about idolatry, reframing that potentially loaded word as something more akin to what a Buddhist might speak of as attachment, or someone in recovery might call addiction. Addressing the broad span of these attachments that get in between us and our own lives, she says, “Idolatry makes love impossible. Perhaps that is why it is the first of all the commandments that God gives to Israel [in the book Exodus in the Hebrew Scriptures] ...If we break any of the other commandments...we have already broken the first one. We have already elevated ourselves and our perceived desires above all else.”

I’m preaching this today because this is a topic that I know very well from my own experience, in my own life, in my own heart; and I know the consequences of putting myself, of elevating my desires above everything else in my life. I am a recovering alcoholic. I am lucky, in the sense that I didn’t lose everything that gave my life meaning before I realized that I had a problem, as happens to so many other addicts and alcoholics. I also am not making any claim to have solved my own problems—far from it. In the last ten months, though, I have learned and grown in ways that were not possible earlier in my life. And I know that any sense of progress that I have in my heart is fleeting, and could be gone tomorrow. So I do not claim to have more than a small fraction of the whole truth, but I am called to speak whatever truth I have and it is in that spirit that I am talking with you today.

I know firsthand how idolatry and addiction can twist around one’s values, intentions, and worldview; how something, be it a foreign object, an idea, a concept or a pleasure can crowd out the truly important things in a person’s heart. In my own story, I didn’t drink to excess until I was in college, and then made up for lost time. I was a really good drinker, and since everyone around me drank as much (it seemed) as I did, I didn’t think for a moment that there was anything problematic about my relationship with alcohol. Drinking and partying just seemed to me to be a great way to unwind and socialize.

By the time I was a year into my career as a seminarian, though, I was starting to develop some concerns. For one thing, I found myself drinking several times each week, and often setting out to drink more than the other people I was with. At parties, I would figure out ways to drink stealthily, so that people wouldn’t know that I’d had as much to drink as I had. I was drinking alone when I had the chance. I drank to escape, I drank to disappear, I drank to avoid unpleasant emotions.

The sense of fun and freedom that I associated with drinking and partying in college was slowly being replaced with a feeling of routine, and even obligation. I wonder if that’s the way that a bone feels as it turns into a fossil, as the true essence of what it had been is slowly leached out, and replaced with something hard and unyielding. Because that’s how my life was starting to feel, like I was losing a sense of flexibility, and of truth to

myself. In retrospect, the idolatry of drinking alcohol that I had been cultivating was indeed beginning to calcify into an addiction.

Because alcohol had been a constant in my young adult life, I didn't have a point of reference, but as I look back now I can see that a lot of my patterns and behaviors that I assumed were just part of my natural personality make-up actually had at least a little (and in most cases probably a lot, if I'm honest with myself) to do with drinking almost daily. As a grad student I could skate by pretty well. The stakes were really not that high in grad school, and there was a culture of drinking and social capital that I was able to navigate very well. I was getting good grades and I was having a lot of social fun, but as I look back I can see that I was fraying around the edges. I couldn't stick with a schedule or maintain a calendar for the life of me, and planning anything even a week or two into the future was painfully difficult.

I was unconnected to any sense of ambition or hope for myself—I couldn't tell you what I wanted to be doing in five or ten years; and I was unaccountable—I would promise to do something, and then completely forget; and I would be so ashamed that it would make me feel like having a drink. I was getting swept away by feelings of jealousy and self-righteousness. I was increasingly wrapped up in myself, and less and less present to the needs of my friends and community. I knew that there was something out of balance in my life but I didn't have the perspective to see what it was, much less to do anything about it.

Many of you know that I am a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. This is my religious home; this is who I am; and my faith is what has given me my values and my drive. However, one of the shadow aspects of Unitarian Universalism to my mind is that, in a cultural sense, we put a lot of stake on the powers of intellect and reason, on our individual capacities to transform situations through reflection and deep thought and a lot of research.

I know from personal experience that there are situations that are impossible to reason one's way out of. I was completely unable to reason my way into new habits and patterns. My intellect, my rational powers, told me that my drinking was out of hand, that I was lying to the people I was closest to, that I was becoming untrustworthy—I knew rationally, very clearly that I needed to stop, or at least to slow down, and I would say to myself, okay, that's it—no more drinking during the week, I'll wait until the weekend. The next day maybe I would have a bad day at school or work, or maybe I felt upset that I'd forgotten to do something that I said I was going to do, and tell myself that I deserved a drink after such a hard day, just to take the edge off my stress. Just like that, my promise to myself would be broken. My word to myself and to others was less and less valuable.

The first few months of my time as a resident chaplain at Saint Francis Memorial Hospital I was able to keep up the act that in some ways I'd been putting on for several years, but in January of 2009 it all came crashing down. In one of the most painful days of my life I heard in exacting and painful detail from my coworkers and supervisors about how my word didn't seem to have any meaning, about how I couldn't be trusted or counted upon to do the things that I said I was going to do, and how I was making more work for everyone else through my, for lack of a better word, sloppiness, and how it seemed as though was drifting away from the people that I was in this intimate working and learning relationship with. My supervisor used a metaphor that really spoke to me at the time, and I'll share it with you today. He said, Andy, it seems like you think you're sitting out on a boat in the middle of a foggy lake: you don't have any points of reference, you don't have any direction, you don't know where to turn, and you don't know where the shore is. And what you don't see, he said, is that the boat you're sitting in is tethered to the shore, and we're all standing over here and all you have to do is start reeling some of that line in. That metaphor, hearing those words really turned a switch in my heart. It made clear to me how far it felt like I had been drifting, and how illusory that drift actually was if I had the courage—and I was being encouraged!—if I took that encouragement to pull in some of that line.

So I can tell you that I know the pain that comes with being more dedicated to alcohol than I was to my own ambitions, my relationships with the people about whom I care most, the value of my word, and also I know that my story is a mild one on the spectrum of addiction. And I know that there are people in this room who could speak to that pain as well as I can. And if you're comfortable, I would ask you, if you in your life have been touched by addiction—in your own life or in the life of someone you care about, it doesn't matter—if you've been touched by addiction I ask you to raise your hand for a moment. Who here has been touched by addiction? [3/4 of congregation raise a hand]

Take a moment to look around, with your hand still raised if it is raised. We hear a lot of talk about the spiritual emptiness in our culture. We hear a lot of talk about how we seem to be missing something. I would say that is an emptiness that doesn't extend just to our culture, that it is a spiritual emptiness that is endemic to the human condition. When we look around, and we see these raised hands and we see the faces of people that we know and care about, we see the real, powerful face of the spiritual emptiness: that so many in this room, this one small room, in one church, on one Sunday morning, have been impacted by what is in truth a misplaced spiritual quest of themselves or someone that they care about. This is a pain that is familiar to all of us, in one way or another, a hole in each of our hearts that is the work of a lifetime to learn to fill in a way that is healthful to ourselves and to those we care about.

The great psychologist Carl Jung believed that alcoholism and all addictions (even insubstantial addictions, for instance to power, money, and influence) were the symptom of a spiritual void, and in a brief correspondence with Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, offered a brief Latin pun: "Spiritum contra spiritus", by which he meant "the spiritual conquers Alcohol(ism)." And this definitely has been my experience. In the brief time that I have been sober, I have felt in myself a growing sense of capability and responsibility; I have able to learn to be more present to the concerns of people around me; I have come into contact with my own ambitions and priorities for my life; my sense of my boundaries (where I stop and another person begins) and my sense of accountability to others is much clearer; and I have been more open to spiritual practice and developing a more intimate relationship with the mystery of God, the unknowable and yet so knowable connecting force that has more names and aspects than can be conceived of, but whose highest name is always love.

This has been a sort of miniature tour through my own spiritual journey, and being as different from one another as we are I know that the spiritual tasks of others can look very different from mine. And I want to be clear that I am not arguing for prohibition of alcohol, that alcohol is evil or wrong; honestly I believe that there are people whose spiritual lives could benefit from drinking more. There's no one right answer, and I'm not arguing for goodness or virtue. I'm arguing for responsibility and connection. I'm arguing for love. It's all very personal work, and it's a paradox that we need accountability to one another in order to see what the shape of our work needs to be.

Accountability to others is a big piece of what saved me at my lowest moments—in middle school when I was socially outcast and awfully lonely, I was saved by my knowledge that there were places in the world where my presence and more importantly my absence mattered. And in seminary, when my drinking was veering out of my control and I was trying to control so many other things in order to compensate, my coworkers saved me by confronting me with my behavior and the impact that I was having on them—they lifted up how different the impact of my behavior was from my intentions. Since becoming sober, I have benefitted greatly from the help and mentoring and leadership of others, and I have tried to be helpful in turn; but if I am honest (and if nothing else, I am being honest) what has been transforming me, what continues to transform me, is my relationship with what people in 12 Step programs would call a higher power.

Theologian Martin Buber named our human capacity to make and honor our promises as that which makes us human, and I would say that one aspect of embracing our humanity through our commitments is that it is an antidote to idol-worship, and to idolatry and addiction. Our words to others, our bonds of obligation, ensure that we are held in a larger web of the promises and love—the interdependent web of all existence of which

we are a part, which we covenant to lift up and honor. To me the rope of that web is God in the form of the way we treat one another, and in the way we reverence the world and other people. I believe that we cannot confer humanity upon ourselves. I believe that we do have an inherent worth and dignity, but that it is not automatic. I believe that our souls are gifts that we bestow on one another. I believe with all my heart that we truly cannot do the difficult and painful work of being alive alone.

It is crucial that we come together, and it is crucial that we know that our commitments do not end at the walls of this building, that we are dedicated to more than just the friendships and support that we have with one another. For me, the good news comes in the double title of this sermon, two statements that honestly contradict each other—I don't know how it is that they are both true at the same time, but they are. We are enough, because we have to be enough: because we are all that we have. And at the same time, any of us left to our own devices can drift into this self-satisfying idolatry that I've been trying to describe and give some shape to this morning. We can drift into this self-satisfaction even as a community—this is not only a peril for individuals. I know from the times when I've edged in this direction that this self-indulgence very rapidly grows unsatisfying and confining, and would ultimately be deadly for me. It might be my physical death, and it would certainly be the death of the person I know I can be and the person that I hope to God I am becoming.

My life, and I hope this is true for your lives, is most satisfying when I am active and working with people around me. I gain vitality through accountability. And I gain stability and direction by working to stay in relationship with a power that is incomprehensibly greater than myself, which I see most clearly in the invisible spark of life that each of us has as our own completely unique and original gift, and which also binds us in relationship with each other. That spark of life that connects us intimately with every living thing—from viruses and bacteria, to Labrador Retrievers and Red-tailed Hawks, to Redwood trees and lichens.

The work of creating a world where love can more fully flower is, I believe, our ultimate calling and purpose. It is an infinite and impossible-seeming task when you think about how large this world is, and then how tiny it is in the context of the vastness of the universe. It is work that can seem daunting, hard, and lonely. But as I look around this room and see your faces, and as I think of all the amazing people that I have been blessed with as co-workers and co-creators in this truly holy work, and as I think about the resiliency and power of the life-force that moves us, shapes us, and directs us, my heart swells with gladness and hope.