

## **Hold On To What Is Good**

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June 16, 2024

A few times a month I pop onto the church's Facebook page to see what's there. Of those of you who have Facebook, do you love it or hate it? I have to confess, I'm not a huge fan. (Hopefully their algorithm doesn't shut down our broadcast this morning for having said that.) While it is true social media has become an important tool in ministry, personally I find so much of it soooo boring. I mean, I get staying connected but I don't really care that the friend of a friend claims to have just had the best cobb salad ever. Or to watch two friends who don't know each other trade insults over political differences. And I surely don't need to see yet another saccharin platitude emblazoned over a picture of tropical sunset instructing me to how to feel. But hey, maybe I'm just a cranky guy in his fifties with something...anything...better to do.

But then again, there have been a few times when, out of the blue, a friend request comes from someone who had been a really important part of my life at one time. Indeed, several years back...my best friend from childhood, someone I remember spending nearly everyday of my life with from 1st grade until high school contacted me on Facebook. We talked some via email and then decided to meet for lunch. It turns out he lives about an hour from me.

We spent some of our four-hour plus lunch talking about our lives since we last saw each other, but mostly we talked about our childhood when we were best friends. As we sat there recalling those days, my friend's expression suddenly changed. He looked as if he were about to cry... and then with tears welling in his eyes, he said, "remember the grilled cheese?" I paused and then remembered my mother often made the two of us grilled cheese and tomato soup for lunch. "Yeah, I remember," I said, somewhat confused by his tears and thinking...geez, I know it was just Kraft Singles on white bread and Campbell's soup, but it wasn't that bad. Then he said, "You have no idea how important that was to me." He continued, "I loved coming to your

house. It felt like a home. Being there, being cared for, meant so much to me.”

The way my friend described it, you would think he was describing some holy place, a sort of sanctuary.

I think that’s exactly what he was describing.

For his tears reminded me, my friend’s home life, with his father and two brothers was, at best, difficult. Certainly it was no sanctuary.

A Google search of the word sanctuary returned fairly predictable results as did searches of quote databases and my theological library. Invariably sanctuary was defined or spoken of in these sources as either a physical place or a state of heart and/or mind. Surely it is both these things, but I wonder if it isn’t even more?

My friend held those grilled cheese and tomato soup lunches like a stone or other object people sometimes carry as a reminder of a place, feeling, or someone important. He carried that memory all these years not because he particularly loved grilled cheese and tomato soup. Indeed, more than feeding or satisfying his appetite, the experience I think, fed his spirit and soul. It was something good in his life, a good he held on to. It seems to me then, that sanctuary, in addition to a physical place or state of heart and mind, can also be defined as what is good, that is, an experience and memory we hold of something that feeds and sustains us.

Sanctuary as what is good.

Wendell Berry’s poem, “The Peace of Wild Things” speaks to this understanding of sanctuary. Amid the relentless angst of human existence and the mind’s habitual preoccupation and subsequent fear of life’s next moment, the poet goes out seeking sanctuary, seeking what is good, something that will deliver him from the anxiety of uncertain tomorrows that he might live, however briefly, the promise of today.

And so he goes down by the water and pauses. And in that pause, in “the presence of still water,” he sees life as it is...as the mystics of every age and

faith have spoken in one way or another, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” (Julian of Norwich). And in that moment of awareness, he releases his fears, he “rests in the grace of the world, and is free.” It is this experience that now feeds and sustains him. It is his sanctuary, something he can recall or reconstruct when, as he writes, “despair for the world grows in him.” He has found what is good, a good he can hold onto.

Now, what about us gathered here today, this last Sunday of the regular church year at Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society?

Way back at our first worship service of this church year in September, I spoke about longing and being a hungry people. We have now gathered week after week for ten months. We have come together for worship, for meetings, for choir, faith formation, fund raising, social action, and social events, pastoral care, and community service. We have shared tears of joy and sorrow, talked about our hopes and dreams, spoken our concerns and fears. For some of us the church has been a place to get away, to find respite for a while from what often feels like a chaotic world. For others the church has been a place to learn how to engage more actively and deeply in the world. Still for others it has been a place to be in multi-generational community with others in a way that is increasingly rare outside these walls.

The question or really invitation I have for you today is to think about in what way has this place, this community, and your relationship with it, provided you sanctuary, a good that feeds and sustains you. What is it that you will carry from this place and hold on to as we move into summer and some of us travel from this place or community until September? Put another way, what good have you experienced or discovered here that will continue to feed and sustain you in the world, a world that will test and try to break you?

I can't answer these questions for you. You must answer them for yourself. I did however ask myself these questions as well and can at least share with you the good I will hold on to.

I've heard about ministers who, when they write their sermons arrange photographs, or more often imagine in their mind, their parishioners sitting

atop their computer screen. I do something like this myself, although I don't imagine or visualize you all atop my computer screen. I have a MacBook Air, you wouldn't all fit. So instead, I see you in my mind's eye, seated here in the sanctuary even to the point of visualizing you in your "usual" seats. As I think of and see you I start to think about things going on in your lives, things you've shared or that I've recently become aware of... struggles with family, illness, or loss, waiting for test results, but also milestones, celebrations, and achievements. I think of times you've made me laugh, times I've felt inspired, hopeful, times I've been disappointed or irritated, and the subtle and not so subtle suggestions you've sometimes made.

And as I do this I become profoundly aware and humbled by not only the freedom but the responsibility of holding this pulpit...I'm moved by the trust you place in me to offer or point to something that will feed and sustain you through words and actions that are affirming, empowering, or challenging. I'm also mindful of the trust I place in you to be present and engaged when you're here, even when you don't like or want to hear what I say or do from time to time. This kind of mutuality is sacred to me, it is a good rooted and nurtured in a community willing to listen to and hear one another. I don't have to tell you how rare that is in our world...the stories and images from our televisions, radios, phones, and newspapers are evidence enough.

The good I hold on to and carry with me beyond these walls is the spirit of mutuality I experience here at SUUS, a true sense and appreciation of our interconnectedness. It is through SUUS's...through your...through our practice of mutuality that I find sanctuary, a good to hold on to, that feeds and sustains, and indeed renews me.

Sanctuary as what is good.

Some of you I'm sure are certain of your sanctuary, the good you have found here and hold on to. Others may less certain right now and that's okay. With time and reflection your answer will become more clear and may even change, expand, or deepen. The important thing is to ask the question now and then.

What is the good you hold on to from this place?

Now, remember that shell you received? (Note to reader: Those present in the sanctuary that morning received a seashell) That's yours to take with you today. Put it somewhere where you will see it often this summer. And in the same way I invited you to take a moment to look at it and to note its color, shape, feel, whatever strikes you about it..., let that shell inspire in you a habit, when you're away from this place, to pause and take note of what part of SUUS stays with you and continues to feed and sustain you beyond its walls.

What you notice or discover is your sanctuary, a good to hold on to until we gather together again be it a week, a month, or a season from now.

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be