

“Encourage one another in the Journey”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 12/29/19

We are all on a journey. We always have been. We descend from people and peoples on journeys. In general, as a species, we have always been on a journey. It is our mentality, our heart, our framework that makes the journey meaningful or not. When Genevieve, Jim Cox, and I were driving to Yogaville a couple of months ago, we were excited. I was in the driver’s seat, Jim and Genevieve my passengers, and we were all so excited to go to Yogaville together—where we would meet other friends and have a powerful spiritual experience together. For me and Genevieve, it was our first time going—so we were especially excited. Then, something happened on the way. Some of us got hungry. We decided to stop on the way to eat, and again got lost in the company with one another—and though we were delayed in getting to Yogaville (which was in and of itself certainly exciting), the time together on the journey was just as rich. We reasoned in that moment that the journey can at times be as important if not more important than the destination itself. Just as the Choctaw people were on a journey spanning many migrational years from the Bering Strait below the ice shelf to what would be their eventual home on the East bank of the Mississippi River—the story of the journey is quintessentially human. Their later forced migration on the Trail of Tears into what would be called Oklahoma almost 200 years ago now, would be another story of journey, of perseverance—as my own Great Great Grandmother Hokte’s survival as a little girl on the trail can attest. Our journeys are each filled with trauma and joys, pain and celebrations—relative to our unique experiences in life. But our mentality is also uniquely our own. How do we approach our journey.

In the story of the Choctaw people, the two brothers Chahta and Chicksa led their people from place to place as they journeyed from the Bering Strait through the Northwestern part of the Continent, heading South. Each time they would stay in a location for a period of time, the story is they would erect a long wood pole into the ground, and would wait until it fell a certain direction, and then follow the path the pole pointed towards. They listened to the signs of their journey through the pole; whether it is symbolic or literal, the idea that we are listening attentively to the events and personalities in our life, and match it with our heart—our mentality—is nothing new. It is as old as humankind. Adam expressing his need to God in the Garden of Eden; he needed a partner, a lover. The honesty of expressing our needs ebb and flow in our lives, don’t they? But until we are honest, there is never change, and true satisfaction. We must express our needs and then be courageous enough to act on them.

The Choctaw people traversed the continent in search for a better way of life. Europeans escaping monarchy and religious persecution sought a better way of life when they arrived to America centuries ago. However, with it came an ideology, a mentality of “manifest destiny.” Thomas Berry writes, *“When we first arrived as settlers, we saw ourselves as the most religious of peoples, as the most free in our political traditions, the most learned in our universities, the most competent in our technologies, and the most prepared to exploit every economic advantage. We saw ourselves as a divine blessing for this continent”* (“World of Wonder” essay in the collection *Spiritual Ecology*). It’s all about our mentality, our frame of mind: How we approach things. We must make the conscious effort of removing our own egos from the equation (which is nearly impossible at times). Even John the Baptist in the height of his own successful ministry and public, social movement said of Jesus, *“You must increase, I must decrease.”* Are we here to force others to mirror our own journey or instead to encourage one another in our

autonomous journeys, simply finding intersections of connection rather than creating obstacles and right-degree turns for one another? We are not here to clone but instead to learn from one another and foster cohesion through mutual respect.

This brings me to my next point, and tis the season: We must look at sudden catastrophes and negative phenomena that force our journeys to bend quickly and often drastically—as in the case of Joseph and Mary with young Jesus. We learn from scripture that Jesus as a toddler was whisked away into Egypt, a foreign land, when King Herod sought to have him killed. Joseph and Mary left their homeland for another in order to save their son's life. They did all of this to protect their lives and that of their child. They followed the *"falling pole"* sign as laid out by the Magi from the East. Then, when returning later, they again settled in a place that had not been their home: Nazareth in the region of Galilee. They were forced to relocate, over and over. Migration patterns are often complex but nevertheless real for preservation of life. This is nothing new at all. I believe as followers of Christ, the presence of which embodied this very child who personally experienced so much upheaval and forced migration in first Century Judea, we should approach others in similar forced circumstances with a great deal of compassion. It is all a part of a tenant we hold so dear within our community—to *honor the journey of others. Not to judge it.*

We should approach it as we do all things, with Compassion. As Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Buddhist teacher so poignantly expresses, *"Compassion is the mind that removes the suffering that is present in the other."* Love one another, plain and simple. Love each other in each other's suffering. Do not shy away from this. And do not judge the journey of another; you were not there. You do not know what they have been through. Instead, love, love, love.

And then you may say, there is too much suffering in the world, how can my investing in one be of any significance to the trajectory of this world? It harks back to what Rabbi John Nimon shared with us last year. *Like the man on the beach who sees all the star fish washed ashore, literally littering the shore line – he comes across a boy vigorously tossing them back in. There were thousands more to go, so the man stopped him and shared what wisdom he could muster, "There's too many. You'll never save them all. Why do it at all? Let nature take its course." The boy picks up another starfish and throws it into the waves, and without making eye contact states matter-of-factly, "I saved that one." And then he does it to another, and repeated, "I saved that one." The man moved by the young one's tenacity and heart, began shucking as many back into the water as his arms could bear to do that day.* [paraphrased]

It starts with us. Love one another; it starts with ONE. And it makes all the difference in the world. The Scripture says *"Love the foreigner, for you were once a foreigner."* Respect everyone's journey, even those you do not understand. The mystery is part of the compassion that actually makes sense. Simply love another in their suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh wisely says, *"True love needs understanding."* And I add only this, the inverse is also true, **"True understanding needs love."**

Shalom