Want What You Have

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The late Forrest Church was a great minister, and well deserved the title which All Souls in New York bestowed on him a few years ago when he retired from being their senior minister – he was called Minister of Public Theology. This title recognized what many of us had known for some time: he belonged not just to that church but to the whole movement and to the rest of the country. I remember after the attacks of 9/11, Forrest Church seemed to be everywhere on TV, trying to help make sense of it all.

He was a colleague of mine for my entire time in the ministry, and I heard him speak on several occasions and met him once, when I was serving as interim minister in Staten Island in 2007-08, and Forrest had the entire New York Metro District Ministers chapter to his apartment in Manhattan for a post-Christmas party. At that point, it appeared that his cancer was in remission, and we talked about his various scholarly projects. He shared an interest with me on the religious foundations of the United States, and he was generous enough to give me his latest book on the subject. Two week after that party, he found that his cancer had come back with a vengeance, and there was no course of treatment which could save him. His response to this news was typical Forrest. He decided to write a book about it. The book however, is anything but typical. In *Love and Death,* a minister loks at his own death against the backdrop of his entire ministry and his entire learning about religion.

At one point, he lets us know about a mantra that he has been using since shortly after 9/11, a simple guide for living contained in three phrases: Want what you have, be who you are, do what you can. This sermon and the next two will try to plumb the depths of this three-part prescription for life.

Want what you have. It seems like such clear, conventional wisdom. It says live your life within boundaries. It is right up the alley with William Henry Channing's symphony: To live content with small means. And it is consonant with Henry David Thoreau as he shouts simplicity, simplicity, simplicity.

It seems almost to violate the spirit of the saying to try to extract more meaning out of it. And yet, I have the sense that if we hold it up to the light, if we shake it, it may yield yet more richness.

When we hold it up to the light, when we consider it in the context of ordinary speech, we observe that Dr. Church has reversed the conventional order of a common phrase. The

conventional phrase is “have what you want.” Reversing the order of words in a well-known phrase is a rhetorical figure known as anastrophe – no, not catastrophe – and Dr. Church is very fond of it.

In the conventional phrase, have what you want, the wanting logically comes before the having. Let’s say you are at a restaurant having lunch with a friend. As you look at the menu, your friend says “this is my treat today, have whatever you want.” This removes the constraint of money from your choice, and the only question you need to confront is one of taste: what do you feel like eating at this moment? What is it that you want?

Once you have decided what you want, then you can have that thing if it’s on the menu. Your wanting precedes your having. The wanting is the given, the having follows from that.

Of course you know that in real life, you don’t always know what you want. The wanting is not always a given. Or there are several layers of want. You’re supposed to be on a no-fat diet. But that steak is calling you. Do you want what you are supposed to want for your diet, or do you want to do what your body is craving?

And this dilemma can be cast as, do you want the short-term happiness of tasting delicious meat or do you want the longer term happiness of keeping off those ten pounds you lost this month or keeping your cholesterol low?

So even before we reverse the order of having and wanting, we’re running into trouble with this word want. Do we have any control over what we want? Can we choose what to want? Or are our desires driven by our instincts and circumstances? We can choose a lunch from the menu, but what is it that does the choosing, your long-term wants or your short-term ones?

Because if we can’t consciously choose our wants, we’re going to be in trouble when we reverse the word order as the mantra does: it says “want what you have.” Note that the mantra is grammatically in the imperative voice. It tells you to want, and it tells you the objects of your want. But in light of what I just said about wants, what good does telling yourself to want something do if you don’t have a choice, if you are driven by your wants instead of being in the driver’s seat?

The will can control behavior; you can make the good choice for lunch in the restaurant if you exercise some control over your appetites. But even as you’re ordering the tuna salad, something in your body is saying, “but I wanted the steak.” You haven’t conquered your want. You have just temporarily disregarded it.

So when Dr. Church suggests that we tell ourselves what to want, it’s quite a tall order. We’ll get back to this in a moment.

Let’s look at what the mantra projects as the objects of the wanting – “what you have.” Here we feel we are on firm religious ground. We in Western Culture will tend to hear this

negatively: “don’t’ want what you don’t have.” In this regard, the mantra echoes the Tenth Commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20: 17). Envy is one of the Roman Catholic Church’s Seven Deadly Sins.

The evils of jealousy and envy are woven into the warp and weft of our cultural fabric. The mythical fall of humankind in the Garden of Eden was occasioned by Eve and Adam wanting what they didn’t have, the knowledge of Good and Evil. Shortly thereafter, Cain killed Abel out of jealousy because he wanted the approval which God had given Abel for his offering. Jesus’s parable of the Prodigal Son is, from one angle, a tale about jealousy. Jealousy and suspicion drive the plot in Othello.

But I suspect that Buddhism looms larger in this mantra than does anything Western. The Buddha’s Four Noble Truths are (1) that all of existence involves dukkha, which is usually translated as suffering, but is more precisely translated as unsatisfactoriness; (2) the cause of dukkha is attachment, craving and clinging; (3) dukkha can be overcome; and (4) the way to overcome dukkha is to follow the eightfold path of Buddhist practice.

From a Buddhist point of view it is elementary that our unsatisfied wants lead to unhappiness. In Buddhist art and mythology, we encounter the hungry ghosts. There are hungry ghosts on the cover of the order of service today.

Originally the hungry ghosts were your deceased parents or other ancestors. They had raised you and given you life and you owed them a debt which could never be repaid. And they hang around the house. A professor of mine had done fieldwork in Sri Lanka, and reported that there, even very Westernized families will put aside a little bit of the food on their plate at the evening meal to fed the hungry ghosts.

The hungry ghosts have little mouths and little necks but large stomachs. They can never get enough, they can never be satisfied. They represent not only our parents but our unfulfilled desires. They represent what we want but do not have.

I have known many hungry ghosts in my time. When I was in my mid-forties, I took stock of where I was and I realized I wanted more out of life. I was not satisfied with where I had come to as a liberal lawyer in a small Southern City. I had a classic mid-life crisis. I had a vague but powerful sense that there was a road not taken, that if I had stayed in New England after college and law school, I wold have had a different life. I could see myself in church basements talking to sincere committed people about how to change the world. The women had long brown hair that was that was pinned up behind with those leather holders with a stick stuck through that used to be popular in the seventies. Whether there was anything to this or not, it was certainly a hungry ghost that helped call me into the ministry. And the ministry path, as I have said repeatedly, has taken me to some places I would never have predicted, like this little

spit of land out in the middle of the ocean. Along the way, some of the hungry ghosts I knew in my forties have dropped by the wayside, though they still write once in a while; I still have unsatisfied desires, but they are not the same desires that I had two decades ago.

I wonder how many of you have hungry ghosts. The broad outlines of the stories that many of you tell of your lives is that you had careers off cape in Hartford and Boston and New York, usually with a vacation place at the Cape, and then you retired and made your vacation place your permanent home. Maybe you have everything you want. It's pretty easy to want only what you have when you have all you want.

And indeed I think this mantra plays very differently for the young person or the mid-life person than it does later in life. The younger person's life may be defined by striving. For the older person, as T.S. Eliot says in "Ash Wednesday,"

I no longer strive to strive for such things,
Why should the aged eagle spread his wings?

The young person strives for what he or she doesn't have yet - educational degrees, credentials, optimal career development, a nice house, spouse, children, standing in the community. For that person, the mantra to want what you have may be seen as advice to stop going after these good things in life, and I have some problems with that. My daughter, three years out of college, decided she wanted to go to law school and applied herself much more intensively than she ever had in college. I would never have wanted to discourage her from pursuing that law degree by telling her to want only what she has.

But for older people, it seems to me that the hungry ghosts, the unsatisfied desires are of two kinds. One is the good things in life that you feel you didn't get or didn't get enough of. Didn't make enough money, not happily married, didn't have kids or had problems with them. The other is the things that you once had but no longer have. For some of you, a beloved spouse has died. For others, your retirement plan was decimated by the recession. For others, your health is compromised, perhaps to the point where you have suffered medical conditions which leave you unable to walk or read or drive or send you to the hospital regularly.

I said a few minutes ago that it is easy to want what you have when you have basically what you want. The hard thing is to want what you have when what you have is less than you once had. And it's particularly hard when what you have lost is your health.

To some extent, this church is haunted by hungry ghosts, ghosts of what we used to have. We want an active Sunday School with ten or fifteen children. We want 200 members as we had five years ago. We want more working people.

Yet we have just welcomed ten new members today. If we follow the mantra to want what we have, we appreciate and enjoy the fact that people of any station in life seem still to

want to join us on our journey.

Of course the mantra breaks down at the boundaries. Wanting is not a simple thing. You can both want the steak and order the salad. Buddhism sees that our individuality, our very sense of self, is an illusion. We are actually a bundle of desires and wills. Sometimes I think of myself as a legislature, and when I find myself doing something I said I would not do, I say, the pro-steak party has outvoted the pro-salad party.

And this is particularly true in a church, which is a collection of individuals. We don't have one want, we have multiple and often contradictory wants. We want to attract more young people, but we want keep the service aesthetic to the traditional Protestant hymn sandwich. We want to have a greater public witness on social justice issues, but we don't want to tax the limited energy of our congregants. We want to have programs at a time convenient for working people, but we don't want our older folks to have to drive at night.

Want what you have. I suppose the hardest time to apply this is when you're looking death itself in the face. Forrest Church's own witness is persuasive. After his diagnosis of cancer, he had every incentive to want something he did not have: his health. Yet he refused the alternative treatments that well-meaning parishioners pressed him to try, and made up his mind he was going to die. Here's how he describes how his mantra fits into his life circumstances, in a sermon from 2007.

"Finally, and most pointedly for me last year when I was diagnosed with cancer, want what you have. Did I want cancer? Of course not, but to obsess on the bad things that befall us squeezes out a just appreciation for the good. The time we waste on wishful thinking or regret detracts from the time we might devote to being grateful for all that is ours, here and now, to savor and embrace. For instance, if you are healthy today, don't take your health for granted. Want what you have. By the same token, when I was sick I remembered to want nothing more than the caring affection of those who loved me. Wanting what I had, my prayers were answered.

"In each of our lives not only will some rain fall, but fires will burn, the ground will shake, and one day, life itself will be exacted in payment for the gift of life bestowed. By wanting what we have, doing what we can, and being who we are, our cup will forever be half full, not half empty. Do these same things with reverence, humbled by awe, and our cup runneth over.

"The alternative, to long for what we lack—for things we have lost or shall likely never find—offers little save the sour pleasures of victimhood and regret. Fantasy is no better. Wishful thinking is both sloppy and sentimental. We should think to wish [there goes that anastrophe again!] instead for things a little closer at hand.

- The courage to bear up under pain
- The grace to take our successes lightly

• The liberation that comes with forgiveness
• The energy to address tasks that await our doing
• The meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others
• The patience to surmount things that are dragging us down
• The joy to be gained in even the smallest endeavor
• The wonder that lies between the sacred moments of our birth and death.

"I call this thoughtful wishing—wishing for what is ours, here and now, to have, do and be. Those are my words to live by. It's like dreaming the possible dream. All we have to do is put our heart in it. And there's one more bonus. Unlike wishful thinking, thoughtful wishes always come true."

Want what you have. It works, to the extent that we can control our wants, instead of being controlled by them. It is easier to follow when you have what you want, but if you practice it in the good times, it may see you through the bad.

Amen.

Readings Feb 28, 2010

Thoreau, *Walden*

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy,(18) made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as

for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. (From Chapter 2, Where I Lived, and What I Lived for).

William Henry Channing, “My Symphony” (SLT #484)

To live content with small means; to seek elegance rather than luxury, and refinement rather than fashion; to be worthy, not respectable, and wealthy, not, rich; to listen to stars and birds, babes and sages, with open heart; to study hard; to think quietly, act frankly, talk gently, await occasions, hurry never; in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious, grow up through the common--this is my symphony.