Do What You Can

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This is the third of three sermons considering the words to live by of the late Rev. Dr. Forrest Church: Want what you have, be who you are and do what you can. We will be looking at the third of these, but first you might notice the active verbs here are want, be and do. This reminds me of the graffiti on the bathroom wall of a college philosophy department, expressing the essence of three noted thinkers as follows: "To do is to be – Descartes; to be is to do – Sartre; do be do be do – Sinatra. "

A second thing to notice is that each of these phrases has what we might call a negative pregnant: "Want what you have" implies "don't want what you can't have" or "give up yearning for what is beyond your reach." "Be who you are" implies "don't try to be someone you aren't." And "Do what you can" implies "don't attempt something that is beyond your abilities."

Seen in this light, these are all advice about boundaries, about limits. They are founded on the assumption that there are boundaries and limits, that there is a what we have, who we are, and what we can do that is knowable, if not known, and that the prescription for happiness is to know those limits and stay within them. It is like Reinhold Niebuhr's famous Serenity Prayer, Lord give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference,

In this light, these phrases look like the most conventional of conventional wisdom, but I submit they are actually quite challenging.

For conventional wisdom among religious liberals is that there are no boundaries, or whatever boundaries exist are a bad thing, to be overcome. I have preached many times from Fred Small's great song "everything possible," with its lines "you can be anybody you want to be." The classic liberal position on psychology is that the brain is a blank slate and you can write anything on it, and you are free to change at any time. Stephen Pinker the evolutionary psychologist wrote a book a few years ago called *The Blank Slate* to refute this notion, saying that science shows that there are definite basic to the brain's make-up, that is, that there is such a thing as human nature and we ignore it at our peril.

But we liberals have a visceral distrust of boundaries. We love names like Doctors without borders; a Google search reveals how the concept has spread so there are now organizations called Students Without Borders, Engineers Without Borders, Teachers Without

Borders, Reporters Without Borders, even Mothers Without Borders.

We applaud these names, they make our hearts glad because it is a central value to push for inclusiveness. We love to quote Edwin Markham's poem, "He drew a circle that shut me out Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout, But love and I had the wit to win; We drew a circle that took him in.".

The bigger the circle, the better. Our religious sympathies are with those on the outside of the circle of privilege and societal power, and we push to have the circle drawn ever larger. After all, both Unitarians and Universalists have historically been regarded as heretics within the Christian west, and while we are no longer burned at the stake, our sympathies naturally to go to those who are excluded by the mainstream religions.

And yet, I and a lot of you entertain at the same time a suspicion that there are also good things about boundaries. The mistake we sometimes make is to confuse distinctions between people with distinctions between ideas, programs and actions. We are so against discrimination between people on the basis of race and sex and sexual orientation, disability, education etc. that we decide that all discrimination, all distinction, is a bad idea.

There is truth in one of the recurring criticisms of our movement: to try to stand for everything is to stand for nothing. When we embrace all ideas, what we are really embracing is incoherence. As a movement, we have opened our jaws wide and taken in pagans and Jews and Religious Naturalists and Humanists and Buddhists and Christians and Baha'is and we have the uneasy feeling that the result is a theology which is a mile wide and an inch deep. We have a thousand worthy projects, but when it comes to budget time, we have a hard time deciding what is the priority allocation of our funds, and where is it most important to spend our time.

Now this problem is not restricted to religious liberals. It is part of our Western culture generally. We are overloaded with information and at a loss how to choose what to read or pay attention to. Our affluence has given us an ability unprecedented in human history to travel, to experience a variety of life, and the explosion of information has made the most remote areas of human experience only a mouse click away from our own viewing. Boundaries can be good things, when we realize that as capable as we are, as talented as we are, we are only one person and have only so much time to do anything.

This is why we can bless Meg Barnhouse when she extols a boundary on one's responsibility in the context of a waitress: "Sorry hon, not my table." We tend to take on the pain and suffering of the world, and to think we ought to be doing something about it. There is a lot of pain. There is poverty, war, disease, ignorance, natural disasters, poor nutrition, nuclear weapons, global warming, nitrogen pollution, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, sexism and sex trafficking to name only a few. If we worried about all of them all the time, we could never get out of bed in the morning.

"Do what you can" is thus in part a negative prescription, it says don't try to do it all. You need to figure out the things that are your table and not your table, hon. Boundaries between people may be bad things, but boundaries in responsibility are good things, for they enable us to carve out a doable piece of work and focus on doing it as best we can.

The other side of the advice is positive. In this aspect, Dr. Church is restating the mantra of the Nineteenth Century Unitarian minister and writer Edward Everett Hale which we read earlier:

I am only one
But still I am one.
I cannot do everything,
But still I can do something.
And because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.[1]

This is very similar to Forrest Church's own take on his phrase, "do what you can":

> "This ... is more difficult than it sounds. How much wasted energy we spend trying to do what we can't. And how often we fail to optimize our efforts and thereby achieve the significant goals that do lie within our power. When we quit trying because we fail to achieve our pipe dreams, we overlook all we actually could accomplish by putting our shoulder squarely to the right wheel. To do what you can is to do all you can, not less, not more.[2]"

For our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, some action to improve the world was part of your Christian duty. And today, those of us who are theists tend to feel that God calls us to be her agents of doing good in the world, healing wounds, relieving suffering, offering love. Originally in Christian thought, deeds such as these, inspired by the actions of Jesus and the ministry he taught his disciples, were seen as the path to salvation.

Two passages in the Epistle of James are the touchstones for a ministry based on action: "But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." (James 1: 22), and "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2: 14-17).

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[1]# 457, Singing The Living Tradition

[2]http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/words-to-live-by.html

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the biggest theological issue between Luther and the Roman Catholic church was whether salvation was accomplished by faith alone, or by faith and deeds. It surprised me to look this up and discover that it was Luther the Protestant who took the position that salvation could be based on faith alone, *sola fides*, and the Roman Catholic position is that you needed both. It's confusing because in later thought, the positions kind of switched: Protestantism got so identified with action that it inspired Max Weber's classic sociological study, the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* in the early Twentieth Century. While we liberals have progressively moved away from salvation and the hereafter as a rewards system, liberal religion has always been heavily involved with action, both in a one-on-one sense and in social reformation and transformation efforts. A typical Nineteenth Century Unitarian perspective is Longfellow's Psalm of Life which we sang as the opening hymn. Instead of wallowing in concern for what's after death or saying that death makes life an empty dream, the poet says

Let us then be up and doing, with a heart for any fate, still achieving, still pursuing.

Do what you can. Let me recap where we have come thus far: we have considered the negative pregnant in this advice and concluded that we all have limits and that is a good thing. Boundaries are good things and we have to discern what is your table and what is not your table.

Then we looked at the positive and concluded that despite the limitations, there is a religious calling to be doing something. Ours is not a passive faith.

At this point, two more questions loom: First, what kinds of things are we called to do? and second, what happens when our abilities to do anything are diminished by age, disease or disability?

Some of you may be wondering why I chose the Mary Oliver poem I read earlier. It is a familiar one, and what most people like about it is the question with which it ends, which appears on innumerable bumper stickers, coffee mugs, posters and bracelets – "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

That question is very poignant for all, but perhaps most pertinent to those with most of their lives left in front of them. I chose the poem for another question it poses. The poet says

"I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?"

Tell me, what else should I have done, what else might I have done than falling down in the grass and being idle and blessed. One kind of down-to-earth answer we might give to this

question is volunteer at your local soup kitchen, write letters to your congressperson to get them to pass the health care legislation, tutor disadvantaged children in an after-school program, write a check to earthquake victims in Haiti. Is stopping to smell the flowers and roll in the grass a waste of time which might be more productively spent? I feel guilty for time spent on crossword puzzles. Who of us is not haunted by the idea that we have limited time here on this earth and the moments we spend idle and blessed are moments we aren't taking arms against the sea of troubles in the world.

To me, "do what you can" embraces the notion that a certain amount of rolling in the grass is a worthy use of your precious limited hours. It is worship, it is getting in touch with the ground of your being.

Longfellow's Nineteenth Century way of expressing action, "still achieving, still pursuing," has given way in our time to worship and love. It is good to make a difference, it is good to slay the dragons of evil and liberate the innocent damsels in distress, but in the end the measure of how you spent the summer day allotted you is not what you achieved but how much love you gave, to God, to nature, to the grasshopper, to your fellow person.

I know a wonderful lawyer named Leslye Orloff who is my role model for social activism: she took one area of human misery, battered immigrant women, and has worked on legislative solutions for twenty years to help give them the power they need in the system to protect themselves. Leslye didn't take on the whole world, just a little square of it, but with hard work and luck she has made that part of it more just and safer for the population she is concerned with.

But a lot of the suffering of the world doesn't have ready solutions. Much of a minister's work is concerned not with fixing problems, but with simply being present to them, and this is true of your lay ministry as well. When we go into someone's hospital room, we offer no cure, we couldn't begin to understand what all those tubes and machines are for. Yet we are doing something valuable, something loving, by being there.

And I think we are doing something equally worthy when we are out in the world noticing it. I do not know what a prayer is, says the poet, I do know how to pay attention. Paying attention is doing. Mindfulness is doing.

Being in touch with the ground of our being is doing, whether we call that ground God or nature or love or the world or our better selves. Faith without works is dead, but so is works without faith. It matter less what we do than the love that accompanies the doing. If we open our hearts to the joys as well as the injustice and hurts of the world, love will guide us through the doing.

There is obviously much more I could say on the question of what we should be doing, but I want to move along to touch on an even more important question for this congregation:

what happens when you can no longer do what you used to be able to? Many if not most of you have had to make a considerable transition in your lives already, from working long hard hours to retirement or semi-retirement. You have downsized your doing life by several notches. But some of you have been forced by medical limitations to downsize your activities a lot more. And it can be even more wrenching to adjust to physical limitations than it was to adjust to not having to get up at a particular time in the morning.

There is no satisfactory answer to this unsatisfactory situation. We have the accident or the illness and we go to the hospital and the hospital releases us to the rehab place and we begin the long slow process of recovery, knowing that we will probably not get back completely to where we were. It is discouraging and we can't resist the temptation to compare what we can do today to what we could do before the illness. But Universalism teaches us to measure up, not down. Take one day at a time. When we are recovering from an illness or accident, we try to do one more thing today than we could do yesterday and be satisfied with that.

Do what you can. What each of you can do is limited by your abilities and circumstances, and what we can do collectively is limited by our abilities and circumstances, but there is a lot we can do. Let's do what we can.

Amen.

Readings:

The Summer Day
Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Meg Barnhouse, "Waitressing in the Sacred Kitchen" from Rock of Ages at the Taj Mahal

The most helpful thing I grasped when I was waitressing is that some tables are my responsibility and some are not. In my life I have certain things to take care of: my children, my relationships, my work, myself, and one or two causes. That's it. Other things are not my table. I would go nuts if I tried to take care of everyone, if I tried to make everybody do the right thing. If I went through my life without ever learning to say, 'Sorry, that's not my table, Hon,' I would burn out and be no good to anybody. I need to have a surly waitress inside myself that I can call on when it seems that everyone in the world is waving an empty coffee cup in my direction. My Inner Waitress looks over at them, keeping her six plates balanced and her feet moving, and says, 'Sorry, Hon, not my table.'