

CHURCH SERVICE
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OPENING

Oh, Great Spirit,

Whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world.

Hear me! I need your strength and wisdom.

Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever hold the red and purple sunset.

Make my hands respect the things that you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice.

Make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.

Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock.

Help me to remain calm and strong in the face of all that comes towards me.

Help me find compassion without empathy overwhelming me.

I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother or sister, but to fight the greatest enemy: myself.

Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes.

So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my spirit may come to you without shame.

Amen

MEDITATION

Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise so I am changing myself. Rumi

SERMON

WHAT IF.....?

Today's sermon builds on my last sermon. There, the emphasis was on what each of us can do to be grounded and centered when all around is falling apart. It is important to not allow ourselves to be caught up in the chaos. Once we can maintain our centeredness in the world, then we can undertake the really hard work. That hard work is about transformation and to do that we must summon up the courage to ask ourselves really hard questions. You may recall the tenth item in my Guide for Thriving was "encounter the darkness." When we look around, we can see darkness everywhere and that darkness is within each of us as well.

I want to share this brief story with you to get to the darkness and to the hard questions. I return to the election for it held very powerful teachings for me.

Pre- and post-election I learned that members of my own small, extended family voted Republican. I was astounded! What followed was my outrage and then thoughts of revenge and payback. I felt so strongly that I was moved to act and I felt righteous in doing so. While acting, there was a small voice in the background that I chose to ignore. Simply, I was too angry to be curious about what it had to say.

Perhaps you have experienced that at times in your own life – a small voice trying to get your attention, but you ignore it. It's a voice that says

something like, “Are you sure you want to do this?” or “Pay attention to the dangers here.” or “Is this who you are?” I think it is a voice that comes from our heart, but our ego mind has another agenda.

To return to the story, I ignored that small voice and acted. I had to deal with the fallout. But more importantly, in a few weeks as I became calmer, I began to wonder what that small voice had to say. I began to be curious about what I may be missing about me? And I asked myself a **“What If”** question. **“What if** instead of pointing my finger at the other, I turned the finger towards myself to find what I was missing?” I found this question led me to more questions.

1. At heart, is this the person I want to be?
2. How did I come to assume that others should vote the way I want them to vote?
3. How do I feel about the actions I have taken?
4. What, if anything, do I want to do?

You see, it is not about the other person, whether that person is the President, an appointed official, or someone in our family. In the end, it is about me for I am the only person over whom I have any control. So, it brings me back to looking at every situation as an opportunity for me to learn something about myself. At heart, the question is what kind of person do I want to be in this world? How does it serve me to act like the very people about whom I am being critical? Do I want to continue growing myself? Do I want to continue to grow my compassion, my courage, and my love for myself and others? And I invite you to ask these same questions of yourself. For me, this is what it means to become fully human. I want this for all of us. We can choose to look at what is going on in the world as teachings for us personally and collectively.

Each of us brings the best part of ourselves forward. But that is not all. Each of us has shadow parts – parts of us that we do not want to look at,

parts of us that do not match up with the picture we have of ourselves. All of us have experienced hurts and traumas, small and big, over our lifetimes. These are experiences that caused us to be angry and scared. As a result, we developed beliefs about ourselves, the members of our family, friends, and the world around us and strategies for keeping ourselves safe. And we learned to hide those parts of ourselves we did not want ourselves or others to see. These make up our shadow. All unexpressed and unhealed trauma lead to survival strategies that keep us separate from our divinity. Our divinity and our shadow are two essential parts of ourselves. In S. Kelley Harrell's words, "In fact, shadows are most often child versions of ourselves who need something that the adults in our lives at that time could not give or teach us." We all need to tend our shadow – learn its story, what it needed and did not get, and what it needs now so that we do not go to our egos but stay in our hearts. We all need to update our shadow story. This is what it means to encounter the darkness. There is darkness in the world and each of us carries our own darkness.

What if we ask ourselves what the shadow parts of our present leaders are showing us about the shadow parts of ourselves? Can we say that any of our reactions and actions are any better than what they are showing us? Can I/we be different? Do I/we want to be angry and vengeful in the ways their anger and vengefulness are being perpetrated on us and others? This is another way to look at the election and its aftermath. Our present leaders are reflecting back to us something we can learn from if we have the courage and resilience to look. What has it stirred up for you? What "**What if...**" questions might you ask yourself? What might you want to heal in your own story?

I want to bring our "**What If...**" questions forward to briefly look at two parts of our shadow – anger and fear.

Anger is a normal human emotion. One cannot stop being angry because it is a physiological response to an experience. And though we cannot stop feeling angry, we do have control over what we choose to do with our anger. Anger is energy and we can use that energy in negative ways that prevent us from growing in our humanness (just look around us) or we can use it in positive ways to enhance our growth. Look around, we are beginning to see people speaking truth to power in deliberate and committed ways without yelling and pointing fingers. And we see people acting in ways that are quiet and courageous.

What if I began to work on my reactivity? What would happen if I found ways to release my anger so that it became more manageable? What would happen if I found ways to express my anger that fairly represents who I want to be in the world? How might I work on that? In the end, we want to use the best parts of the two hemispheres of our brain – the cognitive and the affective – to express our feelings in ways that others may be able to listen and to engage. We begin with small steps of bringing heart forward and allowing ego to step back without running away in fear and blame. Track your own process in meeting your shadow. You do not have to share that with others. This is hard work.

I believe if we look beneath our anger, we will find our fear. We are reluctant to meet our fears, and we certainly do not want others to know our fears. Fear, too, is a normal human emotion that tells us we are at risk of death, either metaphorically through failure, judgment, and abandonment or really in terms of physical death. Fear of physical death is real and becomes chronic. Think of soldiers, survivors in a war zone, or children and adults living in physically, emotionally and/or sexually violent families. The ability to take your next breath is very real. Chronic fear creates a kind of numbness as one meets the next moment, the next hour, the next day. It takes a long, conscious effort to return to life and the fullness of one's feelings when one has lived in chronic fear.

Metaphoric death is the fear of how we will feel if we “fail” in some way and how others will react. We fear feeling “stupid.” We fear the imagined abandonment that we expect in the form of judgment, shame, or humiliation by society, friends, or family. Thus, we flee. But “**What if**” we did not flee? **What if** we asked some “What if” questions? **What if** we stopped to ask what we are really afraid of? **What if** we talked over our fear with a trusted friend? **What if** we developed a plan for meeting a fear? **What if** we took small steps so that we could experience success in meeting something which we fear? **What if** we looked at failure in a different way? **What if** we consider our mistakes as portals to discovery? **What if** we looked at others’ judgments in a different way? **What if** we think about what it might be saying about where they are on their journey? And **what if** I realize that everyone here is doing the same thing that I am doing – measuring myself to see if I feel less than or more than each person? **What if** I just be me, not measuring, just being who I am? When I finally came to understand that a lot of things simply fell away.

The bottom line is that each of us is here for a purpose. Each of us has gifts to bring into our communities. We cannot afford to expect less of ourselves because we are fearful. I invite all of us to do the hard work of growing ourselves. These are the questions to keep asking ourselves as we move forward individually and together into a world in transition.

1. **What if** I point my finger at myself? What am I willing to learn about myself?
2. **What if** I ask, “How do I want to be in the world?”
3. **What if** I brought my head (ego) and my heart (compassion) together?
4. **What if** I use my anger in positive ways? How would I feel?
5. **What if** I meet my fears? What will happen? How will I feel?

It is not an easy journey, but it is rewarding. We all gain and so does the world. I would like to end with this from Khalil Gibran. It is entitled "Fear."

It is said that before entering the sea, a river trembles with fear.

She looks back at the path she has traveled, from the peaks of the mountains, the long winding road crossing forests and villages.

And in front of her, she sees an ocean so vast, that to enter there seems nothing more than to disappear forever.

But there is no other way. The river cannot go back.

Nobody can go back. To go back is impossible in existence.

The river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean because only then will fear disappear, because that's where the river will know it's not about disappearing into the ocean, but of becoming the ocean.

Thank you.

CLOSING

Our worst fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, "Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous?" Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God; your playing small doesn't serve the world.. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

Nelson Mandela

In the days, weeks and months ahead may we each be mindful of how we wish to be in the world, may we ask ourselves "What if" questions, and may we meet our fears so that we can bring our gifts into this world that needs each one of us. I release the circle. Go in Peace.