

July 31, 2022
"Life Actually"
Colossians 3:1-3, 8-11 / Luke 12:13-21
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Meister Eckhart, the renowned 14th-century German mystic, philosopher and priest, never wrote a poem, but his manner of expression was nothing if not poetic. And so his words, pulled from his many writings and sermons, lend themselves to the form. Here's one example, as crafted by Jon Sweeney and Mark Burrows in their book, "Meister Eckhart's Book of the Heart: Meditations for the Restless Soul":

*Where the creaturely
ends in me is where
God has the room
to begin, on the far
side of my desires
and demands, beyond
my expectations and
worries and needs
When I let go of all that,
like letting a heavy sack
drop from my drooping
shoulders, God has room
to be God within me,
and I wonder what
I thought I needed
with all that baggage
in the first place.*

Within what are known as the Four Noble Truths, which the Buddha revealed as a path to nirvana, the foundational Buddhist orientation is that "attachment," the Sanskrit *upadana*, is a primary cause of life's suffering. Or maybe more accurately translated as life's "unsatisfactoriness," from the Sanskrit word, *dukkha*. Recognizing this unsatisfactoriness, this dissatisfaction, is the First Noble Truth.

The Second Noble Truth gets at the why behind that dissatisfaction or suffering. Buddhists emphasize the interconnectedness of all things, of all creation, InterBeing. We get ourselves in trouble when we lose touch with this underlying truth, when we are ignorant or confused – the Sanskrit, *avidya*. When we imagine, misguidedly, that we exist independently from everyone and everything else. An "I" separate from the "we."

Such a state leads either to attachment (or greed, a clinging to) or aversion (hatred, a turning away from). These, then, are the so-called “Three Poisons” in Buddhist thought: ignorance or confusion, attachment, and aversion. Recognizing them as the cause of our dissatisfaction and suffering constitutes the Second Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth points to the possibility of NOT suffering, of not living dissatisfied – by relinquishing ignorance and confusion about our inherent interconnectedness.

And the Fourth Noble Truth represents the path to get there, to achieve nirvana, pure joy – including the famous Eight-Fold Path:

- Right View or Understanding
- Right Intention
- Right Speech
- Right Action
- Right Livelihood
- Right Effort
- Right Mindfulness
- Right Concentration

The antidote to attachment is not DE-tachment, but “non-attachment.” Buddhism teaches that when we reject the illusion that we exist separately and independently from each other, there is no need to attach – or detach, for that matter – because we are already, and always have been, interconnected. We are already one.

Non-attachment doesn't mean we have to disconnect or withdraw from the people or experiences in our lives, or give up what we love. On the contrary, as Zen teacher, John Daido Looi, describes it, “... non-attachment is exactly the opposite of separation. You need two things in order to have attachment: the thing you're attaching to, and the person who's attaching. In non-attachment, on the other hand, there's unity. There's unity because there's nothing to attach to. If you have unified with the whole universe, there's nothing outside of you, so the notion of attachment becomes absurd.”

Baggage, Meister Eckhart might call it. Emotional and spiritual baggage, all the baggage that we accumulate along life's way, tending to our many desires and demands, our expectations and needs, our worries and fears.

It strikes me, in our reading from Luke that Eriks just shared with us, that Jesus is very much channeling his Buddhist self. The reading resonates with a book I've been reading on and off of late, by theologian Paul Knitter, called "Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian." It can be a little dense at times, but I recommend it to any of you who may be curious what we might learn, as Christians, from Buddhist philosophy and practice.

Jesus, as is so often the case, finds himself in a crowd. And someone from the crowd tries to do what Martha tried to do in her conflict with Mary, as we read a few weeks ago: triangulate. "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Work it out himself, with your brother, is basically what Jesus says. And then this: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Or attachments, the Buddha might have said. Whatever provokes our greed, whatever we cling to, whatever we have, we own, we control. Whatever belongs to us, or at least what we think belongs to us.

Jesus references all kinds of greed, not just for material possessions or material wealth, though that's the most obvious example. He is addressing here a man who clearly has access to some wealth through his family's inheritance. And whenever Jesus talks about greed, he is addressing those who are rich. Like the rich man who approached Jesus with the question about inheriting eternal life (which is to say, abundant life). You may know the story.

Jesus cites the commandments of Jewish law, which we know he elsewhere condensed into just two: loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself. The man claims to have kept all the commandments since he was a kid, but Jesus tells him – showing "love to him" the text says: "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." And the man, who owned a lot of property, went away grieving.

This is instruction directed at this particular rich man. Jesus knew his heart, and so he knew that the rich man could not live into the fullness of divine love and the richness of abundant life with his abundance of possessions in tow. His life DID consist of his abundance of possessions, and Jesus famously follows that exchange with these words, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!"

Jesus takes particular issue with those who are rich because he's echoing the Hebrew prophets in their – in God's – preferential care and concern for those who are poor. And in the revolutionary call to dismantle systems of oppression that continue to make some rich and so many poor. In God's kindom, we know that there is no such thing as rich and poor. Divine love would not allow it.

As the first epistle to Timothy says, "As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

Life that really is life. Life actually. Abundant life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

That caution may be directed at one who is rich, in this case, but the caution IS universal. Whether you are rich or poor or somewhere in between, whether you have had or have a lot or a little in your life, whether you have had or have more than enough or barely enough, the trap of greed, of attachment, remains.

Jesus later says to his disciples, further on in this chapter of Luke, "Strive for (God's kindom), and these things will be given to you as well."

"Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also." Echoing his teachings from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Jesus's reminder that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions is an invitation for all of us to examine how our possessions function in our lives, what purpose they serve – beyond meeting basic needs. How, in the pursuit of possessions of one kind or another, we may become possessed by them; our hearts captive to the treasure rather than the other way around.

As the first epistle to Timothy also puts it, "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction."

And this part you will likely recognize, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains."

After Jesus offers the caution about possessions, he drops another parable for further consideration. The lesson continues.

A rich man, a landowner, has an abundance of crops – an abundance we might presume is the fruit of others' labor, not his own. He has more crops than he has space to store them.

"What should I do?" he thinks to himself. What would YOU do?

Would you build bigger barns? Because that's what he does. He scraps the old ones and builds bigger ones in their place to hold all his grain and goods. And so set for the future, he books a nice long vacation.

"Soul," he says to himself, or spirit, from the Greek, transliterated as *psyche*, like psychology, it's time to relax. It's time to eat, drink and be merry.

But in the parable God calls the man out: "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Some translations put it more severely, as in, "Fool, you are going to die tonight." Death, or closeness to death, has a way of reorienting, reprioritizing life. If you've come anywhere close to death yourself, through illness or injury, or if you've experienced the death or near death of a loved one – especially suddenly, unexpectedly, you know that beyond the grief such experiences can bring us more fully into life. More fully BACK to life. They tend to wake us up, simplify our thinking and our purpose, redirect us to what really matters. At least for a time.

As psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross put it, "It's only when we truly understand that we have a limited time on earth – and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up – that we will begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had."

Because, of course, it is.

But the meaning of the Greek here is literally to "ask or demand back." It could mean death, or it could just mean that your LIFE – from the same root word for soul or spirit that the rich man uses to refer to himself – is being asked of you. Your life, your soul, your spirit is being demanded of you. This very day.

Forget about tomorrow, Jesus says elsewhere, for tomorrow will worry about itself. "Do not worry about your life ... Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable are you than birds!"

Life is short and it is precious. We need you fully present to it. Know, at God's word, that you are loved, that you are valuable, that you belong.

So what, then, does your life, your soul, your spirit require of you TODAY, more than anything else, when tomorrow is not promised to you, to any of us? What do your neighbors, what does the world, need from you – your life, your soul, your spirit – today, more than anything else?

Love is the answer to that and most questions as far as Jesus is concerned; the key to life abundant, to life whole, to life ACTUALLY. To life for all.

Storing up treasures for ourselves or treasures on earth won't do it, tempting as that can be to satisfy our greed or our fear or our insecurity – accumulating possessions, baggage, attachments as if our lives, as if life, depended on them. We brought nothing into the world and we'll take nothing out of it. Ashes to ashes.

Storing up treasures for ourselves or treasures on earth won't do it, but being “rich toward God” will, as Jesus's parable insists – making room for the Divine to take root within us, beyond our desires and demands, beyond our expectations and worries and needs; striving to live heart-centered lives grounded in love of God and each other and ourselves, grounded in the present.

And non-attachment will, as the Buddha teaches – striving to live heart-centered lives grounded in the knowledge that all of life is interconnected. And always has been. We already belong to each other; there's no need to cling.

In that same spirit, and in the same spirit of interfaith wisdom, there's a story from Hasidic Jewish tradition that goes like this:

Once some tourists from the United States were visiting Poland. They had heard about the famous Polish rabbi Hafez Hayyim and managed to receive an invitation to visit him in his home.

When the tourists arrived, they were surprised to see that the rabbi's home was only one simple room filled with books. He had only a table and a bench.

“Rabbi, where is your furniture?” they asked.

“Where is yours?” replied the rabbi.

“But we are only visitors here,” answered the tourists.

“So am I,” said the rabbi.

Meister Eckhart again:

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May it be so.