

DAYENU—IT WOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH

(11/20/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 100
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
Matthew 7:7-11

*“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the Lord is God,
it is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.”* (Psalm 100:1-3)

Today, Stewardship Sunday, marks the beginning of our annual stewardship drive. It is also Thanksgiving Sunday. Today I should probably preach a fiery sermon about stewardship in an attempt to shame you (and myself) into giving just \$5 more each week. But you already know that we need your financial support; you know the importance of your pledge to the church, and you already give to us in so many ways! So, this morning I am going to go with the thanksgiving theme, with the experience of gratitude, and the joy that can come when we realize that we have more than enough reasons to be grateful.

This morning, I am going to tell you a story. This is a true story. I say that because not every story I tell is a true story. Sometimes I just sort of create my own version of reality—and to be honest, I generally like my version better than the real thing. Sometimes when I have an idea in my own mind, I assume it also happened in the outside world. And, as you will find out some day when you get to be my age, memory can play tricks on you. As Mark Twain once said, “As I get older my memory actually improves. I now remember things that didn’t even happen!” I know this is true. My undergraduate lacrosse playing at UMass gets better every year, gets better with every retelling!

I also like the quote which I attribute to either the Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman or the frontman for Van Halen, David Lee Roth. The quote is, “Reality is for people who lack imagination.” I’m inclined toward David Lee Roth in my attribution because I know for a fact that he is the source of another quote I like. That quote is, “I know I live in my own little world; but at least everyone there likes me!” But that’s not the point.

The point is that this story is a true story. It happened early one evening about twenty years ago, shortly after I came to this church.

I was downstairs in my study working on my sermon. It was winter, about this time of year. It was nighttime; it was cold; and it was very dark. The church was very quiet.

Suddenly I heard a voice call out, "Hello, hello, is anybody here?" I walked out of my study to encounter a middle-aged woman (this means she was about my age). She asked me if this was where the meeting was held.

Since I did not recognize her as a member or friend of our church, I assumed she did not mean one of our monthly church meetings. None of our boards or committees was scheduled to meet that evening anyway.

I told her I didn't know the meeting to which she was referring, but I suspected that wherever it was, it was not here. She looked exasperated. She said she was looking for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. She had been told that there was one in Southborough and that it was held in a church. She had been driving around our town the past hour checking out churches, but she had been unable to find the one she sought.

I told her that we did not host an AA meeting in this church. We certainly would like to, but the opportunity had never arisen. I thought that there might be a meeting at Pilgrim Church across town, but I wasn't sure. Unfortunately, there was no one in the Pilgrim Church office whom I could call.

The woman was clearly upset. She had been looking for a meeting, perhaps out of a great need, and had been unable to connect with one. Then she did something that surprised me. She sat down at one of the tables in our vestry. She told me to sit down at the table with her, which I did. She then instructed me to tell her something about addictions. She said that since she couldn't get to a real meeting that night, I would have to do.

I thought this was a little cheeky. But I liked her spunk! I also thought that it would not be good to send her away from our church on a cold winter night empty handed. Though what I had to share would not be as good as a meeting, it would probably be better than nothing. At least I hoped it would.

On the spur of the moment, I asked her if she knew about the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's role in the creation of Alcoholics Anonymous. She said she didn't. I had recently come across an exchange of letters between Dr. Jung and Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA, and I decided to tell her what was in the letters.

Bill W. wrote to Dr. Jung in 1960, a year before Jung's death, to tell him of the fruit that had been borne from Jung's work with one of his patients. One of Bill's friends, a man named Roland, was a hardcore alcoholic. Roland had tried to stop drinking, but he had been unable to do so. He knew that if he continued to drink, the outcome was certain: it would lead to insanity and death. Finally, Roland turned to Dr. Jung, one of the leading depth psychologists of his day, and asked Jung to treat him.

Dr. Jung took Roland on as a patient and treated him using the tools of his own approach to psychoanalysis, analytic psychology. The treatment appeared to be successful. Roland stopped drinking and terminated his therapy with Jung.

However, before long, Roland started drinking again. In desperation he again turned to Jung. When they met, Jung told Roland that, unfortunately, he couldn't help him; in fact, there was no one in the world who could help him. In desperation Roland asked Jung if there was truly no hope, if there was nothing that could save him.

Jung responded that there was one thing that could help Roland. He told Roland that he needed to have a religious experience. Jung said that a religious experience, a true experience of the Holy Spirit, was the only thing that could release Roland from the demonic possession of the alcoholic spirits that were destroying his life. He then told Roland, from what he knew of him, that this was unlikely to happen.

Roland, who was not a religious person, went home in despair. A few nights later, while he was down on his knees, he had a powerful religious experience! The experience not only helped him to stop drinking; it took away his desire to drink.

Several years later Bill W., another hardcore alcoholic, happened to run into his old friend Roland. Bill was surprised to find that Roland was still alive, and he was even more surprised to learn that Roland was sober. Bill, knowing that Roland had been in therapy with Dr. Jung, asked Roland if his therapy with Jung had cured him. Roland replied that, in a strange way, Jung had been a tremendous help. He related how Jung had told him that he could not help him, that no one could help him, and that he needed to get himself a religious experience. And then it happened! Following the experience, Roland not only was able to stop drinking; he no longer felt need to drink. Roland told Bill that he highly recommended Bill get himself one of these religious experiences.

Bill, who was already circling the drain, had no idea how he could do this. He began attending a Methodist small group faith-sharing meeting. One night during the meeting he had a powerful religious experience! It not only transformed his life; it took away his desire to drink!

Bill and Roland then got together to try to understand what had happened. One thing was clear. If the cure for an addiction came through a spiritual experience, then the addiction must be a spiritual illness. So, the rehabilitation, to be not only effective but also lead to growth, must have a spiritual component. This spiritual dimension, it was clear, was not the sole possession of any organized institution or religious group.

In his 1960 letter to Jung, Bill thanked him for his role in providing a grounding for an organization that was now international and that claimed several million members who were seeking a life of sobriety. In response, Jung thanked Bill for reaching out to him. He said that what he told Roland could be summarized in the Latin phrase *spiritus contra spiritum*—spirit against spirits. Only the power of the Holy Spirit could drive out the demonic powers of alcoholic spirits.

Getting back to my mysterious visitor, I told the woman that, from a Jungian perspective, there seemed to be a teleological dimension to addiction. The addiction is a search for something, something that is missing in the person's life. It may be a search for spirit. It may be a search for serenity, for the peace that passes understanding. However, this *telos*, this goal, cannot be attained chemically. The chemicals will destroy your liver, your brain, all your relationships, and then it will take away your life. The addict is searching for something precious. He/she is just going about it in the wrong way.

I told her that this understanding of addiction might have been what the poet William Blake meant when he said, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." Through our struggle with our addiction, we may find that our excessive drinking, our addiction to alcohol, may lead us to discover our deeper need for spirit, our need for serenity. As anyone who has been in recovery for decades can tell you, when you have had an experience of true serenity and have integrated this into your life, you realize that being drunk was a poor substitute.

This, by the way, is true of all addictions. You may discover that your addiction to food may be masking a need to be fed with the bread of life. Even anorexia nervosa, which is a disease of depletion, could be seen as an excess of control, a degree of control over your eating and your life that will most definitely kill you. An addiction to gambling, with its attendant adrenalin surge, will hopefully lead you to get high on life. This is also the case with drugs like ecstasy. I would just make one change to the quote from William Blake. The road of addiction *may* lead to the palace of wisdom, but only if you go through the life-long process of recovery. If you don't do this, it will not lead to wisdom; it will lead to death.

I told the woman that the best advice I could offer her was to take the spiritual dimension of life and of her life very seriously. She could do this in the AA recovery process, and, if she had a religious faith, if she had a background in some religious tradition, she could also seek to strengthen it there.

The woman told me that she was Jewish. I told her she could think about how God rescued her people from bondage in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. I said that God could also do that for her, that God could rescue her from slavery to her addiction, that God could lead her through the wilderness of the recovery process (which never ends, by the way), to the promised land of sobriety, true serenity, and true freedom. And she could do this, she really could do this—with the help of AA.

The woman thanked me. She told me that I had been very helpful, and that she wanted to give me something in return. She said what she wanted to give me was expressed in the Jewish term “*dayenu*.” She explained that the meaning of *dayenu* is “It would have been enough” or “it would have sufficed.” She said that what I had given her that evening was not only enough; it was more than enough.

She then told me a little about *dayenu*. It is a song that is part of the Jewish celebration of Passover. It is over a thousand years old. The song is about being grateful to God for the gifts that God has given to the Jewish people. It contains a listing of the gifts, followed by the phrase, “*Dayenu*: if this all God did for us, it would have been enough.”

In this song there are five stanzas that focus on being released from slavery, then five stanzas of miracles, and five stanzas of being with God. The first five stanzas are as follows:

If He had brought us out of Egypt;
If He had executed justice upon the Egyptians;
If He had executed justice upon their gods;
If He had slain their first-born;
If He had given to us their health and wealth;

Each of these stanzas is followed by the phrase, the joyous affirmation of “*Dayenu*: that alone would have been enough.” But there is even more!

If He had split the sea for us;

*If He had led us through dry land;
If He had drowned our oppressors;
If He had provided for our needs in the wilderness for 40 years;
If He had fed us manna;*

Each of these miracles is followed by the phrase, the joyous affirmation of “*Dayenu*: that alone would have been enough.” But there is even more!

*If He had given us Shabbat;
If He had led us to Mount Sinai;
If He had given us the Torah;
If he had brought us into the Land of Israel;
If He built the Temple for us;*

Each of these examples of God’s presence and power is followed by the phrase, the joyous affirmation of “*Dayenu*: that alone would have been enough.” But there is more. And there is more! And there is more! In fact, God never stops giving!

We are met here on Thanksgiving and Stewardship Sunday. We give thanks for our many blessings. We recognize, as did the ancient Israelites, that these gifts come from God. There are so many gifts! Any one of them would have been enough, would have been more than enough. But then there are more!

We have the gift of life. *Dayenu*—that would have been enough. But then there is more! We have the gift of having been born into a human body, with a brain and a heart, with the ability to think and feel. *Dayenu*—that would have been enough. But then there is more!

We were born at this time in history in this wonderful country. We are free to unfold the unique mystery of our life. We have so many material possessions, so much comfort. *Dayenu*—these would have been more than enough. But then there are more!

We have our religious faith to guide us in the unfolding of this life. If we are Jewish, we have the Torah, we have Moses and the prophets. If we are Christian, we have Jesus: we have his teachings and we have him within us as the Holy Spirit. If we are Muslim, we have Muhammed and the teachings of Allah in the Koran. If we are Taoist, we can draw inspiration from Lao Tzu and the *Tao te Ching*. If we are Hindu, our spirits can be nourished by the *Upanishads* or the *Bahagavad Gita*. And if we are Buddhist, we can read the sutras; we can follow the teachings of the Buddha on our path

toward enlightenment. *Dayenu*—any one of these would have been enough, would have been more than enough! But then there are more!

We have our churches, our synagogues, our temples, our mosques. We have a community of faith that supports us, that cares about us and cares for us. Our communities of faith lead us forth into the world that we might bring healing to so many people who are suffering. *Dayenu*—any of these would have been enough! But then there are more!

We also have those whom we love. We have those who love us. The love we feel, which we both give and receive, comes from God who loves us. This is more than we could possibly hope for! And yet—*Dayenu*: there is more! There is more and more and more!

In this Thanksgiving season, I invite us to take on the spirit of *dayenu*. What a wonderful philosophy of life this would be; what a wonderful spirit to incarnate! In the spirit of the 23rd psalm, we will know that our cup overflows. When we realize this, as the apostle Paul tells us, we will rejoice. We will bring our supplications to God with thanksgiving in our hearts, thanksgiving and gratitude for all God has done for us. Dare we believe, dare we hope that God can do even more?

During this Thanksgiving season, let us remember all that has been given to us by God, by our faith tradition, and by those who love us. Then let us open our heart to the recognition of God's abundance, an abundance we are called to share with our brothers and sisters around the world! No matter how much we have been given, there is even more! Our cup overflows! Our hearts burst with gratitude and joy! And then, after we die, there is even more!

So, this morning I give you the gift that was given to me so many years ago by the little Jewish woman downstairs in the vestry of our church. I never saw her again. I hope I helped her. I *know* she helped me! And, for as long as I remember her gift to me, her teaching about *dayenu*, my heart will be filled with gratitude. It will be open to the next gift that God has in store for me, for our little church, and for all of God's creation!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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