

OPENING MUSIC: Antonio Vivaldi – The Four Seasons, 'Autumn' (09:09)

Antonio Vivaldi – Autumn (audio, 03:16)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elE-n9Tj_Zg&list=RDeIEn9Tj_Zg&start_radio=1

OPENING WORDS

We have crept out of our close and crowded houses into the night and morning, and we see what majestic beauties daily wrap us in their bosom. . . .

These enchantments are medicinal, they sober and heal us. These are plain pleasures, kindly and native to us. We come to our own, and make friends with matter. . . . We never can part with it; the mind loves its old home: as water to our thirst, so is the rock, the ground, to our eyes, and hands, and feet.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

From "Nature," Essays: Second Series (1844)

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice as a symbol of the spark of life which abides within us and around us.

May it be as a light in a dark night, a light in a window that welcomes the weary traveller home!

May it be as a light in the hand of a trusted friend that guides us along the path!

May it be as the light in the face of one we love, bright with joy!

INTRODUCTORY PRAYER

Keep me, O God, from pettiness; let me be large in thought, in word, in deed. Let me be done with fault-finding and self-seeking. May I put away all pretence and meet everyone face to face without self-pity and without prejudice. May I never be hasty in judgment and always generous ... Let me take time for all things. Make me grow calm, serene and gentle. Teach me to put into action my better impulses, straightforward and unafraid. Grant that I may realise it is the little things of life that create differences and that in the big things of life we are one. And, O Lord God, let me not forget to be kind!

HYMN 62 – Here we have gathered (CD4, track 9, purple book)

CHARITY QUOTES

“Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness.” — [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

“The simplest acts of kindness are by far more powerful than a thousand heads bowing in prayer.” — [Mahatma Gandhi](#)

SHORT STORY (to be read by Sheila?)

The Two Brothers and the Gold, by Leo Tolstoy

Once upon a time, in the days long since gone by, there dwelt at Jerusalem two brothers; the name of the elder was Athanasius, the name of the younger John. They dwelt on a hill not far from the town, and lived upon what people gave to them. Every day the brothers went out to work. They worked not for themselves, but for the poor. Wherever the overworked, the sick were to be found—wherever there were widows and orphans, thither went the brothers, and there they worked and spent their time, taking no payment. Thus the brothers went about separately the whole week, and only met together in the evening of the Sabbath at their own dwelling. Only on Sunday did they remain at home, praying and conversing together. And the Angel of the Lord came down to them and blessed them. On the Monday they separated again, each going his own way. Thus did the brothers live for many years, and every week the Angel of the Lord came down to them and blessed them.

One Monday, when the brothers had gone forth to work, and had parted their several ways, the elder brother, Athanasius, felt sorry at having had to part from his beloved brother, and he stood still and glanced after him. John was walking with bent head, and he did not look back. But suddenly John also stopped as if he perceived something and continued to gaze fixedly at it. Presently he drew near to that which he had been looking upon, and then suddenly leaped aside, and, not stopping for another instant, ran towards the mountain and up the mountain, right away from the place, just as if some savage beast were pursuing him. Athanasius

was astonished, and turned back to the place to find out what his brother had been so afraid of. At last he approached the spot, and then he saw something glistening in the sun. He drew nearer—on the grass, as if poured out from a measure, lay a heap of gold. And Athanasius was still more astonished, both at the sight of the gold and at the leaping aside of his brother.

"What was he afraid of, and what did he run away from?" thought Athanasius. "There is no sin in gold, sin is in man. You may do ill with gold, but you may also do good. How many widows and orphans might not be fed therewith, how many naked ones might not be clothed, how many poor and sick might not be cared for and cured by means of this gold? Now, indeed, we minister to people, but our ministration is but little, because our power is small, and with this gold we might minister to people much more than we do now." Thus thought Athanasius, and would have said so to his brother, but John was by this time out of hearing, and looked no bigger than a cockchafer on the further mountain.

And Athanasius took off his garment, shovelled as much gold into it as he was able to carry, threw it over his shoulder, and went into the town. He went to an inn, gave the gold to the innkeeper, and then went off to fetch the rest of it. And when he had brought in all the gold he went to the merchants, bought land in that town, bought stones, wood, hired labourers, and set about building three houses. And Athanasius abode in the town three months, and built the three houses in that town; one of the houses was an asylum for widows and orphans, the second house was a hospital for the sick, the third house was a hospice for the poor and for pilgrims. And Athanasius sought him out three God-fearing elders, and the first elder he placed over the refuge, the second over the hospital, and the third over the hospice for pilgrims. And Athanasius had three thousand gold pieces still left. And he gave a thousand to each of the elders that they might have wherewith to distribute among the poor. And all three houses began to be filled with people, and the people began to praise Athanasius for all that he had done. And Athanasius rejoiced thereat, so that he had no desire to depart from the town. But Athanasius loved his brother, and, taking leave of the people, and not keeping for himself a single coin of all this money, he went back to his dwelling in the selfsame old garment in which he had come to town.

Athanasius was drawing near to his mountain, and he thought to himself: "My brother judged wrongly when he leaped aside from the gold and ran away from it. Haven't I done much better?"

And Athanasius had no sooner thought this than suddenly he beheld standing in his path the Angel who had been sent to bless them, but now looked threateningly upon him. And Athanasius was aghast and could only say: "Wherefore, my Lord?" And the Angel opened his mouth and said: "Depart from hence! Thou art not worthy to dwell with thy brother. That one leap aside of thy brother's was worth more than all that thou hast done with thy gold."

Athanasius began to talk of how many poor and how many pilgrims he had fed, and of how many orphans he had cared for. And the Angel said to him: "That same Devil who placed the gold there in order to corrupt thee, hath also put these big words into thy mouth. And then the conscience of Athanasius upbraided him, and he understood that what he had done was not done for God, and he wept and began to repent.

Then the Angel stepped aside from the road, and left free for him the path in which John was already standing awaiting his brother. And from thenceforth Athanasius yielded no more to the wiles of the Devil who had strewn the gold in his path, and he understood that not by gold, but by good works only, could he render service to God and his fellow-man. And the brethren dwelt together as before.

MUSIC: Paul Reade – Victorian Kitchen Garden Suite, 'Mists' (01:56)

Paul Reade: The Victorian Kitchen Garden Suite: Prelude. Helen Allingham: Paintings. (03:10)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bn_T9hvwZEA&list=RDBn_T9hvwZEA&start_radio=1

BIBLE READINGS ABOUT CHARITY

Deuteronomy 15:7-11

"If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your

heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

Matthew 6:1-4

"Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Proverbs 21:13

Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.

Acts 20:35

In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Luke 21:1-4

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

MUSIC: Edvard Grieg – Lyric Pieces, Opus 12, No.1. Arietta (01:07)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqjVIyiXw40&list=RDcqjVIyiXw40&start_radio=1 (video, 01:46)

REFLECTIVE ADDRESS

When we speak of charity and poverty, it is tempting to begin with money: how much we have, how much we give, and how much more we might give. But the spiritual traditions that can nourish us ask a deeper question. They ask not simply, "What shall I give?" but, "What kind of people are we becoming, and what kind of society are we creating?"

From a Unitarian perspective, that question matters profoundly. We affirm the worth and dignity of every person. We do not believe that human beings can be divided neatly into the deserving and the undeserving, the fortunate and the forgotten. Poverty is not a mark of lesser human value. Nor is wealth proof of greater virtue. Each person possesses an inherent worth that does not depend upon income, occupation, education or social status.

This conviction finds a powerful companion in Judaism, and particularly in the teaching of the medieval Jewish philosopher and rabbi Moses Maimonides.

Maimonides famously described eight levels of giving charity, or **tzedakah**. What is striking is that the highest form is not simply giving the largest amount. The highest form of generosity is to help someone become self-sufficient: to give a loan, enter into partnership, offer employment, or otherwise enable a person to stand on their own feet.

There is wisdom here for us today. Charity can sometimes create a relationship between giver and recipient in which one person has power and the other is dependent. Even generous giving can, unintentionally, diminish dignity. Maimonides challenges us to imagine generosity differently. The question is not merely, "How can I relieve this person's immediate need?" but also, "How can I help restore their freedom, security and ability to flourish?"

That does not mean that immediate relief is unimportant. If someone is hungry, we feed them. If someone is cold, we provide warmth. If someone has nowhere to sleep, we offer shelter. Compassion begins with the needs that are directly before us.

But compassion should not end there. We should also ask why people are hungry, why they cannot afford their homes, why insecure employment leaves families constantly anxious, why illness or disability can so easily lead to poverty, and why some people inherit opportunities while others inherit obstacles.

Here Buddhism offers another valuable perspective. Buddhist teaching reminds us of **dukkha**: the pervasive reality of suffering and unsatisfactoriness in human life. It also teaches compassion, *karuna*, and encourages us to loosen our attachment to the illusion of a completely separate self.

That has an important implication for our understanding of poverty. The person who is struggling is not simply “someone else”. Their suffering belongs to the same human world as ours. Their dignity is inseparable from ours.

Buddhism also encourages us to examine attachment. We may tell ourselves that our possessions are simply the result of our own effort, and therefore entirely ours to keep. Yet none of us lives independently. We depend upon parents, teachers, neighbours, workers, farmers, public institutions, the natural world and countless people whom we will never meet.

Our lives are interdependent. To recognise that interdependence is not to condemn having possessions. It is to see them differently. Wealth can become not merely something we possess, but something for which we have responsibilities.

And then there is Methodism, with its strong tradition of practical holiness. John Wesley famously urged people to “gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can.” Behind those words was a conviction that material resources should serve human flourishing rather than become ends in themselves.

Wesley was also deeply concerned with the poor. He did not regard compassion as a sentimental feeling. Faith had to become action. Visiting prisoners, caring for the sick, educating the poor, supporting workers and challenging social injustice, were all part of the Christian life.

This practical emphasis speaks strongly to the Unitarian tradition. We too have inherited a religion in which conscience matters, but conscience is not merely private. If we believe that every person has worth, then that belief should influence the way we vote, spend, work, campaign, welcome and organise our communities.

Charity, then, can be understood at several levels. There is the generosity of the open hand: giving money, food, clothing or time when someone needs them. There is the generosity of relationship: listening without judgement, accompanying someone, refusing to reduce them to their circumstances. There is the generosity of opportunity: helping people acquire skills, employment, education, housing and the security necessary to shape their own lives. And there is the generosity of justice: working to change the structures that allow poverty to persist.

We need all four. For there is a danger in charity if it allows us to feel compassionate without asking difficult questions about justice. We can become very generous at treating the symptoms of poverty while remaining unwilling to examine its causes. But there is also a danger in speaking only about justice. While we campaign for a better society, there are people who need help today.

So perhaps our task is to hold compassion and justice together. Let us give generously, but let us also listen carefully. Let us relieve suffering, but let us also challenge the conditions that produce unnecessary suffering. Let us offer help, but let us do so in ways that preserve dignity and agency. Let us examine our own relationship with wealth, asking not only what we can afford but what we truly need. And let us remember Maimonides' insight that the finest generosity can be the generosity that makes further charity unnecessary: the gift of confidence, opportunity, security and independence.

The Buddhist insight reminds us that we are bound together in a web of interdependence. The Methodist tradition reminds us that love must become practical. Maimonides reminds us that generosity should ultimately restore dignity and freedom. And the Unitarian tradition invites us to bring these insights together through reason, conscience, compassion and action. Perhaps, then, the opposite of poverty is not simply wealth. The opposite of poverty is belonging.

It is having enough to eat, somewhere safe to live, meaningful opportunities, people who care whether you are well, and the freedom to participate fully in the life of your community. Our calling is therefore not simply to become better donors. It is to become a community in which fewer people need to ask for charity because more people experience justice, security and belonging.

May our giving be generous.

May our compassion be courageous.

May our justice be practical.

And may we build a world in which every person can know, not merely in words but in the circumstances of their life, that they are valued, needed and worthy of flourishing.

Amen. So be it.

MUSIC: Alexander Glazunov – The Seasons, Opus 67, 'Autumn', 'Bacchanale' and 'Petit Adagio' (07:32)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dum-2EKDBtY&list=RDdum-2EKDBtY&start_radio=1 (video, 03:43)

AFFIRMATION – 240 (purple book, to be said not to be sung)

PRE-OFFERTORY PRAYER

This church is sustained by what we are able to bring to it:

Our time and our energy,

Our love and our resources ...

This morning collection will be gratefully received immediately after the service in support of the work of this congregation.

(Anonymous) POETRY (to be read by Viv or Caroline?)

Charity Is like an Unsung Anthem

*Charity is like an unsung anthem
Harmonizing everything we see.
A gift can be a work of silent witness,
Remembrance, reverence, unsought forgiveness,
Intention, labor, time, philanthropy.
The worth is measured only by redemption,
Yielding nothing but the grace to be.*

Charity Should Make the Giver Sin

*Charity should make the giver sing,
Happy in the undertow of sharing.
A gift should not be given out of duty,
Remiss in both its pleasure and its beauty,
Intent on rectitude, bereft of caring.
The burdens of the world may be worth bearing,
Yet gifts should still a certain lightness bring.*

A HUMOUROUS SHORT STORY: a turn of the screw

There was an industrialist whose production line inexplicably breaks down, costing him millions per day. He finally tracks down an expert who takes out a screwdriver, turns one screw, and then - as the factory cranks back to life - presents a bill for £10,000.

Affronted, the factory owner demands an itemised version. The expert is happy to oblige: "For turning a screw: £1. For knowing which screw to turn: £9,999."

Author: Oliver Burkeman in "The Guardian Weekend", 13 August 2011

HYMN 191 – We have a dream (CD4, track 20) purple book

CLOSING WORDS

We are blessed with an abundance of good things for which we are truly thankful, as long as we remember them.

We are privileged with great freedom and power, for which in return we act with responsibility.

We are lucky to have shared this time and space together, because we are lucky to have each other.

May the spirit of this place and these friends go with us into the busy city!

EXTINGUISH CHALICE FLAME

MUSIC: Edward Elgar – Cello Concerto, Opus 85 (First Movement–03:57)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8V41D0Uczf0&list=RD8V41D0Uczf0&start_radio=1 (video, 08:07)

ANNOUNCEMENTS/NOTICES with Sheila

ORDER OF SERVICE

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HYMN 62 – Here we have gathered (purple book)

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A HUMOUROUS SHORT STORY

HYMN 191 – We have a dream (purple book) and **CLOSING WORDS**

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