

FCCW  
July 28, 2024  
The Pursuit of Equanimity

### Ephesians Chapter 3: Verses 14 through 21

3:14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,  
3:15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.  
3:16 I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that **you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit,**  
3:17 and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as **you are being rooted and grounded in love.**  
3:18 I pray that **you may have the power to comprehend,** with all the saints, **what is the breadth and length and height and depth,**  
3:19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.  
3:20 Now to him who by **the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,**  
3:21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.

### **Psalm 145:10-18**

145:10 All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall bless you.  
145:11 They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power,  
145:12 to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
145:13 Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.  
145:14 **The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.**  
145:15 The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.  
145:16 **You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.**  
145:17 The LORD is just in all his ways and kind in all his doings.  
145:18 **The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.**

Thank you, Andy!

I'm so happy to be here with all of you this morning – especially in the middle of our summer season when we hear such personal and moving reflections from lay folks. The sermons have been impressive and thought-provoking, and make me think, once again,

about what a wonderful church community we have - so many gifts, so many blessings, so much to be thankful for...

But it's tough out **there**, isn't it? As other summer preachers have noted, in the world today, we're witnesses to the unfathomable impacts of war, extreme polarization in ideology and politics, ongoing racism and discrimination, and an erosion of ethics in society and government.

In the face of this, we experiment with coping strategies like **not watching** or reading the news in order to block it all out, or alternatively taking in every bit of news in an effort to try to understand what is happening. Some find it helpful to talk through the issues of the day, while others don't want to waste their breath because it feels futile to do so. We all respond in the way that's best for us, but still we can feel overwhelmed and powerless.

Kind of a dismal start, huh ☹️?

How many of you participated in the "Mondays with Jesus and Buddha" series led by Sunada Takagi during Lent? Over the six classes, Sunada, who is an ordained Buddhist minister, laid out a path towards equanimity that, for me, felt comprehensible and seemed sort of... plausible.

I was glad when someone in the very first session asked, "What exactly is equanimity, and why do we want it?" Sunada explained that equanimity is **staying grounded and calm in the face of emotion, and that we want it because it gives us peace of mind**. Much more could have been said, I was certain, but that seemed to satisfy the class for the moment.

In the weeks that followed, we would learn that the foundational component of the Buddhist path to equanimity is knowing and really understanding ourselves. And that ultimately, **achieving that** is what opens up the doors to compassion and wisdom, and gives us full access to love, which is the essence of equanimity.

Growing up in the Christian Congregational tradition, I always learned that God is love and love is God, that God's light shines inside ourselves and in all others. And I learned that I can rely on God's care because God knows me fully, and therefore I can give my difficulties up to God.

As in Buddhism, Christianity also asks us to know ourselves. In the section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians that Andy read, Paul reminds us that we can strengthen our inner being with God's power, and with that power inside of us, we can comprehend "the breadth and length and height and depth" and accomplish "abundantly far more than we could ever ask or imagine."

Knowledge, and self-knowledge in particular, seems to be an unlocking factor in both the Buddhist and Christian traditions. And, of course, love – for ourselves, for others, and the natural world – is an essential tenet in each practice.

Self-knowledge and love.

I want to say, quite obviously, that Buddhism is a massive topic and I have learned just an iota about it. My sermon today is offered with **that** self-knowledge. And while many of you surely know a lot more than I about Buddhist practices and traditions, I still feel a desire to share what **I** took away from our Lenten class because it made such an impact on me.

We likely all understand that the starting place for knowing ourselves is mindfulness – the state of just being aware of our bodies, thoughts, and emotions. It's the act of being present in the moment, taking in the current circumstances and our reactions to them, without judgment. The more self-aware we are, the more we can self-regulate in the face of difficulty, which leads to a calming of the body and the mind. That calmness increases our ability to achieve mental clarity and physical well-being. So much good comes from mindfulness... apparently ☺.

I recently re-read my father's 1981 book called *Zen and Christian: The Journey Between*. It was eye-opening in many ways, and I was particularly struck by the evolution of the physical practice of meditation or "Zazen" - as he called it - in the Buddhist tradition. My father talks about the importance of sitting on the floor in the Lotus position (can your knees bend like that - I know mine can't), carefully counting breaths or repeating a mantra with hands clasped in a precise manner. I have usually thought of myself as a mindfulness dropout, perhaps in part because I felt couldn't adhere to these (what now appear to be) old fashioned physical stipulations around meditation.

Our teacher Sunada stressed that when practicing mindfulness through meditation, it's **most** important to just be comfortable in some good sitting spot. You don't have to pose in a certain way, or count, or chant. Of course you can if you want to, but all you really have to do is sit and notice what you think and hear and feel – and acknowledge those observations without judgment.

The mindfulness exercises that we engaged in over those six weeks have many similarities to the Centering Prayer and Welcoming Prayer practices that we've learned here in our church – also effective ways, it seems to me, to dampen down our swirling thoughts and let our hearts lead the way forward.

While we continued to experiment with mindfulness in the class, we learned about the three Buddhist "boundless states" that can help move us towards the ultimate state of

equanimity. Those boundless states are loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy. Appreciative joy, we learned, is the ability to express authentic happiness for someone else.

Each week, Sunada would help us to understand the meaning of one of the boundless states (we took them one at a time) and then would guide us through a meditation to interact - in our mind's eye - with a variety of people while reflecting that state.

In every meditation, the people we “met with” were ourselves, a stranger, a dear friend, a difficult person, and then all of humanity ☺. We tried to observe them without judgment and with open hearts. In each state, and in each case, we offered the people we met a final blessing: “May you be well, may you be peaceful and at ease, may you be happy.”

Interestingly, when we met up with the difficult person, Sunada took a moment each time to remind us (I guess because we're human beings ☺) that we shouldn't feel the need to blame, correct, or try to fix that person's thinking or behaviors. We just need to observe with open hearts.

What we learned from the weekly practice is that mindfulness can organically transform into loving kindness. And then from that foundation, when loving kindness encounters other people's pain and suffering, it can automatically take us to a place of compassion. And when loving kindness encounters other people's happiness, then we can experience appreciative joy - feeling happy about someone else's joy.

Equanimity is on a higher plane than mindfulness and the boundless states. When our kind, generous, and loving heart interacts with the full range of human emotions from suffering to happiness - **and** when we can hold all of that within our own self-awareness, equanimity is what arises. The wisdom of equanimity cannot be achieved without the other states. Equanimity rests on the whole picture of mindfulness, loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy - a picture that we can develop through practice.

On a practical level, the wisdom and perspective of equanimity simply means taking a breath, stepping back, and being grounded enough so we're not hijacked by our own emotions. As a matter of practice, equanimity can never be reached if we're holding on to feelings of hurt, anger, superiority, or resentment.

In fact, the Buddha said, “All that we are is the result of what we have thought: what we are is founded on our thoughts and we are made up of our thoughts. If we speak or act with an evil thought, suffering follows. If we speak or act with a good thought, happiness follows.”

As in Christianity, Buddhist equanimity is also about having faith that we can give up negative or difficult things to a higher power – and trusting that that higher power (whether it's God or nature or The Buddhist Way or some other force) will keep us whole.

Today's Psalm 145 says, "the Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down... and the Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." We can trust that God is aware of, and attentive to, our challenges.

Yet, in another way, equanimity is about realizing that it's **not** about us. It's about letting go of our small selves and our big egos. It's about acknowledging our inner struggles and knowing that there is someone or something that will take care of those things for us – those things that bog us down and keep us from being well, peaceful, at ease, and happy.

Self-knowledge, love, and... letting go.

If we can stay in a place of awareness and loving kindness, it will inevitably guide us down the right path. All we have to do is be present. Wisdom, perspective, and ultimately, equanimity are not things that just happen. They grow over time from a state of mindfulness and awareness.

To be clear, equanimity is not cold indifference – it's not even neutral, and it's certainly not emotionless. In equanimity, we are still very engaged and responsive, but our egos have stepped aside. We actively interact, but it's not about us. We take it all in but we don't get mired down in our reactions.

Thirteenth century Buddhist monk and philosopher Dogen Zen-ji said, "To know yourself is to forget yourself." He asserts that if we can learn to look clearly and honestly at ourselves – at our emotions, our thoughts, at who we really are – we can begin to break down the walls that separate us from others.

As an aside, this fall, our church will be offering a three-session course called "Disagreeing Well" led by Presbyterian minister and MIT Chaplain Nathan Barczy. The classes will focus on empathic listening and engagement with an emphasis on what he calls "intellectual hospitality". It will take place in the weeks leading up to the national election.

Equanimity isn't passive, but active: it's not about fighting against reality or pain or suffering, but instead it's about jumping in and doing the best we can – while we let go and let love. It's not about giving up and resigning; it's about being willing to keep stepping in, but always with an open and loving heart.

Self-knowledge and love and letting go

The power of love is foundational to both Christian and Buddhist beliefs. The Bible stresses the critical importance of knowing one's self, mostly for the purposes of also knowing and **loving God**, who can then guide and support us. God is in us. In a Buddhist practice, knowing one's self places a stronger emphasis on the individual – but the ego-less individual who can **love others** – because again, it's not about us.

The **Buddhist** practice of mindfulness, loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy are not just about feeling good or being good, but together create a whole way of viewing life (equanimity) that opens us up to a higher power and allows us to be an unencumbered force for good.

**Christianity** helps us to know ourselves, to love God, our neighbors, and our enemies, to forgive, and to have faith in a higher power so we can free up our hearts and minds to contribute to our communities and the world in meaningful and rewarding ways.

Self-knowledge and love and letting go.

Both traditions make sense to me. And I feel that I can rely on both traditions to help me navigate my reactions to the issues of the day – and also the personal challenges that I face in my own life related to caring for our parents, the paths of our adult children, family dynamics, evolving friendships, and preparing for the future as we age.

When my father wrote his book about practicing Christianity and Buddhism together, he found that he had to really explain himself – even defend himself – because of the novelty and slightly controversial nature of the joint concept. Forty years later, Sunada says that one of the best books about practicing the two religions is written by the Dalai Lama himself. It's called: *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus*.

May you be well, may you be peaceful and at ease, may you be happy.

Amen.