Wherever you go, there you are

Rev. David Kraemer

The title of this service today – Wherever you go, there you are -- was taken from the title of book by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who teaches mindfulness and meditation as ways to better health.

I thought of it immediately when I first looked through the Soul Matters packet, which lifts up embodiment as the theme for the month. Embodiment, at least according to the packet materials, is all about living in the now, about understanding your blessings, tuning in to your body.

The book “Wherever You Go, There You Are,” lays the groundwork for starting a practice of mindfulness meditation. I try to spend maybe 20 minutes each morning in quiet reflection, what some would call meditation. It helps me prepare for day, especially a long one. So I picked up the book again to reread it for this service.

Kabat-Zinn has a kind of gentle sense of humor. The second chapter opens with a description of a New Yorker cartoon. Two monks are sitting cross-legged on the floor. The younger one is looking curiously at the older one, who says, “Nothing happens next. This is it.”

With a little more edge to it, the book also draws on my own hero, Henry David Thoreau, who could spend a whole morning sitting in the doorway of his cabin on Walden Pond, watching the water and the clouds and the groundhog, and the ants.

“Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in,” Henry writes. Or more deeply, “In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of the ages.”

Be here now. Wherever here is. This is the wisdom of Thoreau and Kabat-Zinn.

But there is a tension too, in religion, between Be Here Now and Be Who We Should Be. Which one is it?

Be content.

Or make some change?

Be grateful, seek your bliss.

Or be outraged, seek justice?

These seem maybe like they don’t go together. Or at least like we’re going to have to do some fancy spiritual yoga to stretch ourselves far enough to cover both ideas.

We might be tempted to think of this as the difference between eastern and western religion – eastern religion focused inward and western religion focused outward.

But that’s not quite it for either one.

Think of the Dalai Lama, in exile, working for change in the world.

And conversely, think of Christian mystic Thomas Merton, or more contemporary, from our own hymnal, Mary Oliver or Carolyn McDade.

The conversation this week in our small groups was all about tension, too. But maybe of a more palpable kind, more immediate.

You can find it in war mongering headlines in the tabloids, or in comments on the internet in response to our embattled president, “Time to bomb something,” some say. A common political response to low approval ratings. The clouds are gathering.

Other ministers I talk to see it too, a generalized anxiety that is popping out in all kinds of ways. In relationships, in people. Maybe it is the canaries among us, the sensitive ones, who feel it first. Maybe you feel it, an unsettledness that you can’t quite blame on your usual gremlins.

There is tension even within our own association of Unitarian Universalist churches. You might know that in the past two months the president of our association, along with several other leaders, have stepped down from their jobs after criticism arose over latent racism in our own hiring practices.

It is happening right here in the UUA, where we declare the worth and dignity of all people, where we have fought for abolition and civil rights, where we have declared our intent to welcome and include all people, and yet where we continue to promote white men into leadership positions, over qualified candidates of color.

There is a strong conversation developing within Unitarian Universalist churches about White Supremacy in our association. Notice I said Supremacy. Not privilege. This is where the conversation has gone, and you need to know this.

Perhaps the term privilege has become too comfortable for those of us who are white. It has allowed us to acknowledge difference, and then talk about something else. But language matters. And White Supremacy is not just about skinheads and neo-nazis and white nationalists. It is not even just hate speech on the internet, or even bullets in a black church in South Carolina.

White Supremacy is the condition that allows privilege to occur. It is the ground on which we walk. It’s the air we breathe. White Supremacy describes the condition of this nation.

We think White Supremacy is not about us, it is about what we would change in the world.

But I think there is something spiritual about recognizing the connection we have between our own lives, and those we would vilify.

Like it or not, even we Unitarian Universalists exhibit White Supremacy when, even after intentionally deciding to diversify our congregations and our affiliation, we end up promoting white men like me to positions of power.

We do as we do and say as we say and they are not the same.

Anxiety reaches further.

Just this past week, an immigrant inmate in solitary confinement in a Georgia prison hanged himself in his cell – locked up for seeking a better life. He’s the seventh person to die in ICE custody since October. But it’s not ICE alone that did this. Not just the federal government. We did this. We did it through our policy and our fear. We are not a kind people.

Our Book Club this month read “Just Mercy,” by attorney Bryan Stevenson, which tells the story of Stevenson’s work over close to four decades now defending men and women on death row, most of them black, many of them ultimately innocent, all of them victims of a racialized and dehumanized criminal justice system.

In the middle of the book is a story of a man sentenced to death for brutally stabbing to death another person in the midst of a psychotic episode. He thought he was being attacked by demons. In this case, this defendant did commit the crime. But the initial trial made no effort to explore his mental health. Only years later, was his life revealed. A life in which he had been in 19 different foster care homes before was 8, where he had been locked in closets, denied food, beaten, and once left out in the woods, tied to a tree, for three days before hunters found him.

Many of the parents later admitted they were unprepared to deal with emerging psychosis. Foster care can be God’s grace here on earth. Some people, however, like this man, do not experience it that way.

When Stevenson first interviews him, the man seems unable to understand even where he was, much less how his case might be appealed. All he is interested in is whether the attorney has brought him a chocolate milk shake. Can’t talk about anything else.

In court, Stevenson described the life that this man had lived, burdened with organic brain damage, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Experts described how psychosis and mental health problems could lead to dangerous behavior that is a manifestation of serious illness, not a reflection of character.

Along the way, there is a particularly cruel guard, who shows no respect or compassion for anyone, whose truck was emblazoned with confederate flags and inflammatory bumper stickers. This guard strip searches Stevenson and hassles him every time he visits. And then he’s the one who ends up transporting the defendant to court.

After the hearing, Stevenson runs into him again. But something’s changed. The guard is more open, friendly even, doesn’t hassle Stevenson, lets him go on his way. But then he says, you know, he was listening when those experts were testifying. This guard says he came up through foster care, too, moved around like he wasn’t wanted anywhere. He thought he had it pretty rough, but when he heard the testimony, he came to realize he was not alone. He wonders whether, as those experts had said, his childhood has permanently shaped him, scarred him. He was afraid.

Stevenson does his best to tell them him there’s always the chance that you can do better, that the bad things that happen to us don’t define us. It’s just important sometimes to understand where people are coming from.

The guard thanks him. And then says, oh by the way, on the way back to prison, he stopped to buy the man a milkshake.

I hope, at this point, to have not bummed you out permanently. I started this sermon with a quote about dreams of happiness and visions of hope, remember? But I also want to reflect back on the conversations of the week, the things that emerged as we talked about the idea of embodiment. The point is, how do we live into the moment in the middle of so much tension?

I know I came away from those conversations more pensive, more sober. But also, more affirmed, more hopeful. Because it is good to be among others who take this job of being alive, and awake, seriously.

Maybe, when the atmospheric pressure of our society is suffocating us, when resistance seems most futile, maybe the best thing to do is to simply live well.

There’s always a chance we can do better. The anxiety in which we live does not have to define us. It is important to understand what we are living in, where we have come from.

A too-happy view of living in the moment is not helpful.

Embodiment is not about ignoring the tension, or sublimating it.

It is about embracing it, fully, and taking that chance.

It is about living in to your hopes and dreams, your values and beliefs.

It is to be grateful, and to act on that gratitude with humility and generosity.

If you ask me, it is about indulging yourself from time to time. Take a hot bath, or a walk along the bike trail. Gossip a bit. Have a milk shake. Or dive into a bag of potato chips. Do these things especially when you have too much else to do.

Embodiment also is about being here with others, who take the job of being alive, and awake, seriously.

It is to recognize that you are not alone.

It is to know that in listening, and witnessing, and in speaking the truth, there is hope.

It is a dream of where we have been and a hope of where we might go.

It is to live well, wherever you are.

There you go.