

## BUF Sermon – August 6, 2017

### To Love and Be Loved:

nurturing the spirit

*Jeff Packer with Shasta Pettijohn*

Just as a seed nurtured in the right way sprouts, takes root, and grows strong.  
So might we learn to nurture ourselves and each other, leading to  
greater wholeness and well-being.

In today's culture of busyness and activity, there is not much that truly promotes us to pause... to stop, and reflect. I want to begin by inviting you to be fully present. Is it possible for you to allow your attention to rest in this room... at this time... with whatever is here... bringing acceptance to this moment. To be at home in this present moment.

Let's begin by taking 3 deep breaths:

Breathing in a sense of calm

Breathing out RELAX

Breathing in Calm

Breathing out Relax

Calm

Relax

I invite you to close your eyes for a moment and focus on your breath

Take a moment to find your own natural rhythm to your breath without pausing... as soon as you breathe in you breathe out... as soon as you breathe out you breathe in.

Focus on your breath for a moment as we sit in a moment of silence. I will end with a prayer from Thich Nhat Hahn... a teacher of mindfulness:

*As we are together, let us truly be with each other.*

*Let us pay attention to our breathing.*

*Let us be relaxed in our bodies and our minds.*

*Let us be at peace with our bodies and our minds.*

*Let us return to ourselves and become wholly ourselves. Let us maintain a half smile on our faces.*

*Let us be aware of the source of being common to us all and to all living things.*

*Evoking the presence of the Great Compassion, let us fill our hearts with our own compassion – towards ourselves and towards all living beings.*

*May we cease to be the cause of suffering to each other.*

*With humility, with awareness of the existence of life, and of the sufferings going on around us, let us pray for the establishment of peace in our hearts and on earth.*

*Amen*

**Good Morning everyone. Welcome!** It's good to be with you! I am Jeff Packer, a BUF member and Associate Community Minister endorsed by this congregation for my work as chaplain at the hospital. It is good to know that I am among friends and a community of support as I begin to share things that I find important in this journey called life and living. My hope is always that someone will find this time of reflection inspiring or useful. We are all similar... and we are all different. Each of us with unique gifts to offer this community and this world. I celebrate with you this diversity and hope that we all may come to know it as a source of strength. Agreement is often overrated in our culture and communities. Humility and an open curiosity about how others see and experience the world... these things are often better predictors of healthy communication, relationships, and understanding than the need to have others agree with us. Of course, this requires us to pause and put aside for a moment our own opinions and pre-conceived notions of reality in order to truly listen to each other. Today, I offer my thoughts and words in all

honesty and with good intention, trusting that they might touch those who may need to hear them.

**I have entitled this talk: *To Love and Be Loved... Nurturing the Spirit.***

Just as a seed nurtured in the right way sprouts, takes root, and grows strong.

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**Generally, when we speak about human health and wellness,** so often we talk about physical health or mental health. But we are more than just physical and intellectual beings. We are emotional and spiritual beings. What does it mean to be emotionally and spiritually healthy? Holistic models of human health and wellness look at things like emotional resilience... and how we function in relationship to the moment, to self, to others. Do we have a sense of belonging and connectedness to nature, to community, to what is most significant or sacred? Do we care beyond ourselves and our own personal interests? Do we come from a base of Love or Fear? But when we look at our political climate, or the challenges of human rights, or the environmental crisis, or many world events taking place today, I find myself

wondering why so much of humanity seems to exist in emotional and spiritual toddlerhood. There are developmental models that exist for emotional and spiritual health. How do we nurture this development?

**A while ago**, I was called to visit a patient in the hospital who was challenging for the staff to deal with. I found a very rough looking fellow (I'll call him Ted) in his mid 40's who presented as belligerent and angry. I know the importance of acknowledging people for who and as they are. I try to enter with a willing curiosity, not to fix, but to listen with a genuine sense of compassion and interest in their experience of life. Part of my training was learning to acknowledge people's emotional and spiritual pain which often is buried under things like anger, depression or anxiety.

I don't know if it was because he knew he had an ear to listen or because he felt safe with me, but Ted just started talking. He was from Alaska where from an early age he got involved in drugs and criminal activity. A striking pattern emerged in the conversation. He had had a lifetime of broken relationships. He was estranged from his whole family and just about everyone that had ever cared for him. Physically, he was extremely ill with many co-occurring ailments and organ failure. He had been recently flown to Bellingham from Alaska for surgery. His lifestyle had obviously

taken a toll on his body. And, as soon as he was healthy enough, his future consisted of returning to prison where he was serving a 15-20 year sentence.

I found my own patience with listening waning as he continued to project blame and anger on people, circumstances and events for his lot in life. He seemed to be saying: "If only life met my expectations in exactly the right way, then I could be OK." But how realistic is that?... I know that anger and blame is often a protective shield for some deep pain or hurt. But I couldn't seem to find what that was for Ted. He appeared to have such limited insight into himself and his own functioning. His ability to recognize his role or take some responsibility for his own life and choices seemed remote at best.

**I was struggling.** I felt the conversation going nowhere, in fact the longer he went on with what's wrong with the world, the angrier and more worked up he seemed to get. I was looking to interrupt his momentum. Finally, I did interrupt, looked him in the eye and said: "as I sit here listening to you, I find myself wondering... what is it that you really want most? What is your deepest heart's desire?" He looked back at me and without a moment's hesitation he said: "To love and be loved." He was serious. It felt like a moment of clarity. In some strange way, his life suddenly made some sense to me. His early need to love and

be loved was never met. Sad really! How does that need get met now? How does he learn to love himself?

**The truth is our need to love and be loved gets met, or not met, in many ways.** Many of us carry unresolved pain from the past. Maybe our parents didn't know how to meet our needs or were not comfortable with our emotions. I often work with people who have experienced childhood trauma or abuse. In such cases strong emotions are pushed out of awareness, but it can be like putting the lid on a pressure cooker, the feelings never get acknowledged and so they never get processed or worked through in a healthy way. They are denied or avoided - usually changing into something else like anxiety, anger, depression or worse. The nurturing that comes from love is one of the ways children learn to process their own emotional pain helping them to develop into emotionally healthy adults.

**I invite you all for a moment to close your eyes** and picture a young child, Sara, alone in a room. Sara has just found out that her beloved dog, Boomer, has died. She is crying and very sad. The door opens and Sara's mom comes into the room. Mom immediately notices and gives her full attention. She walks up to Sara, picks her up and says: "You look so sad, what's the matter?" Through the tears Sara manages to say: "Boomer died today."

“Oh no! I’m so sorry! No wonder you are so sad.” Mom hugs and holds her. “Oh my... I know how you must feel. I lost my dog when I was 10.” She holds Sara for awhile in silence. Without words, Mom’s presence conveys the message: “I’m here, you are not alone.” Sara feels seen, her feelings are acknowledged as appropriate to the situation... sadness and grief are seen as a normal human experience of loss. Sara feels that she matters, that mom understands... mom gets it and she gets me. After a while mom says: “You loved Boomer very much didn’t you?” “Yes, I did.” “I see that... and it will probably hurt for a while because you miss him. I’m sad too, so if you need me just come and get a hug. I love you very much.”

**It’s interesting to me how often in situations like this adults try to “fix it.”** “Don’t cry. It will be better tomorrow. Boomer was getting old anyway. We’ll get a new dog and everything will be fine.” Sometimes in our own discomfort with emotional pain, we unintentionally invalidate what a child is experiencing. As a result, the child can feel that there is something wrong with them - that feeling negative emotions is somehow bad or wrong. Nobody seems to understand and they are left to grieve alone. Healthy emotional development is disrupted. Many start to deny, avoid or numb themselves to their emotional experience. We begin to

learn to invalidate our own emotions, then the emotions of others – our friends, our parents, our life partners.

Often it is the quality of a healthy attentive parent, that doesn't rush to fix everything, that provides a nurturing presence... one that accepts, allows and holds a space of safety and security. It is a space where we love and are loved as we are. It is a space where we learn to embrace ourselves as we are... where we learn to allow emotions to come and go as they will recognizing that they are usually connected to things we care about deeply. Models of emotional and spiritual development show that we heal and become more whole as we learn to embrace and accept the fullness of ourselves and our human experience.

**What does it mean to be emotionally healthy?**

**Does it mean that we are always happy?**

**Or that we never experience sadness, frustration or get our feelings hurt?**

No! Emotionally healthy people are resilient. They actually acknowledge and feel their emotions more fully, recognizing that they come and go. They have a sense that “this too will pass... but while it's here I better pay attention to it.” Sara's mom was the perfect model of this for Sara. She held the knowing that Sara was going through an experience that will likely pass, but while it

was present she helped Sara to name and be fully present to her experience. Sara was fully supported in learning to be emotionally resilient.

**In my work with people** I see that many of us avoid, deny, or numb ourselves to painful emotional experiences. It is so common. It is one way to cope and this is understandable... nobody “wants” to feel bad. But when this becomes a consistent pattern for coping, or the main strategy for dealing with the emotional pain that many carry from their past, then after a while we begin not to be able to feel positive emotions either. Life can become flat, dead... we might wonder why we are not happy or do not experience joy. Perhaps this is most true when it comes to love. To protect ourselves from pain, it can be easier not to care... to harden our hearts rather than take the risk of getting them broken. But, when we live in excessive avoidance of any emotions, we can end up losing something of what it means to be fully alive - the result can be increasing isolation, anxiety, fear, and/or depression. The healing journey then becomes the willingness to move into those places and feelings that we have been avoiding. This takes courage, and sometimes even professional support.

**I was recently meeting with a woman in her 40's at the hospital who suffered from anxiety and depression.** She

talked about experiencing abuse in childhood. It became clear as she told her story that she still carried much emotional pain from her past. She did not get any kind of healthy support when she was young. In a very real way, she still carried that hurt child inside of her. I asked her if she would try a visualization exercise with me. She agreed. I had her close her eyes and visualize herself as that hurt child. Then I asked her to visualize her adult self coming in and holding her child self in an embrace. I asked her: “What do you want to say to that child.” “What is it that she needs to hear.” She struggled a bit so I guided her suggesting that she imagine herself saying things like: “I am here... you are safe... I see that you are hurting... I will hold you... I love you no matter what... I’m not going to leave you.” The woman told me afterwards: “I didn’t know I could do that.” “I was always told it was my fault and that I was to blame for everything.” We talked about the importance of looking back at our lives and telling the truth about what we needed as children, and how our needs were met or not met. Is it possible to meet our own needs now? How is it that we can nurture and hold ourselves in an embrace of acceptance, love and compassion?

**Song: Shasta, Amy and Annie**

Thank you Shasta, Amy and Annie.

I want to end by sharing with you some information I recently received at a Palliative Care conference. One of the presenters was Simon Fox, the Executive Director of the Adventures in Caring Foundation. The foundation pioneers what Mr. Fox calls “the education of the heart.” He talked about self-care as beginning with self-awareness. I want to share with you what he calls the 4 A’s of self-awareness.

1. Attention
2. Acknowledgement
3. Affection
4. Acceptance

If we think about these 4 things in relation to Sara, the child who lost her dog, this is exactly what Sara’s mom did. First, she paid attention. Mom was mindful and fully attentive to what was happening the moment she came in the door. Next, she acknowledged exactly what was happening. As Sara shared about the death of Boomer, her mom named and acknowledged what she was feeling. Sara’s experience was validated. Then, mom picked her up showing love, care and affection. She looked upon Sara with kindness and warmth. And, throughout it all, there was acceptance which brings Sara a sense of peace, safety and welcomes her just as she is.

I have with me a a section of the handout from the conference. The 4 A's of Self Awareness are given in regards self-care, but they also apply in our relationship to others.

**The Handout Reads:**

*These are the four elements of self-awareness that build resilience, connection and compassion. They are the essence of living wholeheartedly... Like the water, soil, air, and sunlight a tree needs to grow, they are the minimum number of things you must do to develop self-awareness.*

- *Attention – read from handout.*
- *Acknowledgement*
- *Affection*
- *Acceptance*

Often we are hardest on ourselves. We can carry a self-critic who thinks that in order to be well, we must practice excellence or some imagined perfection. But true wholeness and well-being is about embracing ourselves as we are. It includes and accepts all of what it means to be human. We all have a need to love and be loved as we are. Nurturing love understands this need without having to earn it, or be worthy of it.

**Just as a seed nurtured in the right way sprouts, takes root, and grows strong.**

So might we learn to nurture ourselves and each other, leading to greater wholeness and well-being.

Thank you all.

And may peace arise within us and within this world we love!

### **Extinguishing the Chalice: #456**

We extinguish this flame but not

the light of truth

the warmth of love

or the fire of commitment.

These we carry in our hearts until

we are together again!

### **Circle Round for Freedom**