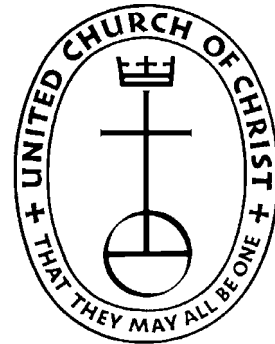


Diving into Life with Abandon

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
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This sermon uses the examples of Peter accepting Jesus' invitation to get out of a boat in the midst of the sea and of John Keats living life to its fullest before his early death as depicted in a recent film to illustrate how we too may live life to the fullest, in the present moment, sharing and receiving love and accepting mystery.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

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Simon Peter was probably the most prominent of the disciples who joined Jesus in his Jewish renewal movement. The storytellers give Peter an exuberant passion for life. He was the one willing to risk asking Jesus' hard questions. He was the first disciple to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus' life and ministry. After Jesus' death, Peter led the early church in Jerusalem.

But this is the story where I think we can see Peter diving into life with abandon. Did this actually happen? I don't think so. I think it is a story created by the early churches to show those in the Greco-Roman world how special they thought Jesus was. You can come to your own conclusions about that.

The setting for the story was that Jesus, learning of the death of John the Baptizer, tried to get away by himself but the crowds had followed him. So this is what happened at day's end.

Jesus insisted that the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side. Having sent the crowds away, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray, remaining there alone as night fell. Meanwhile the boat, already a thousand yards from the shore, was being tossed about in the waves which had been raised by fierce winds.

At about three in the morning, Jesus came walking toward them on the lake. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they were in awe. "It is a ghost," they said, and in their fear they began to cry out.

Jesus hastened to reassure them, "Don't worry. It's me. Don't be afraid."

Peter spoke up and said, "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water."

"Come!" Jesus said.

So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink and cried out, "Save me."

Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. "You have so little faith," Jesus said to him. "Why did you doubt?"

For the early church, the story probably had lots of theological meanings, but I am fascinated by Peter's willingness to step out of the boat. Peter threw himself into life with abandon.

Let me move from that biblical scene to two stories told in an idiom of our own time, stories on film.

The first, *Dead Poets Society*, produced over two decades ago by Australian film-maker Peter Weir, was set at the imaginary Welton Academy in Vermont, a prep school for upper class boys who were expected to move on to Harvard or Yale, and then to a prestige-laden law firm or corporate boardroom.

Into that setting came John Keating played by Robin Williams – a dedicated new teacher, a poet, witty and humane, inspirational and unconventional. Keating began to challenge Welton's rigid, dogmatic notions of truth.

He wanted his students to experience poetry, to feel it, not just to objectively describe its reality. He ordered his students to destroy the pages in their poetry anthology that suggested the value of poetry could be measured like a geometric figure. His credo was *carpe diem* – seize the day. He said, "We don't read and write poetry because it is cute, but because it is full of the passion of life."

Jane Campion, director of the second film, like Peter Weir lives in Australia. Her film, *Bright Star* came out last year and was just released on DVD. It is about John Keats, a British poet whose life was filled with tragedy. In 1818, when Keats turned 23, he began to create the poetry for which he is now so famous, but at the same time he developed symptoms of tuberculosis. He died two years later. But during those two years, he fell in love with Fanny Brawne, whose mother was his landlord. Their relationship – passionate and enduring, yet ultimately unconsummated – is the focus of the movie.

Fanny, stylish, forthright, a talented seamstress, not big on poetry, initially had disdain for the famished poet living next to her family in Hampstead.

There is a scene early in the movie when Fanny visits Keats and his roommate in their room next door. She said to him, "I confess I do not find your poems easy." She wanted him to teach her how to read and understand poetry.

He responded; "If poetry does not come as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all." That's why Mr. Keating had his students at Welton remove from their textbooks the pages about rules and structures for poetry.

But Fanny persisted. She wanted Keats to tell her how to "work out" a poem. He replied: "You do not work out a poem. That would undo its magic." He said poetry is best understood through the senses, through "your capacity for being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts." He said, "The point of diving in a lake isn't immediately to swim to the shore, but to be in the lake, to luxuriate in the sensation of water. You do not work the lake out; it is an experience beyond thought. Poetry soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery."

For Keats, the point of swimming was not to reach some objective goal but to luxuriate in the sensation of water. I think our faith calls us to accept, acknowledge and affirm the mysteries of birth and of death, and then to luxuriate in living meaningfully in the present moment.

Let me look at three words that are critical to liberal Christianity: Mystery, Life and Love.

First, **Mystery**. Keats' words in *Bright Star* affirmed mystery. He said poetry is amidst “uncertainties, mysteries and doubts ... poetry soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery.”

My first sermon after being called as your senior minister was entitled “A Skeptic in the House of God.” It was about doubt and mystery. Our spiritual journeys are always bracketed by mysteries; our knowledge is always limited.

And sadly, much of Christian history and orthodox Christian theology has refused to accept mystery, replacing it instead with dogmas and creeds that must be believed. The goal seems to be to leave no question unanswered – dogma replaces mystery with absolutes and certainty. But I would claim, that our faith, like poetry, “soothes and emboldens the soul to accept mystery.”

I need not have more than a partial sense of the reality or presence of God. It is okay that I have no clue as to what lies beyond death. It is all right to admit that there are mysteries in life beyond my comprehension.

There are three great Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Judaism and Christianity. In Judaism, the word “Israel” is critical. Remember the story about Jacob wrestling with God and being renamed “Israel,” the one who struggles, who wrestles with God. My friend, Rabbi Haim Beliak, sometimes reminds people, often gleefully aware of how startling his statement will seem, that the Arabic equivalent of “Israel” for Islam is “Jihad,” struggling to serve and be faithful to God. Faith is seen as a struggle to find the truth, not as a pre-determined list of beliefs and doctrines.

I think Christianity shares that notion at its best – once we let go of the need for certainty in every aspect of life.

Unitarian Forrest Church was one of my generation’s best theologians. Two years younger than I, he died last year. He wrote in his final book: “Challenged by the demands of love and death, I had to make room in my theology for a more capacious, if unfathomable, power. I had to clear a place for mystery on the altar of my hearth, which before I had crowded with icons to knowledge. The 18th-century classical lithographs of architectural drawings that I favored while at divinity school could no longer divert my awareness from the cracking plaster behind them. I needed something far more arresting and humbling, something more like Vincent Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*.”

Mystery is at the heart of our faith.

The second word is: **Life**.

Preaching a couple days after Forrest Church died, his successor at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York, Galen Guengerich, said, “As much as anyone, and more than most of us, Forrest had the courage to dive into the mystery of life – to luxuriate in uncertainty and cherish doubt, to wrestle with paradox and embrace irony. In the pulpit as in the rest of his life, Forrest held up his failures as readily as he celebrated his successes. He dove full in – nothing hidden and nothing held back.”

That’s like Peter stepping into lake, or like Jesus saying that Empire of God is not some distant

realm in the heavens nor some reality after death, but it is here, in our midst, right now.

Once Forrest Church wrote an essay about trapdoors. He said: "My children helped teach me this lesson. One day we were almost killed crossing the street in front of our apartment building. I was walking them to their last day of school. Three-quarters of the way across, with the light in our favor and all of us dutifully holding hands, a car burst out of nowhere, hurtling around the corner at breakneck speed, ricocheting off the curb and swerving into our path.

"Missing us by inches, the car skidded, fishtailed back into control and disappeared down the avenue. I could barely breathe, my heart beating like a pile driver. In stark contrast, my kids just laughed, romping blithely down the sidewalk, jumping from tree to tree as they always did.

"Deeply shaken, I did the obvious thing. I got angry. Not at the driver, of course. She was long gone. I vented my anger at the children.

"'Did you see that car? It could have killed us. It almost hit us.' But neither of them had been doing anything wrong. I had nothing to teach them. Only this perhaps, our lives are beset with trapdoors. A massive coronary, an embolism, a drunk driver, a vagrant cell multiplying with mortal vengeance secretly within our body until the tumors it spawns literally take our breath away.

"Trapdoors have one saving grace. They add to our appreciation of life, even as they threaten to extinguish it. Later that day, walking my children home from school, they looked different to me, more vulnerable and precious. I loved them desperately."

"It reminded me," he said, "that life is not a given, but a wonderful gift. That gift comes with a price attached. One day something will steal it from us. That doesn't diminish our lives; it increases their value. Fragility and impermanence ensure life's preciousness. It took a trapdoor trembling beneath my feet and a crazed woman casting the shadow of death across my family's path to awaken me once again to the wonder of life and the blessings of love."

Then he concluded: "My kids had the right idea. We had just escaped from a brush with death. Why didn't I think to jump and touch the leaves."

Dr. Rachel Ramen, a Jewish oncologist, said that her grandfather gave her a silver wine goblet so small it holds no more than a thimbleful of wine. Made long ago in Russia, he gave it to her during one the many afternoons they sat together memorizing phrases from old books and discussing the nature of life. If she became restless during the discussions, he would revive her attention by filling her little wineglass with Manishevitz and putting a splash of wine in his much larger ceremonial cup.

Then they would offer a toast together: *L'Chiam*. He said it meant, "To life!"

She asked him once, "Is it to a happy life?" "No, it's just, "To life!"

"Is it like a prayer?" she asked. "No, we pray for the things we don't have. We already have

life.”

“Is it written in the Torah, Grandpa?” she asked. “No,” he said, “it is written in people’s hearts.”

Seeing the confusion on her face, he told her that *L’Chiam* meant that no matter what difficulty life brings, no matter how hard or painful or unfair life is, life is holy and worthy of celebration. He said, “Even the wine is sweet to remind us that life itself is a blessing.”

Forrest Church wrote: “Only in the here and now can we love God, love our neighbor and redeem the day ... That is one of the most beautiful things about a terminal illness. If you have made peace with your past and have no unfinished business, you are invited into the present. Your friendships become stronger. Your love becomes more vital. Every day becomes more beautiful, a gift unto itself. All you have to do is unwrap it. You unwrap the present and receive it as the gift it is.”

Mystery, Life and then finally **Love**.

Last year, I preached about theologian Don Cupitt’s notion of solar living. Using the metaphor of the sun burning itself out, he says, “We should live as the sun does ... it simply expends itself gloriously and in so doing gives life to all.”

The sun gives life to our solar system, even at the same time it is gradually burning itself out. The process by which it dies and the process by which it lives are the same. And so for our lives to have meaning, for there to be a sense of wholeness, of completeness, of shalom in that gift of life, that gift of the present moment, we must focus on giving warmth and love to others. For that is what ultimately fills us with joy. That is why Jesus said the heart of faith is to love God by loving others.

Again words from Forrest Church: “We have been born into a great mystery. We die into a great mystery. In between – in that little dash between the dates on our tombstone – what we know of God we learn from love’s lessons. Love teaches us the difference between what is holy and what is diabolical. When we act in concert with our higher selves and embrace our neighbors, we act in the presence of all that is divine ... When love dwells in our hearts, we dwell in God’s presence ... The realm of the heart is not only where we touch each other most sacredly; it is also the place where we encounter the cosmic source for our sense of awe.”

Living life to the fullest, in the present moment, sharing and receiving love and accepting mystery – that is at the heart of liberal Christianity. Diving into life with abandon!

Let me end with some final words from Forrest Church: “If you are struggling with a relationship, out of touch with an old friend, unsure whether to risk a new job, uncomfortably estranged from a parent; if you are hiding to be safe, taking care not to be wrong, I suggest that you take a chance. Don’t wait until you are sure. Don’t wait until you have it right. Though waiting till we have it right works for some things – mostly little things – often our most important decisions and actions are so fraught with danger that we will never surely get them right.

“Life is filled with danger. That’s just the way it is. Finally, the *Titanic* always hits the iceberg. Hence this simple, if imprudent, bit of advice: Before it does, pick up the phone. Pick up the gauntlet. Do whatever it takes. Take a few chances. Dare to live before you die.”