

“We Reap What We Sow II: Sowing the seeds of peace”
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Today’s sermon is the second part of a two part series. For the sake of review, last week I talked about the importance of becoming conscious of the seeds we plant into the world in the form of not only our actions and words, but also our thoughts.

I explained that karma is the idea that all of the things we do, say or even think create an energy that has an effect on the world. And when we make an effort to become aware of how we interpret the events in our lives we become able to make conscious choices about how we will react. With that awareness we can then choose to align our actions with our highest values.

I closed the sermon by saying that when we sow the seeds of loving kindness and generosity and compassion we will find it is kindness and generosity and compassion that is returned to us in like kind.

The focus last week was on learning to recognize and bring consciousness to the seeds we are sowing in our lives on a daily basis. I think there is great power in simply gaining that awareness.

But today I’d like to talk about what happens when we actively choose to plant and nurture the seeds of peace that dwell within us.

Mahatma Gandhi exhorted people everywhere to, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” If we want to live in a world where people treat one another with respect and kindness it is to us to first embody respect and kindness in all our interactions.

As much as we’d like to have it another way, we can only change ourselves.

I will bet that most of the time, when things are going along well, most of us enjoy spreading cheerfulness, helping people around us whenever we can and generally promoting peace. It feels good when we know we have increased someone else’s happiness.

But being a bright beacon of joy is definitely not as easy when times are tough. When we have just been hit with bad news or especially when we are reacting to having been wronged by someone – these are times when we may be challenged to be thoughtful in our responses.

These are the times when I believe it is most crucial to become conscious of our reactions and how we choose to move through the world. These are the pivotal points, the moments that can help us grow into our best selves if we allow them to.

When my friend Sasha’s first child was two years old she was trying to teach him impulse control. Her son would sometimes get frustrated and angry with a playmate and as he was

just about to clock his little buddy over the head with a toy Sasha would jump in and say “Jason, stop and think!”

I just love that phrase. “Stop and think!” Sasha’s words of wisdom have stayed with me over the years - occasionally coming to mind just in the nick of time and saving me from regretting my words or actions.

I have to tell you a story. When I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area I had a little white Honda CRX – I loved that car. It had one bright blue bumper sticker placed prominently on the bumper. You should know that I am not usually a bumper-sticker person. They are a little like tattoos. I am afraid that at some point I will regret them.

But I came across a sticker with a quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama that read, “My Religion is Kindness”. I felt confident that I would never regret proclaiming my allegiance to such a gracious statement.

Now I don’t know how much experience you have had on the freeways in Oakland and Berkeley. Highways 80 and 880 especially are home to some of the craziest drivers I’ve ever shared the road with, cars zipping in and out of the lanes at top speeds. It is astonishing. There was more than one occasion when someone nearly tried to kill me with their reckless maneuvers and I felt road rage rise in me.

But then I would remember that bright blue bumper sticker. How could I in good conscience, express my frustration by making a rude hand gesture, or yell an expletive with the Dalai Lama’s words prominently displayed upon my bumper? What kind of hypocrite would I appear to be?

I figured I had two options. I could peel the darned thing off and freely indulge my frustration or I could keep my anger in check and allow the sticker to help guide my behavior.

Which wolf was I going to feed?¹

Maybe you remember hearing the story of Amy Biehl, the blond, blue-eyed Stanford graduate and Fulbright scholar who was killed by an angry black mob in Cape Town, South Africa in 1993. Amy was spending a year in South Africa studying the lives of the black women there as the country transitioned from apartheid to democracy.

She had just finished her Fulbright paper and had her tickets to fly back to California the next day. But that evening she was driving through one of Cape Town’s most poverty-stricken shantytowns when she was attacked and beaten to death by a group of young men who were returning from a political rally.

¹ A reference to the children’s story “The Tale of Two Wolves”

Four of the men were convicted of her murder and sentenced to eighteen years in prison. Four years into their sentence they applied for a pardon from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which had just been established by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As part of the reconciliation process Amy's parents were invited to come to South Africa and talk about Amy during the hearing.

Amy's mother, Linda, said when she saw her daughter's assailants at the hearing she was moved by just how young and pitiful they looked. In the hallway after the trial the four men approached the Biehls, shook their hands and asked for forgiveness.

The Commission ultimately agreed that Amy's murder was a political, rather than a purely criminal act and, with the Biehl's encouragement, granted all four men pardons.

Many people, in the United States and South Africa, were outraged that Amy's parents should support the amnesty bid. Hate mail landed in their mailbox and continued for years.

Over the next few years the Biehls made several trips to South Africa and in the process developed a close relationship with two of the men who killed Amy.

Linda Biehl and her late husband, Peter, started the Amy Biehl Foundation in 1994 with donations that arrived, unsolicited, from strangers who were moved by the news of their daughter's death. The foundation continues to fund community projects and after-school programs in the bleak, poverty-stricken Cape Town townships where Amy had worked and died.

The two men who once helped kill Amy Biehl now work for the foundation set up in her memory. Over the years they have built mutual trust and respect and in the process grown quite close to Amy's parents, calling them "mom" and "dad".

This is a remarkable and improbable story of forgiveness. Surely no one would have blamed the Biehls for harboring rage at these men indefinitely for murdering their daughter. But instead they chose to extend an olive branch.

I think for most of us the idea of forgiving, much less befriending, the people who murdered our child is not only improbable it is abhorrent. It may even strike people as dead wrong because it goes against the value of family.

And yet when I think of all the stories I have heard of people who have lost children to violence, this story contains the most redemption. Those parents who opted to witness the execution of their child's murderers may say at first that it gave them some satisfaction. I have to wonder, though, if the experience contributed to their comfort and sense of peace in the long run.

By pushing themselves into places that most people would never go in terms of compassion and grace the Biehls were richly rewarded. They have been able to come to terms with the men who killed their child, and find peace in a way that I think they would never have been able to if they had simply stayed rooted in their righteous anger.

When I think of the times when I have gone ahead and indulged my rage at another driver on the freeway I realize that it didn't actually make me feel much better. In fact, the times when I've given in and yelled in anger it actually poisoned my day.

It feels uncomfortable at first to hold in our negative feelings because it is natural for us to want to vent them. But what I am suggesting is that we don't always have to express our anger. In my experience making another choice usually makes me feel much better.

So these days when I get cut off on the highway and I feel my fear explode in my chest and the anger swelling just behind it, instead of raging at the other driver I say a prayer of gratitude.

"Thank you for reminding me just how precious and fragile life is."

What I am talking about, choosing to nurture peace, especially in extreme cases like the Biehl's story, is not easy stuff. It can be nearly impossible to do because it goes against our nature. It is written deep in our DNA that when we are attacked we attack back.

The lightning quick responses that emanate from the base of our brains were crucial when early humans were living in a hostile environment. It is rare in our society today that fight or flight is a fitting response. Yet we still carry that impulse for survival at all costs and it can come out in inappropriate situations. People get their ire up and seem ready to attack over where the brochures are kept and who gets to make that decision.

That is why we choose to engage in spiritual practice. Like all spiritual practices this one is challenging. Learning to actively choose to plant the seeds of peace will help us to rise above our reactive self and become more self-aware and thoughtful.

The point of this, and any, practice is not simply to make us better people. The point of pushing ourselves to grow into our very best selves is to ultimately to enhance our enjoyment of life. When we clear away some of the clutter of our egos and walk through the world in a more conscious state we are able to see and receive the abundant joy available to us that we may otherwise miss.

And yes, it can be a really a slow and laborious process. If we can simply make an effort to notice our reactivity, or if we remember just once in the coming week to "stop and think" in that split second before we respond carelessly, we will have made an important difference.

It is up to each of us to decide in every moment of our lives which wolf we want to feed.

I will close my message today with the "Prayer of St Francis"

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
and it is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

Amen.