

Sermon On Snails and Jellyfish

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented Sunday, October 29th, 2017
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Matthew 22:34-46

On the west coastline of Italy in the Bay of Naples, just beyond Naples' city beaches, lives the *Nudibranch snails* and the *Medusa jellyfish*. The Nudibranch snails are small, attractive snails protected by a shell that cannot be digested. The Medusa jellyfish makes a deadly error when it swallows a Nudibranch snail. The jellyfish thinks it's getting a tasty meal, but the snail attaches itself to the inside of the jellyfish and ends up eating that jellyfish from the inside out.

I tell you this seemingly silly and inconsequential but common and natural event because it illustrates why the gospel lesson regarding the two great commandments Jesus spoke of (Love God and Love your neighbour as yourself) is so important for you and I to incorporate into the very fabric of our lives. And we can be grateful the two commandments are emphatic and not in any way ambiguous.

Indigestible food will eat you from the inside out. This is what happens to you when you nurture your grudges, protect your bitterness, and do not let go of your anger. You think you're getting a tasty snack, munching on those resentments, that bitterness, that self-righteousness. But, in fact, those resentments, that bitterness, that self-righteousness is eating you alive. This is not what God wants for you. God does not want your destruction but wants for you joy in your life and freedom.

Let me tell you about Tom (not his real name, nor is he someone known to me personally – but just the same his story is true). Tom's sister had been cruelly stabbed to death. Time had not healed Tom's grief or the anger he carried unknowingly toward his sister's murderer. His sister had been a delightful young woman. She had worked for a Christian organization, and she sang in the church choir. She and her roommate attended a Bible study that welcomed into their study the man who would become her killer. They were told he had recently been released from a psychiatric hospital. They had not been told he had been confined to the facility after being found not guilty by reason of insanity for killing a 15-year old girl.

Tom's sister was moving out of her apartment the next day. Her roommate, who was getting married, had moved out two days earlier. Tom was to have been there the next day to help her move, but this night she was alone. Her murderer came to the door looking for her roommate, became enraged when she was not there, and took his anger out on Tom's sister, stabbing her several times, leaving her to die in a pool of her own blood. This is a horrible story!

During the trial, Tom recalls wanting to leap over the railing and kill his sister's murderer right there in the courtroom. He couldn't even see the man as a human being and who could blame him? Who among us would have responded any differently at the time, but 15 years later it was eating him alive. Tom, in those lean-mean intervening years, had thrown himself into work and volunteered hours and hours at the church so he would be too busy to have time to think or feel. In preparation for a Bible study he was leading on forgiveness all these many years later, he had a sensation of a voice ask him if he was also going to forgive his sister's convicted murderer. That was something he was not prepared to do.

That evening in the Bible Study, he talked the talk. But then a woman raised her hand and said, "This is all too easy. What if someone killed your children or your wife or your husband?" Tom said he felt as if he'd been hit. They didn't know about his sister until that night. During the course of the rest of that evening, the rest of the Bible study, and the worship service that followed, Tom finally realized the price he was paying for his anger. He realized he must and could let go of his anger toward his

sister's murderer. It wasn't dramatic, he said. It was a simple release of anger he didn't know he still had; and, finally, after all those years, he had a real sense of peace.

To love your neighbour as yourself does not mean that you must have a cozy, warm feeling in your heart toward those who have inflicted the greatest pain on you or on your loved one. God knows that feeling of love is sometimes simply not possible. What Leviticus and Jesus both are talking about, though, is not "love" the feeling but "love" the action. The action of love is what is required here-letting go of the hatred, letting go of the bitterness, letting go of the self-righteousness that, in fact, is eating you alive. Leviticus speaks of other actions of love:

- You shall not hate in your heart anyone.
- You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against anyone.

These are the actions of love. They do not condone the wrongs of someone else. They prevent those wrongs from eating you alive. Sometimes these actions of love can take time, as in the case of Tom. It can take time to come to terms with one's anger. This commandment is not given to force anyone into the actions of love. It is not given for an outsider to point accusatory and judgmental fingers at another, telling that person you must love your neighbor as yourself. It is not given to make the suffering person suffer more because that is one more thing he or she is not doing right.

This command to love your neighbor as yourself is given to you as a gift, for our all-knowing and all-loving God knows that this is the only way to true joy and true happiness and peace. To let go of the anger, to let go of the bitterness, to let go of the self-righteousness does not right the wrongs that have been done but is the door God has opened for you so that a holy joy and gentle, enduring peace may reenter your life.

Through all of this I hear Jesus say again, "Love. It's all about love. Love for God, and God's love for us and our love for one another." The apostle Paul said it best: Now abideth faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, how easy it is, how easy it is, to hold the grudges, the resentments, the self-righteous air. It is easy to believe in our unwillingness to let go that we are somehow settling the score. Give us the eyes to see that that behavior really is only a slow death for us and then give us the strength to let go and to know true joy and true peace in our lives through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.