

***I WISH TO LIVE DELIBERATELY***

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University Congregational Church

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**Reading: “I Went to the Woods” by Henry David Thoreau**

**I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>1</sup>**

On this day, July 4, 1776, the American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. On his deathbed John Adams uttered these last words, “Thomas Jefferson survives.” Little did he know that Jefferson also lay dying. Both men passed July 4, 1826. And on July 4, 1825, Henry David Thoreau moved to his cabin on Walden Pond.

The passage from *Walden* that I read to you is found in the second chapter of the book, “Where I Lived and What I Lived For.” The first chapter is “Economy” wherein Thoreau offers an accounting of his experience on Walden Pond. It seems that his neighbors wanted to know what in the world he was doing out there, what good use of his time he had made, and how much did he earn and spend. Thoreau loved word play and suggests that he will offer his account of two years at Walden. He offers a detailed expense report on the cost of building the cabin, \$28.12 1/2. By his ledger Thoreau discovered that he could work about six weeks out of the year and

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *The Annotated Walden*, edited and noted by Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), p. 222.

earn enough money to maintain his frugal life-style for the balance of the year. Satirizing clothes, labor, housing, business practices, and farming Thoreau asks what is really worth accounting? Where are the true values of life that are worth measuring? He declares that Walden is a “good place for business” as he takes inventory of his life and the choices that he is making.

Without a doubt *Walden* is a far more challenging book that most people pretend to have read. It is a challenge mainly because Thoreau confronts our lifestyle, business practices, and fundamental assumptions about the meaning and value of life. I think that challenge is far more daunting 165 years after Thoreau entered his one room cabin, of approximately 10' X 15.' It is more challenging because all of the vanities that Thoreau made fun of in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are now more extravagant and their marketing is far more pervasive that Henry could ever have imagined.

I do not pretend to be made of the same personal timbre or moral tenor as Henry David Thoreau. I do not expect that I could ever emulate his lifestyle. Thoreau never expected anybody to copy him. His experiment at Walden was his own. It was a personal accounting of his character that precedes all of his comments about society.

Having said that, I am nonetheless challenged to live my life as deliberately as possible. To what extent have I declared my own declaration of independence? Have I penned my own charter of freedom? If the nation's declaration of independence promises “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” have I chosen my life, exacted my due of liberty, and pursued the essential character of happiness? Toward those ends Thoreau ever remains a guide, a sobering conscience, and fellow traveler in my spiritual journey.

Well, right away, I have a major problem. The kind of independence that I hunger for and the kind of profession that I have chosen – or have been chosen for – is too often at odds. Ministry is hardly the place for personal freedom. On the surface there are the problems that you can readily imagine: expectations about how I dress and how my wife dresses, how our children behave, how I cut my hair, the kind of car I drive, *ad nauseam*. Then, consider the people who think: I am theologically too liberal or too conservative, my sermons are painstakingly rationalized or patently simplified; I am overly spiritual or not spiritual enough, too high-church or too low church, politically charged or overly reserved in the face of social issues, frightfully direct and confrontational or noxiously indecisive and vacillating, *ad nauseam*. Now all of this just from my family! I haven't gotten to you yet. Perhaps you have heard this report from a church's search committee.

We do not have a happy report to give. We have not been able to find a suitable candidate for this church, though we have one promising prospect. We have followed up on each of these candidates with interviews and reference checks and offer you this confidential report.

ADAM: Good man but has problems with his wife. One reference told us that both of them love walking nude in the woods.

NOAH: Served his former pastorate 120 years with no converts. Prone to unrealistic building projects.

JOSEPH: A big thinker but a braggart. He has a prison record and believes that he can interpret dreams.

MOSES: A modest and meek man, but poor communicator, even stutters at times. Sometimes he loses his temper and acts rashly in business meetings. Some reports suggest that he left an earlier church over a murder charge.

DEBORAH: One word – female.

SOLOMON: Great preacher but has problems with women.

ELIJAH: Prone to depression, collapses under pressure and has too many conflicts with local clergy.

HOSEA: A tender and loving pastor but his wife's occupation is scandalous.

JONAH: Told us he was swallowed up by a great fish. He then said the fish spit him out on dry land. We hung up.

AMOS: Too much of a country hick. Backward and unpolished. With some seminary training he might have promise, but he has deep prejudice against wealthy people.

JOHN: Says he is a Baptist, but doesn't dress like one. We think he may be Pentecostal. Tends to lift both hands in the air to worship, where we only lift one. John sleeps outdoors and has a weird diet. He too often provokes denominational and civic leaders.

PETER: Too blue collar and has a bad temper. It is reported that he curses from time to time. He's a loose cannon.

PAUL: Powerful CEO type and fascinating preacher. However, he is short on tact, is unforgiving with younger ministers, and has been known to preach all night.

JESUS: Has had popularity, and even built up his congregation to 5,000. But he managed to offend them all and attendance dropped to twelve. He seldom stays in one place very long and he is single.

We do have one candidate that we are seriously interested in:

JUDAS: His references are solid. A steady plodder. Conservative. Good connections. Knows how to handle money. We're inviting him to preach this Sunday in view of a call.<sup>2</sup>

Every congregation I have ever served had a significant number of people who wanted me to deliver sermons that they wanted to hear and affirmed their lifestyle. I have had people walk out of sermons because I did not believe in the physical resurrection of the body; preached against the war in Viet Nam; offered a community worship service a few days after 9/11 and stated that war was inevitable; and so on. I

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<sup>2</sup> <http://javacasa.com/humor/pastor/html>, revised and downloaded 7/1/10.

have been called a Communist, Socialist, an “intellectual liberal,” and was told a year ago that I did not have Jesus in my heart. I guess there are just some people who expect the right of individual conscience but not for the preacher, or the free and responsible search truth but not for the preacher.

I sometimes feel like the minister who was serving Holy Communion to a largely Hispanic congregation. He was using Pita bread as the host, or body of Christ. He bent down to serve a young child. “Oh, sir,” said the child, “I don’t like flour tortillas. I prefer corn tortillas.”

So my wish to live deliberately is challenged by my occupation. It is a vocation, by the way, that I could not imagine leaving. I can only do my best to preach the truth with love by the lights God has given me. I can only “Praise God the Truth that sets us free.” All speech, be it civil discourse, sermon, or conversation is set within the limits of a social context. Every social setting is in bond to cultural prejudices, variety of language and interpretation, and the economy of relationships. Preaching is always communal.

A little boy went up to his minister after the Sunday service. He said to the clergyman, “When I grow up I am going to give you lots of money.” The preacher replied, “Oh? Why is that?”

“Because,” answered the boy, “my daddy said you are the poorest preacher he has ever heard.”

Thoreau clearly saw the limits of occupation in the cause of deliberate living. He lamented those who lived “lives of quiet desperation,” or resignation. Henry observed with pity the farmer lumbering down the road with 40 acres of field, pasture,

and barn on his shoulders. He chose, rather, to be the inspector of snow, and the keeper of springs. In fact, he was an excellent surveyor whose accuracy is still respected in Concord today. He worked at day jobs for people like the Emerson's. Thoreau kept a daily journal and worked at the craft of writing with meticulous care. He did not publish *Walden* until 1854, after multiple revisions. Several of his essays, such as "Huckleberries" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown" he delivered on the lyceum lecture circuit.

Thoreau also stated that a day was hardly worth accounting for if it did not include at least four hours walking in the woods. Ralph Waldo Emerson was also an avid walker. Emerson wrote:

"The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retrained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food...In the woods, we return to reason and to faith."<sup>3</sup>

Since childhood nature has been my soul mate, the balm of my spirit, and the center of my character. I have been able to swim since I was three years old and often immersed my body and soul in the Gulf of Mexico. I have bathed in many rivers, streams, lakes, and yes, even Walden Pond. I have been sanctified in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans; fished, snorkeled, and scuba dived in cold water springs and the Caribbean. I have made many pilgrimages along the Appalachian Trail and other paths. I have sauntered down country lanes, meadows, and plains. I have often lingered in forests and atop mountains from Vermont to Colorado. Sassafras tea, gooseberries, high bush

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<sup>3</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: AMS Press, 1979); Vol. I, pp. 9-10.

blueberries, mulberries, wild blackberries and strawberries have delighted my tongue. Thoreau called them “nature’s cordials.”

Thoreau said, “Nature is my worship.” Nature is certainly essential to my worship. It is where I go to recover reason and faith. More often than not I find that the power of nature, the laws of nature, and the beauty of nature make more sense to me than most of society. Even when nature is harsh it is not mean spirited or vengeful. Indeed, she is often more forgiving than many Christians I have known.

That is why, whenever possible, I try to live in the country. I deliberately choose that place where my soul can be restored and I can most enjoy the intercourse of heaven and earth. I ride the wild delight of horses whinnying, birds singing, and coyotes howling. I slumber on the breasts of wind and the brilliance of the Milky Way. I am centered in those moments of absolute silence. Not a horn honks, nor a train rumbles, nor a dog barks, nor a horse munches, nor a bird chirps. That happens where I live and I am absorbed into eternity. Often I have sat alone on the barn deck, soaked in sunlight and silence.

I understand that this is my choice and it does not appeal to every person. In fact, I had a friend who once visited us and was terrified, especially of the night. But most people who visit us at Soggy Bottom will say, “Now I understand.” Sometimes they will stand by the side of their car before they leave, lingering just long enough to breathe in the sounds and smells of nature.

A dear friend spent a weekend with us a few months ago. Our friend took time to ride horses and read books in Emily's "Half Acre Wood." She wrote a touching thank-you card about love and generosity. One evening she referred to Soggy Bottom as "my happy place."

I believe that Nature nurtures us because she contains and reveals spiritual elements that are profoundly sacred. Emerson wrote, "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue. Every natural action is graceful."<sup>4</sup> The closer our soul is integrated with Nature, when the inner person is deeply woven in natural circumstances, the greater the equilibrium of body, mind, and soul. That is how I choose to live deliberately, expecting God's mark on my soul. In the words of Wendell Berry:

"We will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God...Creation is thus God's presence in creatures."<sup>5</sup>

I have always hungered for God's presence and can tell you with joy that I live in it every day. So do you!

The experience of God is not confined to a national park or scenic byway. When we say that God's presence is experienced in all creatures, we also mean the human creatures, the habitats of people. But just as in the nature, we have to train our eyes to discern the Creator. I had just such an experience this week. I was visiting Harriet Price who is writing the final chapter of her life. Harriet has Alzheimer's disease and her memory function is not very good. But in the moments I am with her she is very present to me, very conscious of our talking and holding hands. I visited

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Wendell Berry, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," *The Art of the Commonplace* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 308.



her in the hospital last May. As I started to leave she firmly held tight as if to not let me go. I said, “Oh, Harriet, there is still strength in the old girl yet.” A huge smile beamed across her face. Last Thursday evening I offered a brief prayer. Again, she clasped my hands and said, “I like that, especially the middle part. Get me a copy of that.”

Do you hear the celebration of God in those words? Do you feel an eternal smile that radiates from this grand old dame? I sure do, and I am thankful that Harriet gave me a little window into the love of God. Mary Oliver teaches us something about receiving God’s presence in her poem “Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does It End?”

There are things you can’t reach. But  
you can reach out to them, and all day long.

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,  
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing  
from the unreachable top of the tree.

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around  
as though with your arms open.

And thinking: maybe something will come, some  
shining coil of wind,  
or a few leaves from any old tree –  
they are all in this too.

And I I will tell you the truth.  
Everything in the world  
comes.

At least closer.

And, cordially.

Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.

Like goldfinches, little dolls of gold  
fluttering around the corner of the sky

of God, the blue air.<sup>6</sup>

Live deliberately today. Stand around looking with deliberation. Look with your arms wide open. See what comes closer. Embrace all the creatures. When you open your arms to them, embrace them and kiss them you press your life to the very lips of God.

***Finis***

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Oliver, "Where Does the Temple Begin, Where Does it End," *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), pp. 8-9.