

“Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant?”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

Inspired this week by Linus, he of the security blanket

And the sucked raw thumb, who says to Lucy in perhaps

The best and most theological of the Peanuts T.V. specials

“It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown” (on this past week

Right before the Pat’s Game):

“There are three things that I’ve learned never to discuss

With people – religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin,’

But who taught us what faith looks like when he went out

To the pumpkin patch and shivered with hope all night for the Great

Pumpkin’s arrival,

And further inspired this week by the betrayal of bacon,

And sausage, and all things tasty, courtesy of the WHO’s study

That says such things are a level 1 carcinogen, on par with asbestos
(I guess this means I get to insulate my attic with beef jerky, said Colbert
 This week), and that led to one Globe writer to visit Tony DeBenedictus,
 The butcher at Tony's Market in Roslindale for the last 46 years (!),
 Who said to the writer as he handed her a slice of pistachio-studded
 Mortadella, "*now why would you want to deprive yourself of that?*
Today you deprive yourself of this; tomorrow that..
You don't live anymore. You just exist."

And inspired even further by that reading Alex shared with us earlier,
 So beautiful, that the writer wrote after Johnny, the person to whom
 The poem is written, committed suicide,
 I have made a special effort all week to remind myself – *this is what the*
Living do.

As I vacuumed the balls of blonde retriever fur from underneath the hissing
 Iron radiators in home – *this is what the living do -*
 As I cleaned out the corn and rice from the kitchen sink strainer after dinner,
 The child whose chore this is now mysteriously absent - *this is what the*
living do –
 As I visited with Bob M. one of our mentees at the MCI Norfolk prison,
 Daniel,
 Who astonishes us both with his appetite for talk of Locke and Hume
 And Social Psychology and his beloved Pittsburg Steelers,
 All while guzzling Mountain Dew after Mountain Dew
 Because we are among the few who will actually sit and talk with him –
this is what the living do –

And as I walked the blonde dog in the rain on Wednesday,
Even though I didn't want to, and didn't have time,
Because Karyn was deep in Boston all week at work,
And the children had homework to do,
And I hadn't had time to think of the sermon yet,
And oh look – here comes a truck to splash us both,
Thanks! As the dog turns from blonde to the wet, brown
Color of rust –
this is what the living do.
Even when I forget to think it.

Here on the hinge between fall and winter,
Between light and dark,
Between memory of our losses and our own lives yet to live,
between living in the moment and the yearning for more...

It's so easy, isn't it? to think that what we as the living need to do
Is just smile harder, love fiercer, cheer deeper, whistle louder,
To help us cope with our most secret hurts.
We sit with Linus shivering with hope,
maybe we revel in our farm to table salami,
Maybe we fall in and out and back in love again with our family chores,
And we think – *well, I just need to talk more of pleasant things!*
I just need to appreciate stuff more! I just need to keep
That glass half full!
Even as we hold here in this room these stones of memory,
These losses over there, the job there, the cancer here, the aching love

There, the addiction there, the depression there, the sick parent there,
 Stories from Ria house front and center,
 The aging body there. Winter coming, Maine ocean waters warming....

Ugh. Life is hard.

Yeah Nathan, we get it! Can't we talk about something more pleasant?

Isn't that what the living are supposed to do?

Talk about things more pleasant?

Isn't that the cure? Be positive! Be grateful!

Turn that frown upside down,

Said my mom to my deep melancholy 14yr. old self,

Which drove me crazy then, and still does.

But she's got a lot of company.

Isn't talking about the pleasant things our work?

Hmmm. Well, we might not think so,

But sometimes we act like it is....as we avoid the hard conversations,

Keep our pain to ourselves, pretend like we won't ever age...(50 is the new 20!), saying *shhhh* to our grief....

Not long after his diagnosis with esophageal cancer,

Forrest Church, one our great, and greatly flawed ministers,

Climbed into his NYC pulpit to share the news that he

Had only several months to live, and that this would be one of his last

Sermons.

Which was, he said, a real downer for some, and a real positive for others.

But then he reminded his stunned, tearful congregation: *"I have long believed that one of worst thing you can say to someone with terminal illness*

Is...

Don't worry about it! You're going to beat this! You're going to get better!

Please don't say this to me, he said.

(aka: Shouldn't we talk about something more pleasant)

Because it's just an insult to that person's living reality.

Whereas if you say: 'this must be really hard' they will tell you

How it is and how it isn't, and they will be connecting with you on a deep,

Human level.

There are fewer occasions in life, he said, that we can really connect to one

Person at their very depth."

Yes, he was quite the preacher.

But to become all mesmerized by his ability to give these words so soon

After his diagnosis misses the point, which is: *don't avoid the hard*

conversation, don't miss saying: this is difficult; this is hard.

But, but, but....Can't we talk about something more pleasant?

Well no, not always,

Because if we do we miss figuring out other things the living are supposed

to do, which is asking: am I living my purpose?

Getting past my fear? Owning up to my mistakes? Letting go of my regret?

I've been thinking a lot about this question – *can't we talk about something*

More pleasant? – ever since my brother Nick died this August,

As you know, his addiction to pain killers,

which he tried to hide so well behind his more than pleasant smile (that you

might have seen on FB this week),

behind his more than pleasant job (he was an Assistant Principal at a
 school),
 behind his well-dressed body,
 behind his tidy little house in St. Louis,
 behind his always polished car,
 behind his so beautiful son Jackson,
 behind his hopes for the present, never mind the future...

His addiction hidden so well, at times, that his family could be forgiven
 For talking only about the pleasant things....

Hey Nick, it's your brother! I would say on his voicemail,
Hope things are great!

Except that they weren't, the drugs slowly and then not so slowly
 Rubbing away the veneer of the pleasant to reveal just how
 much he was hurting.

Nick, it's your brother, I began leaving on the voicemail.

I'm worried about you. Call me.

Which eventually he would, but only when he had something

Pleasant to tell me (*I'm good, I'm really good this week, much better*),

*Well, I'm glad, but have you called your sponsor? Have you gone to any
 Meetings?*

I'm cool, I'm great, I don't need it!

But you do. I'm worried.

Hey, I gotta go. Don't worry. I'll call you tomorrow.

Which he would never do. *Who knows?* We his family ask.

If we had challenged him more, confronted him more,

*Been less willing to talk about pleasant things...would
He still be alive?*

Such a tough question, maybe even unfair question,
But nonetheless a natural question, an important question.

And it inspires me to commit myself to this new commitment:
To develop my courage muscles, to resist focusing only on
The pleasant because I am scared of what the hard conversation will bring,
To name the shadow along with the light.

Said Forrest Church in that same sermon: *the opposite of love and life is
Not death. Oh no. The opposite of love and life is fear –*

fear that we will offend, fear that we will
Upset the status quo, fear that the brother will hang up the phone,
Fear that others will reject our telling our version of the truth,
Fear this, fear that....fear, fear, fear.

Not for nothing are horror films the top grossing genre every year.
We recognize the feeling they give us.

Which leads me, by way of the great Pumpkin Patch,
Back to Linus, shivering there in the dark night not with fear at all...
But with hope, with faith...for the Great Pumpkin,
Which is euphemism for whatever in your life you need it be.
Who knew I would ask us to draw inspiration from Peanuts
Just in time for the movie's release,
And me not evening getting a cut from the proceeds.
But this I know, that behind and beneath the quite beautiful
Veneer you and I are in the patch with Linus....shivering with hope,

Just shivering with faith,
 To find the courage to not just talk about the pleasant things,
 But also the other things we often keep hidden:

Because this, too, is what the living do:

- Watch our parents age
- Confront addiction in our families
- Watch our kids grow up and become too cool for costumes
- Make our wills while we're young and healthy
- Wonder: is DNR for me?
- Get treatment for depression
- Talk about race and class here in the very segregated suburbs
- Confront our own privilege, which we didn't earn
- Carry photos into church of our loved ones despite our get-over-it culture
- Ask – what will mean to cherish this living earth, really, in this climate changing world we live in?

It's hard sometimes, I know, this living – *can't we talk about something more pleasant?* Maybe next sermon?

Well, yes, but not before we look around in this sanctuary

And realize that we are gathered here, shivering together,

Hoping together, trying to have faith together,

Trying to abide together in this sometimes beautiful and terrible world.

If we listen closely we will hear the words whispered:

Be not afraid. Be not afraid. Be not afraid. Amen.

