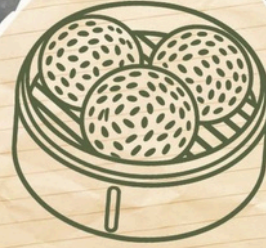


SUMMER FOLKTALE SERIES

THREE

*for*

FREE



REV. DR. DANIEL KANTER | MAY 31, 2026

William Wordsworth in a poem he wrote, wrote these words. "The world is too much with us; late and soon. Getting and spending, we waste our powers." They're the opening lines from Wordsworth's 1807 sonnet, a critique of industrialization and materialism in which he argued that an obsessive focus on getting and spending, earning and consuming causes humanity to lose its connection with nature and waste its spiritual energy. The poem suggests this obsession makes us feel out of tune with life as we sacrifice our humanity for material gain.

Now, Wordsworth was a 19th century romantic poet, which was a job back in those days, especially for those who weren't enslaved or encumbered by poverty or otherwise busy. But if you think about it, that period of time in Northern England where he lived was quickly sliding toward the industrialization of everything. The air was becoming thick with soot from chimneys and factories and he probably had a point. He probably saw it all coming and he probably saw us coming.

Wordsworth got some of his radical ideology from being 22 years old in revolutionary Paris in 1792 from meeting the mysterious John Stewart who was nearing the end of his 30 years of wandering on foot from South India through Persia, through Africa and Europe. By the time of their association, Stewart had published an original materialist philosophy entitled *The Apocalypse of Nature*, to which many of Wordsworth's philosophical sentiments may be indebted.

The apocalypse was not a celestial theological event. It was the disconnection to nature of humanity, the drive to control it and to own it, to destroy it at all costs. Something that modern day environmentalists have been telling us daily about as Pacific plastic islands float in the oceans, as climate change rages, as El Nino in the Pacific is being described as the most volatile since 1870. The

Clarion call that systemic greed is killing us. The prioritizing of short-term profit over ecological health is the root cause of climate crisis. Habitat destruction and biodiversity loss. All things have been a human warning even before the ascot-wearing romantic poet of the 19th century.

You hear it in the ancient folktales like the one I told earlier, the half-sheared mountain of Banping Shan has its own story. An old dumpling seller, the Mountain God, in search of a kind and thoughtful person, feeds the mountain itself to the greedy villagers.

It's not lost on us that a month ago, the King of England, a person who embodies in part why we fought for freedom to combat in part the extraction of American natural resources, the King of England came to America and spoke to Congress and said, "We must reflect on our shared responsibility to safeguard nature, our most precious and irreplaceable asset," he said. "Our generation must decide how to address the collapse of critical natural systems, which threatens far more than the harmony and essential diversity of nature."

Our story today is in part a warning of this very thing, that the extraction of a mountain's substance cannot feed a village for long. The dumplings were mud. The mountain itself was consumed piece by piece by the villagers; greed.

It's a stark image; to fill ourselves on what does not nourish, to take and take until something whole is diminished. Isn't this in many ways the condition of our world? We consume more than we need. We overlook the cost to others. We confuse abundance with excess. We confuse getting and spending, taking and consuming, measuring value and quantity rather than meaning.

This is not just an ancient village problem. It's a modern spiritual condition. Because we are taught, all of us, in countless ways to optimize, to maximize, to extract, to choose three for free in every dimension of our lives over one for 10 or two for 20.

You and I were taught that we are here to attend to our own needs at any cost, to create careers that gave us deserved rewards. One of the earliest lessons that we were taught was to take, and we can hardly get past that lesson.

One of the most painful lessons I learned about the idea that we deserve more I learned from my father, who had worked hard. He had worked through pain and illness. He made a lot and he lost a lot and he wasted a lot. When he said in his retirement that he deserved anything he wanted to me, my response was, "We don't deserve anything." We enjoy what is in front of us. We enjoy the careers we have and the gifts that come and the people in our lives, our children and their educations, not the next trip or the thing to buy.

I've been recovering from that moment with my father ever since he died. To deserve. It's an interesting concept, but it hurts the spirit of who I am because on the other hand is the hand that says, "Take what you want."

To take a turn in the sermon, I want to say that three for free isn't also just an environmental warning. It isn't just about what we take or deserve. It's mostly an invitation to see the sacred appearing in unexpected ways. Not in power but in vulnerability, not in wealth but in need. "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me," Jesus said. The villagers missed this idea. The young man did not.

This story is not also about condemnation. It is about grace because the villagers realize what they have done. They feel ashamed. They feel it literally in their bellies. They name it and they remember it because the name of the mountain that hovers above them is Half-Sheared Mountain. And that is the beginning of transformation.

Grace in this way is not about being perfect. It's about being called back again and again into right relationship. Something our faith calls us to do, not to reject the world but to engage in it more consciously, to live with intention and compassion and justice, to walk through our days not tabling ethical decisions, but enacting them at every exhausting turn because we are not here to use up the world so we can get to another world. We are here to aid the world we have.

And the young man in the story embodies this very thing. He observes his family and his friends and his neighbors. He observes the old man. Did he have more than 10 cents to give? Maybe. Did he see his way into this story by being helpful to the old man? Definitely. Did he interrupt the pattern of the behavior of the village? Yes, indeed. Did he resist following the crowd and the ethos that was created by their greed? He did. And he listened to something deeper than his appetite.

He practiced what we might call ethical imagination. Ethical imagination is the ability to see beyond ourselves into the experience of another, the ability to creatively envision the full range of possibilities, alternatives, and consequences in a situation to resolve an ethical challenge. This idea of how we might live goes beyond adhering to rigid rules, to the inclusion of empathy and innovative thinking. To see beyond the immediate, to see past our self-interested choices, to consider the broader human impact. Ethical imagination is a core value in our faith and it is a core seed of real equity work. It is a core of being part of this community because it means that we consider at every turn of our lives what our ethical responsibility is to one another.

People say to me all the time, "Isn't our church about being able to do anything we want to do or think anything we want?" I say, "No. Being part of this church and this community is about living in tune with the ethical imagination that we can cultivate. It is seeing how your needs are balanced with those of the whole community." But I want this meeting, right now, right here, in this place. But it impacts the whole community. Don't you see the echoes of your decisions?

The trick here is to practice this way of living, and not just on Sunday morning, but in every aspect of your life. It is to practice this ethical imagination at every turn, the consideration of the impact of your actions on those around you and to do this without giving up hope in our capacity to change our capacity to cut the cord with those self-orientations that have such strong hold on us.

The hope this faith builds goes against the grain of the society on occasion. It asks us, can we look at humanity and see more than a villager, a village full of people eating free dumplings? Can we see in

the village also a young man or a young woman who steps forward and says yes?

That is why I don't give up hope. I believe we can do this. I stand in the pulpit over and over again, never giving up on humanity no matter the nonsense of the world because I believe that we can surpass these deep-seated understandings of who we are to live lives of ethical imagination for one another. And the young man in this story embodies that hope. He becomes a student of the divine, not to go learn how to make dumplings, I'm sure, but to learn greater things. He wasn't flawless. He was open-hearted. He chose empathy over advantage. He chose enough over excess. He chose relationship over transaction, all things we could say of our racial equity work or our equity work in general, the ideals that we live to. He didn't just do whatever he wanted. He considered the wellbeing of his village because what we don't know is what happened when he came back down the mountain.

But I can guess, like so many spiritual heroes of other tales that have returned back down the mountain, that they had something to say, and this young man maybe transformed his community, a community that literally was eating the ecology one step at a time.

The question that this story leaves us with is not whether we have ever chosen three for free or whether we will. Of course, we have and we will. But the question is whether we are willing to see our lives differently, to notice the person carrying the burden, to ask, "What is enough?", to act with love even when the crowd moves another way, because the sacred still comes to us in ordinary moments, in unexpected people, in quiet opportunities to choose compassion. And we might not always recognize it, but we can still respond to it. We can put our minds to things that outlive us, not things we think we deserve, but the things we participate in, to the lives of the people we know, the time that never ends, the holy that sustains us.

Wordsworth, for all his privilege, he got this idea. He had children of his own die. He took jobs to sustain the writing of his romantic poetry. He loved and lost and loved again. And in his last book of poems, after showing us the growth of his spiritual awareness through time, his time in the French Revolution and his travels through Europe, each book of his pyramids upon the previous one and builds to this capstone moment description of an ascent he made of Mount Snowden, the highest peak in Wales. As a metaphor for his entire life, the poem at the end of his life says he emerged from the fog that he had been climbing through on the mountain and he finds a clear and glorious view, a summit of outlook and insight, in which he experiences a full spiritual love for humanity, in which he understands the power of imagination from which all his poems have been written. And he writes these words, "Faith in life endless," faith in life endless, "the sustaining thought. Of human Being, Eternity and God." A sustaining thought better than anything he could buy, better than anything he deserved.

One for 10, two for 20, or three for free. You choose, my friends. Amen.