

I went to the movies on Monday. Not a big surprise, anyone who's known me or ever heard me preach. But my buddy went with me and he picked me up, which is my preferred mode of transportation. And we chatted about the upcoming season, and we sat down at the movie and the very first person in the movie that we saw was the actor, John Gallagher Jr. It was a cameo. He didn't have any speaking lines, just a slick back hair.

He's a television and movie star, not of huge amount of fame, but I leaned over to my friend next to me. There wasn't a lot of people in the theater, don't worry. And I said, "He was in the original cast of Spring Awakening." And then after the movie, I proceeded to detail all the careers of all the actors that were in the original cast of Spring Awakening, two members who have recently passed. And so it was a lot to tell my friend about.

I think he was really impressed. I could tell by the glazed over the look in his eyes. So as we drove home, he asked what I'd be doing for the rest of the night. It was Monday night, last Monday. And as you all know, the Bills were playing in Monday Night Football. So he was shocked, shocked, I tell you, to hear that I wasn't home watching the Bills because my friend knows me. I said, "Well, the only way the Bills are going to win against the Vikings is if they play the way they had to play against the Lions. Which was to run the ball, which isn't very exciting. And I didn't really want to watch it. They should win anyway. And so if they lose, I'll just be sad I stayed home."

And I went on like this for a while. And my friend, bless him, said, "I just never thought I'd get a dissertation on the original Broadway cast of a musical from the same person who explained the fine points of running a football offense on the same walk from the movie theater to the car." So I said, "If you think that's cool, you should see me do it in drag." No. In the heels, it's true. But what I think he was really saying was, "I get it. You're gay and you like sports. I get..." No, no. He was really saying, "It's nice to see you be yourself."

So we're in a new sermon series right now, sort of the third one in it, but we're talking about truth as I mentioned during the story. And more about being true to ourselves today, to our innermost selves. So this sermon might mention some things about what we want to do with our lives. I just don't want anyone quitting their jobs or doing anything rash during this service. So we start at the beginning though. Let's look at who we really are. Who are you? It's okay. It's rhetorical. But really take a second and think about who you are.

Let's start biologically. You're a mammal related, yes, to a lot of other mammals, which is nice. Now none of those other mammals were able to invent the sport of football, and then go to the Super Bowl four times in a row and then lose like the Bills did. There's just something different about humankind. I think we can agree on that. The difference really is part of these concepts that they develop like morals, laws, ethics. Things that more or less keep us to relate to one another. They keep society in order. We are mammals though, with a positive genius for working together on enormous projects.

The historian Yuval Harari says in his mega hit Sapiens that one of these projects, one of the shared projects humans have undertaken that is amazing and among the most powerful and consequential in the course of our short history on this planet is religion. Or a shared belief in something greater than all of us. The shared belief we're talking about today is our basic nature. What is our basic human nature?

Here in this church and in this faith, we say that humans are born good. We tell that humans are a blessing to the world and that they have what we call original blessing. Our ancestors, they looked at those rascals, Eve and Adam, running around in the garden. And they saw the naked babies running around testing their parents' patience. Maybe not exactly that, but that's the idea. But our ancestors and those before them never adopted and then maybe outright rejected the idea that something these two did, whether in reality or whether metaphorically, somehow springs up and springs to life in a human when they're born into what people call original sin.

Instead, we say that humans have original blessing when they're born. This is why we don't need to perform infant baptism. We bless our children with the hope and the prayer that their thoughts be wise, their lips speak truth. That their hearts know love, and the work of their hands be blessed all the days of their lives. And what are our lives except a series of choices made to respond to our surroundings, to the people in those lives and the events that change the course of our lives? And even so today, as we sit here, people are wondering, they're wondering whether they are living the life that they were meant to live. They wonder whether they are being authentic to themselves.

Robin Williams used to say that when grownups ask children what they want to be when they grow up, they're not actually curious what the child wants to be. They're just looking for suggestions. There's so much on social media and plenty said in therapeutic settings I know where people discuss how to be their more authentic self. It's a thing out there. If you Google authentic self, there's going to be a lot of people selling you a lot of things.

But what does religion tell us about our authentic self? And what does it mean for our faith? I am so glad you asked. The world's great faiths of history have plenty to share about the self, about what the self means. But among those faiths, the Buddhist teachings and faith really put that

question of the self more centrally than many others. So we can start there. Buddhist teachings tell us that what we think of as ourselves, as our personality or our identity is just a fleeting profession. A procession of thoughts, feelings, mental formations. And that suffering comes when we start to believe we are those thoughts, that we are those feelings, that we are our mental formations.

Now, not many of us were around when Buddhism broke away from the Hindu faith centuries, millennia ago. But before Europeans got all excited about their own religious revolutions about a millennium ago, soaked in arguments about their faith. Trying to see who could call humans more and more depraved than the next group of people. Before the person of Jesus ever walked the earth, Buddhists had their own reformation of the Hindu faith. They called it Buddhism.

And one of the core revolutions in Buddhism from Hinduism was the idea there is no permanent, separate self. And that we are all a part of a more interdependent world than any of us fully realize. And many of the paths we take, the ways we find are to realize and fully feel how connected we truly are. Because too often we think of ourselves, our authentic selves means that we need to stand apart from others. We need to differentiate, be different, be special, get likes, rise above the noise, be followed even. Be noticed and to do it as the song says, "My way."

But one of the oldest religious movements on the globe happened in part because of the belief that we are more connected than we realized. And that we are not our thoughts. We are certainly not our worst thoughts. We are not our own perceptions. We are not our own. We are not alone.

The great Emily Dickinson tells us this in her singular style of writing, "I'm nobody. Who are you? Are you nobody too? Then there's a pair of us. Don't tell, they banish us." You know how often that is true. How dreary to be somebody. How public like a frog to tell your name the livelong June to an admiring bog. It's just the image of a frog professing their greatness to a swamp somewhere, a bog makes me laugh. Ribbit.

But what the Bell of Amherst is telling us is that the attempts to be somebody are akin to holding court to a bog, croaking to it like this frog. It's actually the private true self, the one that Dickinson guarded to her own death that she prizes and she is cajoling us with her sense of humor to value, to appreciate. The pair, the kindred she finds is in someone who is just being themselves, their true self, being an original blessing. But it's scary, and it's been scary I think for a long time for many of us to be our true selves in the world, in public.

I just don't go around listing the full original cast of Broadway shows to just anybody. It's not because I'm that afraid people will physically hurt me for knowing all of these things. It's not even necessarily that I am afraid that I won't be liked. I'm afraid that people sometimes when I do that, that they just don't like theater kids for some reason. Yeah, there really is not enough laughing in the room over that. Are you picking this up that they maybe don't like theater kids? It's fine. I see you now.

No. I mean, I guess it's similar to say I'm afraid people will know I'm gay right away. I don't have time to charm them into liking me in advance. I'm afraid I'll be sneered at like I have been before, or called names like I have been before. Once actually I was out in front of the Equinox, which I

discovered after the first service I should tell you is a gym. I think this story was lost on something. Not that there are any other services, it's just you.

But I was out in front of the Equinox on Greenwich Avenue in Greenwich Village in Manhattan. If you aren't aware this Equinox on Greenwich Avenue for gays, it's like the Vatican. You're just roaming around in Vatican City and there is the Equinox, no I'm just... I wish I was kidding. I was there in front of the gym and I said bye to my friend, and I said I love them. And an old lady snarled at me, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." I said, "Who's Steve?" No, I'm kidding. He sounds fun. He does.

Okay. No, there are many things, many, many things I could have said like, "Mind your own business," or, "Love is love," or the deathly cutting, "Bless your heart." But I didn't say any of those things. I said, "You're going to need better shoes than those before you tell me something like that." Don't mess with the theater kid, man. Afterward and today even I wonder, was she really thinking that? Did she really think that that story of Fable, somehow she could defile Greenwich Village or Gay Vatican City with hate because of that story?

That the world order, the universal order is structured around a mere inference from this ancient tale. And that we are only worthy of love if we love according to that painfully tortured inference? That does not sound like love to me. That sounds like theology and cheap shoes. Hard to wear, doesn't hold up for long, and offends anybody with good taste.

As James saying, "I've been feeling something since the day you left me. I'm sitting on your shoulders. I'm on top of the world. Don't let go now, please don't let me go. And in my mind, you throw your arms around me. I find a way to bring you back to life. And all this time I didn't let you love me. But I know now I know it's time to let you go." The poet says, "In all this time, I didn't let you love me. "It reminds me of all the ways of hidden parts of me. We've all hidden parts of ourselves that we fear others would find objectionable or wrong.

Moments I could have spoken up for myself and others, but I stayed quiet. I though I was comfortable there. Times I could have told someone how much I love them, met with the reality that it was too late. The song is a prayer to be held, not to be let go. And then the realization that we're only free finally when we let go of what others do. What others have done to us as having anything to do with who we are. When we let go of others' ideas of us, otherwise known as lies, is when we are free."

The lives of the founders of great faiths are defined so much by how those lives end. By letting go of how people treated them and loving them anyway. One of the many stories about the Buddha's death is that he arrived at a home of poor villagers who were so excited to welcome a stranger that they made him a potato soup. The Buddha saw that the potatoes had turned, that they were bad and knew that they could be poison. And yet to deny these people the dignity of offering him this meal would have been wrong to him. So he drank the soup and he did die, because he valued more the dignity of these strangers than his own physical self.

And similar in the story of Jesus, his last words, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do." Letting go of how people treated them and loving them anyway. The lives of the great saints of our times also are defined by speaking always against systems that crush and trample love.

That crush and trample people for the sake of power. And so the lives we live will be defined by how much love we hold and the lies we let go. And if you hear nothing else today, just hear James is singing first, and hear this. It is time to let those go.

E. Cummings was the child of a Unitarian minister. He grew up in a house that taught that we're loved simply because of who we are, not because of what we do or accomplish. And he just gives away the secret to us all. Here's the deepest secret nobody knows. Here's the root of the root and the bud of the bud, and the sky of the sky of a tree called life which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide. And this is the wonder that's keeping stars apart. I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart.

Sometimes I imagine E. Cummings coming home from school. "Daddy, daddy, lady at school said that because even Adam learned something. Or maybe just because they were naked, that we all need God to agree to not send us to hell. But that a person first needs to agree to say the right words and then another person will tell them that it's okay." And his dad is like, "Son, this lady, was she wearing horrible shoes? Did you go into the city? Were you on Greenwich Avenue? I've met this lady."

But right after he asked that, I imagine this Unitarian dad saying, "Oh, that's not real. God loves you because you're you and because God is love. I love you because I carry your heart. I carry it in my heart." And so God says, and so the poet proclaims, and so the singer sings, and so the church prays that all hear this message, wherever you may be. That whatever lies were told you about your worth, the more of your true self you show to others, the more you let others love you, the more free you will be.

And so we build this world, the world to come for our children upon this foundation of love, of understanding and of embrace and of full and powerful freedom. And so we build this world remembering that we are all somebody's children who can be freed at any time from the lives of others and of ages, and no love at long last. We build here this world with every heart held in another's heart, with every fiber of our blessed lives. With every act of service, every brave and bold claim that we are blessings of this world and each of us a living prayer.

That our thoughts may be wise, that our lips may speak truth, that our hearts may know love. And that the work of our hands will be blessed all the days of our lives. And with this, we say amen.