Message Ideas: Everything is a gift.

Scripture: Psalm 66:14-18; Mark 5: 18-20

I'm grateful and honored to speak with you today. I grew up in a church where women couldn’t preach, so this makes me feel a bit revolutionary still!

The scriptures I chose are from the “Common Book of Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals”. My message today “Everything is a gift” – is quite broad. And since “everything” refers to all things, I feel most passages would correlate to this topic well. So, I let a liturgy pick a passage. This is probably not a typical Quaker way of doing things, but you’ll forgive me.

This story in Mark is a powerful one. This tells the story of the demons being chased out by Jesus. At the end it says, “Go and tell how much the Lord has done for you.” I have a friend who has been a missionary in Tanzania for a long time now. She does great things like teaches women how to sew or make jewelry so they can give up prostitution and make a living. She also spends a lot of time evangelizing. One newsletter she sent told the story of literally casting out a demon. I don’t really understand this part, or most parts for that matter, of God or Christianity.

Still, this is what was happening in that story. A person was troubled greatly by a negative spiritual entity, and this person was liberated from this terrible thing by Jesus. What a story of redemption.

This person is then asked to tell their story to everyone. The story of freedom from the unbearable trouble that had been burdening them. Last week we heard Kathleen and Sue talk about happiness in mourning, joy through grief. One of my go-to spiritual/religious guides, Rob Bell, has a podcast that gets me thinking. He says that we cannot “fly” through this life without the two wings of joy and pain. The redemptive power of suffering follows us through the Bible, especially in the story of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension of Jesus. So, we can see that even the darkest of moments, and perhaps because of the darkest moments, we can feel joy.

For me personally, this year has been difficult to live through. The government is separating families through deportation of undocumented immigrants. Fathers have been taken as they drop off their children at school. Mothers are taken from children during soccer practice. The ways their humanity is being ignored and even violated form a growing list. And now our government is creating an organization to publish “news” about crimes are being committed by so-called illegal immigrants. Where is the dignity in this? Where is the humanity here? Where is the DIVINE here? I’m not sure yet. It’s painful to watch and feel like you can’t do anything. So, there’s some pain. Where’s the joy here? I don’t have that answer now.

So, we have these stories of pain and joy that make us human and make us divine. What I’m talking about today is that all of this – the joy, the pain – this is all a gift. This is what I find I must remember when I’m lost in between the joy and the pain, between the suffering and the redemption.

Everything is a gift. There are days I look around my house and I’m absolutely overwhelmed by how much we’ve been given. I pick up a mug that was given to me as a teenager by a dear friend. Dressers given by moving friends. Two incredible paintings by my aunt—whom I’ve only spoken with a handful of times. I talk about this with Camila. We go through her toys and stuffed animals and remember who gave them to her and what those mean. Because the things are nothing. They’re just atoms collected in a solid space for a time. They will (hopefully) disintegrate and turn into dust. But they’re doing something special, through my memory and the powerful engine of my brain-heart connections. Those objects send my heart aflutter when I remember where they came from. They were gifts given freely. These gifts were given to me by people who knew me, the bad and the good, and gave to me generously anyway. This generous spirit flows to me through the mug, or the dresser, or the paintings and helps me on cold (or unusually warm) winter afternoons. When I’m feeling especially worn about this world or my corner of it.

And it’s not just the objects. My children, miraculously grown from tiny particles, atoms drawn together in certain patterns to create Camila and Simon, unique to the universe. They are strange gifts, but nonetheless gifts.

My husband, this man who chose, has chosen, chooses, and will choose to live around me for life. He seems fairly contented about his choice, which continues to baffle me. His gifts are his time with the kids, guiding them and nurturing them, his carpentry projects building an organized house up around me. Hundreds of gifts through the years.

My work, and all the classes, research, and training that allowed me this position are also gifts. Every single day, I am grateful for incredible colleagues, giving me guidance, listening to trite complaints of teaching, never stepping away from my sometimes “too much” energy and enthusiasm.

How about the teachers, unions, feminists, administrators, and others in history who have made my job and all that comes with it possible?

The roads, gifts of infrastructure, taxes willingly or unwillingly paid, and government. Water, clear of bacteria. Just enough money to pay the bills. The bills!

When we see that everything is a gift, we can then realize that we are the gift. We are the gift. We can look at every moment of our lives and ask, “What gift am I giving now?” What am I creating? My job, taken from one perspective is a silly one. I teach adult students how to speak better English so they can enter universities, go back to their countries, and be wealthier (than they already are – many, not all, of my students come from privileged families). I’ve always wanted my life to be full of purpose, positively changing lives around me. Bringing peace to the world. My job didn’t fill that category. But when I remind myself that I am a gift, I see that I am already giving something to the people I’m around – my colleagues, my boss, my students, my family, the community (those roads, the school, water). And this is my gift. Seeing this as my gift then shows me that I am of value, I have purpose, and I am offering something to those around me.

And we all are. All the time. Let this change the way we think about ourselves and those around us.