WANT WHAT YOU HAVE

Want What You Have
A Sermon by Peter Friedrichs, Pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Delaware County. He delivered this sermon in January of 2015.

These are his words:

For nearly thirty years, Forrest Church served as the spiritual leader of the All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City. During his ministry, the church became both a haven for spiritual seekers and a beacon of social outreach to the community. He helped to found a shelter for homeless women in Harlem, a scouting program for boys and girls at a welfare hotel, and a soup kitchen adjacent to the church. During his lifetime, Church authored and co-authored nearly twenty books on the topics ranging from American history to liberal religion and spirituality. He was frequently interviewed as the voice of liberal religion on National Public Radio and local television broadcasts. When he was called to All Souls attendance hovered at around 100 members, and now it is in excess of 1,000.

By all measures, Church’s ministry was public, prolific and powerful. But as with all of us frail and fallible human beings, Forrest fought his demons, too. In the year 2000 he acknowledged his alcoholism, joined AA and remained sober for the remaining years of his life. He faced other struggles as well, and what perhaps made him a popular pastor and preacher is that he faced those struggles head-on, and he used them to inform his ministry of compassion and hope. In February 2008, he informed his congregation that he had been diagnosed with esophageal cancer and that the doctors expected him to live but a few more months. With this death sentence in hand, Forrest did what he did best, and picked up his pencil and paper and began to write. The book that resulted from these efforts is called “Love and Death (My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow).” He expected this to be his final work, but as a result of an experimental treatment for his disease he lived longer than predicted, and he managed to pen one final work entitled “The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology.” That work was published by Beacon Press after Forrest’s death in September of 2014.

In an interview conducted shortly before he died, Forrest Church described the importance of writing “Love and Death.” He said that “it allowed me to write a coda to my pastoral theology, to my lifelong belief that love and death interwoven are the heartstrings of religion.” He goes on to say, “I have a mantra that I’ve come to live by over the past few years, and it’s served me very well. It is ‘Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are.” “Want what you have; do what you can; be who you are.” As a summary of a philosophy, a theology, a statement of faith and a way of life, these three statements warrant some attention. And so, in tribute to Forrest Church, a colleague whom I never knew but whose words and life have touched me deeply, I am reflecting on the first statement, “Want what you have.”

“Want what you have” seem like strange words coming from someone who was diagnosed with a terminal disease at a relatively young age. No one “wants” to have cancer, at any age. To understand Forrest Church’s prescriptive, we need to put it into a larger context, a context provided both elsewhere in “Love and Death” and in an earlier book of his called “Freedom from Fear.” In “Love and Death,” as in some of his other works of theological reflection, Church asks us to imagine that our lives are made up of a large window with many panes. If you like, you can use the image of a stained glass window. Each pane is made up of some aspect of our life – our job, our hobbies and interests, our health, our relationship with our partner or spouse, or with our children. At any given time in our lives, he tells us, some of these panes are going to be clear and bright, with the sun shining through them, and others are bound to be clouded over and perhaps even shaded or opaque.

While we may be enjoying a particularly productive time in our work lives, things at home with our partner might be strained. Or perhaps we’re deliciously and deliriously in love with a new mate, but it strains our other relationships with friends. You get the idea. Some of our windows are rosy and allow the light to stream in, while others may be a bit foggy or even boarded up, Forrest states that as human beings we have an inclination to focus on, and perhaps even to obsess about, the cloudy window panes to the exclusion of the sunny ones.
“The tendency,” he writes, “is to press our nose up against that one frame, desperately trying to see through it. When we do this,” he continues, “we lose all sense of proportion. Our entire world goes black.”

The effect of this response to a darkened window pane, to pressing our noses up against it, is that we then lose sight of the other panes that remain clear and bright. The black cloud of the unreasonable boss at work is carried home to darken our family relations. The betrayal by a friend makes all our other friendships suspect. When our health is compromised, all we can see ahead is a lifetime of disability and pain. When one of our window panes goes dark, Church tells us, we literally lose sight of the things in our life that are positive and life-affirming and life-giving.

The other aspect that bears on Church’s advice to “Want what you have” is found in a book he wrote before he was diagnosed with cancer. In *Freedom from Fear*, Church warns against engaging in wishful thinking. Instead, he urges us to practice what he calls “thoughtful wishing.” His premise is that wishful thinking leads to certain disappointment, a disappointment that can easily blossom into a paralyzing fear.

“Until we learn to wish for the right things,” he writes, “what we wish for will only come true by accident. What’s worse, if we wish for the wrong things, the fear of disappointment will dog us from one broken dream to the next.” He goes on to tell us that “Happiness doesn’t follow when we long for what we lack – for things we have lost or shall likely never find. Longing for something we may find in the future distracts us from enjoying the present. Wishful thinking is both sloppy and sentimental.”

Forrest urges us not to engage in wishful thinking, but in thoughtful wishing. Wishing, he says, “for what is ours, here and now, to have, do or be.” In his later book, *Love and Death*, he states it slightly differently: “Pray for the right things,” he says, “and your prayers will be answered.” [3] Some examples of “thoughtful wishes” or the right things to pray for include: the courage to bear up under pain; the liberation that comes with forgiveness; the joy to be gained in even the smallest tasks; and the wonder that lies between the sacred moments of our birth and death.

And so, it is through these two lenses, the lens of our lives as many-paned windows and the lens of “thoughtful wishing,” that Forrest urges us to “want what we have.” Wanting what we have encourages us to wish for things thoughtfully and to pray for the right things. It urges us to step back from the darkened, opaque window pane that we have our noses pressed against, so that we can see and appreciate all the other panes that remain brightly illuminated. Wanting what we have enables us to live fully in the present, with an appreciation of all the gifts of our lives, and an acceptance of those things that we would never consciously wish upon ourselves.

I think it important to spend a few minutes talking about what “want what you have” does NOT mean. First, and foremost, wanting what we have is not about tacitly accepting our fate or condition. It is not about giving up or giving in. It does not mean that we have to stay in an abusive relationship or to embrace an illness that can and should be treated as aggressively as possible.

To want what we have is not to relinquish our responsibility to care for ourselves and for others, or to look at the suffering, pain and injustice in the world and say “c’est la vie.” Forrest Church treated his aggressive form of cancer aggressively, even undergoing an experimental treatment that added more than a year to his life. Wanting what we have does not require us to just “sit back and take it.”

Wanting what we have similarly is not about letting go of the natural yearnings that we have as human beings. We will, I believe, always desire more of the good things in our lives. More love, deeper connection, greater meaning and purpose. To want what we have does not call us to rest contentedly with our situation or the status quo, and it does not negate or nullify ambition. Marianne Williamson famously tells us that we are powerful beyond measure, that we are brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous. Wanting what we have does not mean “living small.” Rather, it means tending to all the panes in our window to allow as much light as possible to shine in, and to allow as much of our own light as we possess to shine out into the world.

Finally, wanting what we have does not require us to become boring and dull, or to forego imagination and creativity. While thoughtful wishing probably tells us that we shouldn’t waste our time praying that we’ll win
the lottery, I would say that there’s no harm in dreaming and day-dreaming. We must remain imagineers and co-creators of our own lives, caretakers of wonder. Fantasy can be a powerful release. Wanting what we have just means that we should not become consumed by the fantasy, constantly living in a world of “what-if’s” and “if-ever’s.” For if we do, we’re sure to end up disappointed and depressed, infecting our real lives, which contain real goodness, with our disillusionment.

To want what we have is to engage in a deep spiritual practice of appreciation. We’ve all heard the lines from the Joni Mitchell song: “You don’t know what you’ve got til it’s gone.” Wanting what we have calls us to constantly keep in our awareness the things that we would miss, the things that we would long for terribly, were they to be taken from us.

When we want what we have, we don’t take things for granted. To use Forrest’s language, we see all the panes of the window, the bright clear ones and the cloudy ones alike, and we are grateful for the light that shines through them all. Wanting what we have helps us to know and to love what we’ve got before it’s gone.

Wanting what we have is not a passive exercise. Want, desire, acceptance and appreciation are acts of volition. It calls us to make a choice between longing for some other state, some other perhaps unspecified place -- “Anywhere but here, thank you very much--” and where we are, living with what we’ve got. It requires us to actively engage in our lives as they are now. To live our lives with deep meaning and conviction, even if they’re not the lives we might have hoped for or planned for. To want what we have calls our attention back from the other side of the fence where that greener grass of our fantasy beckons, and asks to apply our energies to tending our own yards, to digging out our own weeds, and to making our own lawns more beautiful.

I have no doubt that there are those here today who do not want what they have. Fear of losing a job. Anxiety over the choices a loved one is making. Depression that life has not worked out the way that we’ve planned. It seems almost trite to say it, but the truth is that life is hard, really hard, sometimes, maybe all the time. And often we wish it were otherwise. We pray for salvation from the pain and suffering, and sometimes we seek relief and release in ways that are hurtful to ourselves and to others. With our face pressed up against the darkest pane of glass, we are unable to see anything but darkness. And yet, whether we see it or not, the light still shines in through all those other panes. The light of the morning sun rising each day, the light of our child’s smile, the light of a friend’s constant companionship, the light of life which is our single, greatest gift. These are the things we have, and that we can hold onto. And if we do, we will never go wanting.

Amen and Blessed Be