

SERMON: MAKING LEMONADE
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Welcome to this service of celebration. Relax everyone, you're among friends. I hope you feel like smiling, but if not, don't try too hard. Conflicts, worries, problems and other lemons come down on us all the time, and it's easy to say "when life hands us lemons, *we make lemonade*" but some lemons are just too hard to squeeze. Everybody here IS recovering from something, and that calls for celebration. For this service I'm asking that you run through **your** personal problems in your mind and focus on **one** that you believe you **can** recover from. This is not like New Year's resolutions, this is serious. Some of us have to deal with alcoholism and addiction, but there are plenty of other lemons too, and if you don't reach out for help, troubles can snowball, piling one on top of the other until we can't think straight and don't know where to start. This morning we can help each other along in the recovery process. The Buddha said that life is suffering-- that is the first **noble truth** of Buddhism. Personally I think the second noble truth could be *times when everything goes right are abnormal—if you remember that, it's easier to grab and squeeze those lemons*. The first step in recovery is to accept what we cannot change, quit asking WHY, and start believing we always have choices, there's always something we can do that would be better than other choices.

During the last few years almost all Americans have lost something. Economic recession forced us to learn to get by with less, give up habits we could no longer afford, take jobs we didn't want, work long hours for poor pay. Many of us lost even those jobs, and *some* have seen their careers wither and die. It's getting better over-all, but maybe not that much better yet for US. We don't like to talk about it, it's depressing, it makes us angry or ashamed. Economic stress also sets off ripples on the homefront. Families change over time in natural ways, , growing or shrinking, but *some* changes are UNnatural, unpredictable and painful. Children grow up and move out, leaving parents with empty nests, that's natural, but sometimes they make bad choices, disrupting OUR lives. The elderly begin to need more care than we can provide and have to move to the safer environment of assisted living or nursing homes. That's natural, but we feel guilty and they may feel resentful. When we begin *losing* members of the older generation we suddenly feel sort of fragile ourselves. Serious illness can strike at any age--we see the shadow of death falling across the future. Some of us become caretakers of sick or disabled loved ones, and our lives are not our own anymore. Far into the night we toil and study, looking for answers at the computer as we pour out our dilemma to cyber friends all over the world. Sometimes our primary relationship is threatened. The significant other seems depressed or angry, we drift apart, betray or wound each other, or clash beyond repair—the specter of divorce traumatizes the household. Even when you know it's for the best, it still brings heartache, nostalgia for the love that was and now is no more, just plain grief.

If you suffer from alcoholism, addiction, or codependency, you may have developed spiritual power and muscle from making lemonade. You're working a program, staying clean and sober. Congratulations. If you're still caught in addiction your presence here this morning is an expression of hope, and hope is a big step on the road to recovery. Family members, you're learning what NOT to do for the addict you love, and how to take care of yourself no matter what. Progress in overcoming codependency can be measured by the balance between smiles and tears. We may still rack our brains trying to figure out what we could do to get the active alcoholics or addicts into recovery. If they don't live with us, these brothers, sisters, parents, children, grandchildren, and friends, are with us anyway because we love them. The experts tell us they have to be allowed to hit bottom—the veterans of recovery programs tell us to Let go and let God. This may be true and wise, but sometimes it's so hard it seems next to impossible. As a recovering enabler with a lifetime of that stress and strain, I now know that when we find the courage to let go, stop enabling and step back, the addict will stop looking to us for help and begin to look within. If he or she is going to recover, that's where the needed resources will be found.

Given all these lemons that just keep coming, how can we celebrate? What must we have in order to celebrate? It cannot be that all our troubles must disappear, all problems be solved—that'll never happen. The alcohol industry spends millions every day trying to convince us that—well, you can't party without booze. They love to show us films of people having fun, implying that without alcohol we'll just eat too much, gossip, and ask *are we having fun yet?* You can't have a kegger in a church, so how could we have a genuine celebration *here* on a Sunday morning! You might as well call a party in a cemetery! Now I am NOT against alcohol, but I am against such misleading nonsense and in favor of truth. Church is a great place to take the lemons and make lemonade, and it does **not** need to be **HARD** lemonade, which is an alcoholic drink now being bottled and sold primarily to underage drinkers. All we want really, the simple answer for every one of us is that elusive thing called happiness or serenity. That's all we want—a sense of well-being, relief from internal stress, a lifting of the fog of anxiety that can darken our days. Serenity, love, hope, honesty, and the hand of fellowship-- even an hour of that **is worth celebrating**.

When I was a kid, my parents always observed Memorial Day by driving from Louisville where we lived, to a tiny church with a tiny cemetery down in the wilds of Kentucky—deliverance country. In preparation for that trip, my mother would have been out in her rose garden, cutting every single bloom, fighting the bumblebees for the sweet tendrils of honeysuckle, piling all that wealth into the back seat of the car, and sprinkling the flowers with cold water. This extravagance put us in a celebratory mood. Riding along for two hours in a cloud of perfume, I knew I was in for a boring church service, but also that the trunk of our car was filled with baskets of food for the picnic that would follow. Memorial Day has become a time to honor the military dead, but back then we honored **all** those who had gone before us into the great beyond. The church service ended with **Shall We Gather at the River**, and then everybody piled out into the sunshine, and I would be put to work unloading all the flowers and carrying food to the picnic tables. Every grave would be decorated with colorful blooms and tiny flags. It was not a solemn time. People walked up and down the rows of markers, not with hushed voices, but greeting each other with hugs and kisses, laying flowers, sharing memories, telling stories that provoked laughter. Some tears flowed, but they came with as much joy as grief. In the midst of that tiny graveyard we celebrated life.

May is full summer in Kentucky, so all the men would be wearing short-sleeve shirts and taking off their ties as soon as they could. Women never wore shorts back then, but cotton dresses and no stockings, and once people moved into the grassy picnic area, kids could go barefoot. Men lit up cigarettes and cigars, while women laid out platters of fried chicken, bowls of potato salad, and stacks of paper plates. Watermelons were cut, while kids hung around pestering their mothers and grabbing the best seats at the tables. The frail elderly folk among the crowd were mostly widows, but also a few aged men who had lost their wives. These lonely men thought I was cute and would pat me on the head when I brought them plates of food my mother had prepared. **There was never any beer, wine, or any of Kentucky's famous bourbon, but now and then after they'd eaten their fill, a few men would wander around behind the church, out of sight of the crowd.** In the early years I hardly noticed, but eventually I realized what was happening. Kentucky is the home of illegal stills, where the product called *moonshine* was created. The men were observing the ritual of the jug. Now if I had a banjo and could play it, I'd sing an old hillbilly song about this, but since I don't, I'll just share the words with you. You can help me out by providing rhythm. It goes like this: (clapping) **now my uncle Mort, he's sawed-off and short; he measures about four-foot-two, but he thinks he's a giant if you give him a pint of that good ole mountain dew. Oh, they call it that ole mountain dew, and them that refuse it are few; I'll hush up my mug if you fill up my jug with that good ole mountain dew.**

A decade later I learned that my father was alcoholic. He had four brothers, and one of them died in a VA Hospital with alcoholic dementia. Alcoholics Anonymous and I had both come into being during the thirties, the middle of the great depression in America. If we think we've had it hard for the past few years, the people of that era endured far worse. They made their own whiskey partly because it was almost free, and they knew perfectly well that it was dangerous, since every now and then someone died with wood alcohol poisoning from drinking moonshine. If you had told me way back then that I would grow up to be a preacher specializing in addiction ministry I would have laughed and said NO, I'm going to be a concert pianist. That dream sustained me for a long time, but gradually faded

away, and I'm sure that most of us here had dreams, long since gone but never forgotten. This is life—highs and lows, achievements and losses, joy and sorrow.

The pleasure, the high created by substances or chemicals is temporary and artificial. True celebration is spiritual. Why did the country cemetery evoke such joy for everybody, young and old? It wasn't the church service that did it—singing gospel hymns pleased some people but many others had turned themselves off when they came in the door and sat down in those hard pews and wouldn't come back to life till it was over. What I am reaching for right now, the bridge that can bring us all together, no longer us and them, but simply WE, the magic quantity for making lemonade out of these dreadful sour hard lemons that have fallen down on us, is the sugar of honest, energetic, genuine spirituality. Where's the sugar?

Sixty years have passed since that scene in the country cemetery. My parents have both gone on to whatever comes next, and they're not buried there. I have no reason to go back. Thomas Wolfe said *you can't go home again* because home is not where it used to be and you're not *who* you used to be. When the truth of that hit me some years ago I wrote a poem about it, and I think it fits here. This was written in a hospital bed after I broke my leg and arm chasing a baseball back in 1978. A Lutheran pastor friend of mine sat next to the bed and took it down as I said the words.

Homeward

I know it will not be the same—the dry brown road
laid across the fields of seedy rebel grasses
the wind-bent walnut tree beside the slattern fence
the green-veined silk of young tobacco swaying
in its June peace, the molten weight of sun
upon my knees and the scuttering generations
of forest feet.

when around that certain bend I come,
dry-mouthed and light-weary,
though I know it will not be the same
yet it will seem the same and feel the same
for home is not a place, but a feeling.
when above that certain hill I climb
my scattered selves blowing like the vagrant seed
and with a joyous rush of hands I am gathered up
gathered and set upon the table,
in that holy place allowed to be and loved for being
than I will know I have come home.

This place is home for us this morning, not really the place, but the feeling that what was separate has come together, *us and them* have become WE. *Everyone here* is in recovery, *everyone* can share in a collective ritual of healing. Candles on the table represent the suffering we have sustained, the losses we have been forced to accept, and the fears we're trying to overcome. We may have a solid recovery well underway, or we may be just looking at the rough road ahead and wondering if we have what it takes to recover. We need seven brave people to come up and light the candles. Anyone can do this. If you lost your job this year, if you suffered divorce, death in the family, children leaving home, a burden of care for someone you love, mental or physical distress, alcoholism or addiction, or any other assorted pain that you want to let go of, see in a new and more healthy way, or just rededicate yourself to ongoing recovery, listen to the music and come light a candle. Make a fresh start by changing the only person you have the power to change, yourself. This is a celebration! Count your blessings! (candles and music)

Now there's lemonade in the kitchen today. Imagine that your shortcomings have been squeezed into that pitcher, your trials and troubles are in there, and the sugar of hope and love has produced something sweet. We can do this anytime, as often as we need to, one day at a time. The lemons will keep coming, but we have many ways to turn them into lemonade. We have this fellowship, the strong hand of friends, and the tools for building spiritual health and vitality.

Home is within us, where the unconditional love of a higher power pronounces each one of us sacred, beloved, precious in the sight of the one who eternally creates and affirms Life. Always torn between the unworthy part of ourselves and the higher calling in our hearts, we are EMpowered when we rise to the best that is in us. We come to believe there is something greater than, something that can overcome, something to celebrate that is our own, serenity in the spirit, gratitude in the heart, faith in the future. Let the church say Amen!