

Commitment & Creativity
March 7, 2021
Rev. Wendy Jones

Sermon:

“The hardest thing about adolescence is that everything seems too big. There's no way to get context or perspective..... Pain and joy without limits. No one can live like that forever, so experience finally comes to our rescue. We come to know what we can endure, and also that nothing endures.”

— Sara Paretsky, *Bleeding Kansas*

What are the things in your life that you are committed to? Do you know why you are committed to them? Do you know how to translate that commitment into actions that produce your desired results?

Is it okay for your desired outcome to take a longer than you expected and is it worth the wait? When is it time to let go of something you committed to in that past that no longer serves you?

What does it mean to walk away from a commitment verses simply letting go of something that is toxic? Sometimes, people hold on too long and sometimes people let go too soon. The key is knowing what you are doing and why.

There is a difference between being determined and being stubborn. Determination offers you a grounding and a direction. You know where you are going, and you know why. Within determination is the ability to pivot, to reason, and if needed, to modify your direction. When a person is determined they are committed. The ideas, the goals and the process are not fleeting.

Some things are worth letting go of, but many times we let go too soon. Some outcomes are worth staying with the process, the growth, the commitment and the wait.

Discernment is figuring out which is which.

Sometimes we release commitments because we are ready to move in a new direction or commit to something else.

Sometimes, it serves us to take a deeper look before letting go, and sometimes we are living through both of these experiences at the same time.

If only there were always easy answers.

I have found that our seven UU principles serve as a guidepost for me when I am in the process of discernment about what to commit too.

Commitment takes grounding; a calm strength. Is what I am committed to honoring the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even if it is hard? Is it valuing the interconnected web of which we are a part? Is helping me move forward in my own search for truth and meaning?

If I find that the answer to each of these questions is yes, then I stay committed, even if it is hard, even if it is scary, even if the path forward is unclear. At the same time, if the commitment is not in alignment with my highest sense of truth, then maybe it is time to release it with love and move towards something else.

Sometimes, it can be easy to look at the circumstances in our lives and wonder why we should keep moving forward.

When we take a short-term perspective some things in life can seem almost overwhelming, with overwhelming odds.

The thing about commitment is that it requires a long-term perspective. It requires us to be in dialogue with our past, our present and our future and to have endurance.

In order to have endurance you need three things: You need context; where have we been? You need perspective; where are we now and, you need to have a sense of future hope and purpose; where are we going & why? I believe that as we come to terms with these three things, we will be able to move forward with endurance.

In other words, we must know why we are advocating for something. We must understand where we are in relation to the struggle, and we must be able to see it from a larger perspective.

Many of the struggles that we are dealing with today were struggles and causes that started many years ago. The foremothers and fathers who started the movements entered into the struggle understanding that they very well may never see the fruits of their labors in their lifetimes. For some reason they were able to continue moving forward.

It is important that understand that something may be larger than us, and acknowledge that we stand on the shoulders and eat the fruits of the labor from the many men and women who came before us.

We see this regarding things like women's suffrage, civil rights movements, LGBTQ rights and we also see it in regards to science and medical advances. We are not constantly re-inventing the wheel.

So, when we get discouraged it is good to take a step back and put things in context. Where have we been? Where are we going?

Understanding that many times we are fighting for a cause that started before we were born and will continue after we have died offers a perspective that can motivate us to keep on keeping on.

Dr. Vincent Harding, a wise strong voice and mentor in the Civil Rights movement was also a professor at the Iliff School of Theology. While talking about the Civil Rights Movement, when his students would get discouraged he used to say, “yes, we have a long ways to go but we must also recognize how far we have come.”

So, understanding our past is a key ingredient to having endurance. We must occasionally look back to remind ourselves that we have moved forward. Sometimes looking back is a way that can help us to continue to move forward.

Present

In order to move forward with endurance, it is important to have a realistic understanding or perspective of where we are now; an understanding of the “why,” the reason to keep on going.

We must understand that the present moment is valuable. It is where we are. It is our turn. The present moment is where our power is. All we actually ever have is the present moment.

Mahatma Gandhi offered good perspective of the importance of the moment. He understood that things change. That our perspectives change. He never waived on his long term goal, but he was willing to assess where he was in the present.

“My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

In other words, Gandhi was not hindered by his past understandings. When truth as he understood it changed he was willing to recognize that truth and alter his course without apology.

Thomas Merton was a staunch opponent to the Viet Nam war. He understood the need for keeping perspective, for staying centered in the present moment. In one of the letters he wrote to his friend Jim Forest, he wrote:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect.

As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.

And there too a great deal has to be gone through, as gradually you struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything. (Thomas Merton)

Perspective is important by realizing that what we want in any given moment might not be achievable in the way that we understand it. However, the key is to continue moving forward even in the midst of the uncertainty.

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach.” Clarissa Pinkola Estes (Women who run with wolves)

Dr. Harding used to say, “we have our songs, you younger generations must begin to write yours.” In other words, “we may have come before you in the struggle, but you must understand that the struggle continues with you, it moves beyond us, and someday it will be continued by your children and grandchildren.”

And, Nelson Mandela said, “It always seems impossible until it’s done.”

Future: Hope

Finally, we cannot begin to understand the concept of longevity and endurance if we do not understand the relationship we have with the future.

So many times, we think that who we are is a reflection of our past. What we don’t understand is that who we are is also very much a reflection of our understanding of our future.

Andrew Lester wrote an eye-opening book called, “Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling.” In it he argues that our understanding of our future stories is impacting who we are in the present moment.

“At any given moment, each of us is working on our self-in-progress, not only by re-assimilating the past and integrating it with the present, but also by using the unique self-transcendent process of imagining our “self” in the future. Our identity, obviously, is not only influenced by the past that we “re-collect” but also by the future that we “project.” We cannot separate ‘who we have been’ and ‘who we are now’ from ‘who we imagine we are becoming.’” (p.36)

He goes on to say, “I use the word despair to describe disturbances of the “hoping” process in which our capacity to hope is lost, blocked, distorted, or in some manner impaired. . . . When a person is broken or wounded, we can assume that their perceptions of the future have been invaded, altered or threatened.” (p.72)

So, if we are to have true endurance, we need to have a future story worth moving towards. This is very real not only with the larger social causes that we have been talking about up to now, but this is also so critically important in our individual day to day lives.

I told Dani yesterday, for my birthday I want her to give me a makeover new haircut new clothes. I have a vision of myself being nice and strong. My commitment is to that vision that I'll appreciate it more in six months if I've actually made myself go to the gym and change my body shape a little bit.

When I was a freshman in high school, and I joined the tennis team a girl named Kristi was the number one singles player. I looked at how well she played in a state of awe, and I thought when I am a senior I want to be as good as her.

She became the vision of what I wanted to be four years from now. The vision of being as good as her became a source of joy and motivation to stay committed even when it was hard.

So many of us are going through things in our personal lives that can seem overwhelming. Sometimes what has happened is that we have lost touch with our future stories. Or we can't seem to get in touch with a future story that brings us hope.

There are so many times when we may be grieving but what we don't understand is that we are grieving the loss of a future story that we may not have even been aware of.

So, a strong commitment comes down to knowing where you're going, knowing where you've been and knowing where you are, and then, understanding that you don't have to do it alone. And this is key.

You show up on Sunday mornings I hope because you're getting something out of our time together. Maybe it's friendship, maybe it's a sense of purpose and connection. maybe it's a meaningful message.

Hopefully it's a little bit of all of those. But it's always a choice to show up. And sometimes it is hard. But we continue showing up for a reason larger than the present moment.

The vision I have for this church being a point of light in our community I am so deeply committed to. But I'm not doing it alone at all. We get to say that we are a point of light, because we have the joy and commitment and gift of John Mayo knowing how to put an amazing Soundsystem together which allows us to offer something to the community.

We have Laurel and Melissa totally committed to being voices of social justice in our community and connecting us with people who are doing amazing work through GJ Mutual Aid and local racial justice groups.

We have Maya who is so incredibly talented in her artistic ability and she just puts together beautiful pamphlets and production with her computer skills every week.

We have Sandy who said I think we need to get some food to the Navajo Nation and it's become a huge undertaking once a month with beautiful results.

We have Janver saying "I still have a song that I want to sing at this stage of life," and gifting us with his beautiful music last week and Miriam's beautiful music today.

We have Pooka who tirelessly cares for, advocates for and helps make sure the homeless community has access to food every Saturday.

We have Wendy and Audrey with their aquaponics garden sharing their amazing lettuce with us and leading by example of what it means to go green in this world.

My goal is for this space to be a point of light. That's my commitment. But look at how it's happening and I'm not doing that. We're all doing it, and we're creating this beautiful sacred space and a point of light together. Through each one of us figuring out what brings us joy and committing in our own way to that sense of purpose within our own lives.

It's not always easy, commitments can be hard. There is struggle. But I'm going to go out on a limb and I'm going to say something radical. A true authentic commitment can always, *always* be entered into with a sense of joy.

If you're committed to something and you can't find any sense of joy in it, maybe that's when you begin to question if you're committed to the right thing in the right way. Notice, I didn't say if it's not easy, I didn't say if it's hard, I didn't say if it's scary. I said if there is no joy in it.

Just like I say there's a difference between being nice and being kind, there's a difference when I talk about joy versus being easy. It's not easy waking up and reading the newspaper that one of our homeless community was violently murdered this week.

There's no joy in that. But there is joy in being able to look somebody in the eye and saying, "I'm going to commit to doing everything I can to make sure that this never happens again; to team up with like-minded people to keep you safe." It's not easy, but within the struggle there can always be joy.

Maya Angelou opened us up today, and I'm going to close with her today.

"We need joy as we need air. We need love as we need water. We need each other as we need the earth we share."

Joy, love, and each other. Those are the true marks of commitment.

