

## “At Home in the World”

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John 7: 37-39

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*This morning I want to share some thoughts about an important teacher and writer and spiritual guide. His name is Thich Nhat Hanh. I have talked about him before from this pulpit, but given the music we're enjoying today, and also just given what is going on in the word, it just makes sense to introduce him to you again.*

*I discovered his writings many years ago through my spiritual mentor, Brother David Steindl-Rast, who is a Benedictine monk and a dear friend, and a longtime admirer of Hanh's work. Thich Nhat Hanh is from Vietnam. He's a Buddhist monk, and for many years now has been regularly nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. He's that significant of a figure. During the Vietnam War he was a constant witness for peace, and was even included in the Paris Peace Talks during the nadir of that terrible conflict.*

*He was friends with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights movement and has been an important witness to peace and justice and human rights for the past 50 years. He has also been on the forefront of Christian / Buddhist dialogue, and wrote a marvelous little book a few years ago titled *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, and he demonstrates in that book, in such a calm and beautiful way, that there are so many shared teachings between Buddha and Jesus.*

*He was eventually exiled from his homeland in Vietnam, and received asylum in France. And that's important, because like a lot of you, his search for home, for a sense of place in the world, has been an important part of his spiritual journey. I think it's true for a lot of us that we're looking for a way home.*

*Hanh established a meditation center in southern France called Plum Village, and it's still an important destination for people on a spiritual search. His most recent book is titled – *At Home in the World* – and I highly recommend it to you. It's an excellent summary of his life and teachings.*

*So, that's a little context for you today, but that's not really the point of the sermon. What I really want to do is talk about why he is so important to my spiritual life, and why I think he might become important for you, too.*

*One of the great transformative ideas that Buddhists and Christians share is that of mindfulness. If you don't like that word, then you can use the word consciousness. Or maybe awareness. It's the idea that we find God or spiritual meaning, not by escaping the world, but moving into it in a deeper way. That we become more and more mindful of what we're doing, what we're feeling, what we're experiencing at any given moment.*

*Mindfulness slows life down. It finds a pace that is humane inside our souls. Rather than being “other” worldly, that is to say, I can’t wait to get to heaven one of these days, mindfulness squeezes us down like cold-pressed juice more deeply into the world. From a Christian perspective, prayer is a form of mindfulness. If you think of praying as a way of getting stuff from God, then you’re really missing the genius of prayer.*

*We pause and pray, not to get stuff, but because it helps us become more mindful, and being mindful always changes the world. If I pray for peace, then I become more mindful of peace. When I pray and give thanks for food and or wine or friends or a beautiful morning, I experience all of it in a deeper way. It changes me. It’s mindfulness.*

*In a way, mindfulness is over against the pervasive technology of our time, because technology, and I’m only speaking for myself now, but it tends to give me guppy brain. When I was a kid I used to have a fish bowl full of guppies, and they would have babies like crazy, and the fish bowl would be swarming with these tiny little guppies. Maybe twenty or thirty of them. Technology does that to me.*

*I hop from one quick thought to another to another to another to another to another, and it’s all so superficial. Most of it is brain clutter. Now, I love technology, I really do, but mindfulness asks us to pay attention. Deep attention. To be present with what we are doing or feeling in the moment, because it’s in the moment that we discover the transforming presence of God / Life / Source.*

*And so Thich Nhat Hanh tells the story of when he was a novice monk, and as a novice monk he had a couple of different jobs. One job was to clean the toilets at the monastery. Now, is there anyone here this morning who would like to stand up and give a testimony on how much you love to clean toilets? I didn’t think so!*

*But Thich Nhat Hanh tried to move into a place of mindfulness. That’s his spiritual practice. He cleans the toilets, but recalls that for years the monastery did not have toilets at all. Nor running water. Nor anything close to privacy in a bathroom. The monks would wander up the mountainside and, well, there were trees and bushes and a few little hiding places they would use.*

*So he tried to focus on gratitude, gratitude for the convenience of a toilet and sanitation and privacy and cleanliness and hygiene. He cleaned the toilets but did so with a full heart. Instead of hating the task, he became present with it. Instead of resenting the task, he embraced it. That is a spiritual pathway that can be applied to any aspect of our living.*

*And then he also realized that cleaning a toilet is a way of serving the community of monks, and serving the community is also part of the spiritual life. Jesus put it like this: Love your neighbor as yourself. Or he also implored us to give someone a cup of cold water. Now, as far as I know, Jesus never said anything about cleaning a toilet, but if he didn’t, he should have, because cleaning the toilet for someone else is a*

*profound act of human service! My point is this, and I'm so grateful to Thich Nhat Hanh for this insight, my point is that anything we do mindfully is a religious experience!*

*And by the way, if you don't like the example about cleaning a toilet, because that might be like the graduate school of mindfulness, consider the simple task of doing dishes. Does anyone still do dishes? Well, dish washers notwithstanding, the fact is that 99% of the human family does dishes every single day. Is there anything more common, more mundane, more simple than doing dishes?*

*Listen to how Thich Nhat Hanh applies mindfulness to doing the dishes . . . he writes . . . To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you're not doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant.*

*I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to be able to finish so I can sit down sooner and eat dessert or enjoy a cup of tea, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles!*

*That is a profound description of mindfulness. Think for a minute: the spiritual life is not some grand heroic thing God calls us to achieve. Quit trying to achieve God! The stuff of God is right in front of us. Toilets. Dishes. Soap. Sponges. Towels. To pay attention to the ordinary is to open the door to something extraordinary within us.*

*Now, I want to be honest about this – this is so easy for me to preach – but you should know that most sermons I preach, I preach them, not because I have it, but because I want it and need it. That's so true about mindfulness.*

*Here's how I have operated most of my life . . . I'm pretty good with delayed gratification . . . and so if I get all my work done, and if I get the house clean, and if I get the dishes done, and if I get all my errands done, like the cleaners and the grocery and gas station and the wine store and Home Depot and get the dogs taken care of and then and then and then and then . . . that's when I will sit and relax and be mindful.*

*But here's the problem . . . once I finally sit down and say to myself – “Okay. On your mark. Get set. Be mindful!” – it doesn't happen. It falls as flat as a Whoopee Cushion. I sit for two minutes, maybe three minutes, and then I get up and get something to drink. I get up and find my computer and check my email. I get up and go to the fridge. I get up and check my flowers on the patio. It's like someone is dripping caffeine into my soul 24 hours a day!*

*What Thich Nhat Hanh asks me to think about is that mindfulness is not something you schedule. Nor is it an activity that you do. Nor it is a spiritual reward you achieve.*

*It's a way of being in the world. It's a way of living. It's an orientation of thinking and feeling and moving through life. Listen to him again as he concludes his meditation on doing the dishes. He writes . . .*

*Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. I must confess it takes me a bit longer to do the dishes, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end. We do the dishes not only in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them, and to be truly in touch with life.*

*Now, I'm not sure how all of this sounds to you today. Does it sound like a bunch a religious chatter? Maybe it does. But I'm here to tell you that moving toward the practice of mindfulness can be transformative. Jesus himself engaged in mindfulness, not just in terms of getting away for quiet and reflection, which he did regularly, but in terms of how he saw the world.*

*The teachings of Jesus did not begin with theory. He didn't have a set of abstract principles that he tried to teach others. His approach was never – “follow these ten steps and you'll find God.” No. Instead he observed the world. He paid attention. And what I'm suggesting to you today is that if you'll cultivate more attention to the world, you'll find a spiritual resonance that will last you over the course of a lifetime. And so let's try it . . .*

*I would like everyone to relax. Sit up straight and relax. Rest your hands comfortably. And for a moment allow your mind to be flooded with thoughts of gratitude . . . and to help us let's all exhale a big breath at the count of three . . . 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . now think of a person / a special place / a memory / an experience. Notice your breathing and be grateful. Your heart is beating right now. Be grateful for your beating heart . . .*

*And now look around this church . . . notice something in the building or a person here and turn your head to a person if you like, and now let a gentle smile come across your face . . . this is going to be a miracle . . . a church smiling together . . . Bliss out for a minute. Bliss out over something or someone that touches you with beauty.*

*And now repeat after me a Thich Nhat Hanh prayer . . . Repeat . . . Breathing in I am loved by God. Breathing out I give love to the world. Breathing in I am loved by God. Breathing out I give love to the world. Breathing in I am loved by God. Breathing out I give love to the world.*

*I love you all. Amen.*