



Matisyahu's "One Day"
Today, Tomorrow, and One Day

From the message series *Songs of the Spirit*

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Kurt Vonnegut, the author, had an alter ego named Kilgore Trout in a lot of his short stories and novels. And Kilgore Trout, much like Kurt Vonnegut, came up with all these very inventive scenarios.

One of these inventive scenarios was imagining a dialogue between two pieces of yeast. These two pieces of yeast were discussing the purpose of life while they gorged themselves on sugar and suffocated in their own excrement. Now, because yeast is of limited intelligence and limited self-understanding, these two pieces of yeast never guessed that all this action was into the transformation that they were becoming champagne.

Now, if you've been around for a while, you might know that I don't drink champagne. But I still love the moral of this story, because it's about how sometimes, our perspective on ourselves can be so limited, we can miss our potential for becoming and changing into some marvelous and beautiful.

I think about this human capacity – this potential to change and grow – when I think about today's Song of the Spirit, "One Day," which is a hopeful song for a despairing time. Knowing that I was going to be preaching on this song today, I perhaps was a little bit more attuned to what I guess I could call a trifecta of human misery and aggression this past week. I'm going to show it to you.

First one is this. *[shows photo]* Maybe some of you know what this is. It's a drone. There was a story this past week. I don't know if many of you caught it. The McClatchy News Service had gotten access to some heretofore private government files. The administration has been telling us that these drones – these Hellfire missiles they rain down – were just targeted at senior al-Qaeda operatives in the mountainous region of Pakistan.

But what the documents revealed is in fact these drones, as many people have suspected, are being used much more widely, and that in fact, they include these things

– that awful phrase – collateral damage. We may not know how many innocent people are being killed by these drones, and we may not be being told the truth about it. Second of this trifecta of aggression is this fellow. *[shows photo]* Mike Rice, the former basketball coach at Rutgers University. Because of ESPN – I’ve got to give them some credit here for some good journalism – they got in possession of a number of tapes that showed hours of Mike Rice routinely, regularly bullying, belittling, humiliating, acting aggressively, physically and verbally, to his college players under his charge. Including using some words that some of you might have read that I will not repeat. Mike Rice is no longer the head basketball coach at Rutgers University since this has come to light.

The final thing that really stuck in my mind and in my heart this past week is this picture. *[shows photo]* Some of you might know who these people are. These are the parents of a number of the children killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. This is a still picture taken from the interview they did last Sunday night on *60 Minutes*. It was hard to watch, and I can tell from some of your expressions that many of you watched it as well. Of course, the difficulty that I experienced in me watching is nothing at all like the difficulty of what these parents have had to live with since mid-December.

One thing really caught my attention. This fellow here, in the tie, with his hands almost in a kind of heart-shaped, prayerful pose. I don’t know if that’s intentional or not, but that just visually resonated with me. He talked about speaking for those who survive and live in the wake of other people’s violence. He said he hoped that this tragedy, yet another tragedy of mass violence and aggression, he hoped that in the wake of this, that we can evolve as a society. That we can evolve. That’s what this hope of a prayer of the song “One Day” is all about.

This fellow, Matisyahu, who sings it, is an interesting guy. He’s a hip-hop artist who also once looked a rabbinical scholar from two centuries ago. He’s got a big old beard. Actually, I think he shaved off recently. But he’s a really interesting fellow. He practices a kind of enlightened, more modern form of Orthodox Judaism. And so running throughout this song when I listen to it, I wonder – I’m almost sure he knows these words from the prophet Isaiah from his own tradition – that “they would beat their swords into plowshares and they would study war no more.”

It is a hope for human evolution that we would find a more meaningful, more peaceful, more humane way to handle our disagreements. To be able to deal more mindfully and more lovingly with all those things that afflict us that the song identifies, this extreme version of winners versus losers that ends in bloodshed, these acts of aggressions and violence, and these acts of warfare that particularly visit themselves awfully upon children, upon the innocent. And these are his lines: “Sometimes in my tears I drown.”

I think a lot of people, even those of us who aren’t parents, have felt this way after Sandy Hook. I think it’s so important to remember at moments when we feel overwhelmed by the difficulty of the world, feel perhaps despair for all the inhumane,

unmindful, awful ways that we can treat each other, to remember: There is still within our lives the movement of a larger reality than simply our tears or our sadness alone. I want to give you a little bit of homework today – not in preparation obviously, because I haven't given it to you already. But this is after the fact, if you will. Extra credit. Although there's no possible way I can grade you on this. *[Laughter]*

One of the things I encourage you to do is take a look at a video. It's called [The Empathetic Civilization](#). It's about 10 minutes long. That's why I can't show it to you today. It makes a compelling – and not just compelling but logical and historically valid – argument that in fact we as a human race are evolving into greater and greater understandings in practice of empathy and compassion. We are, as the video makes known, enlarging that sense of who is the “We” emerging out of a tribal, nationalistic, very often religious understanding that limits the understanding of who really counts.

We can see examples of this a number of years ago. I know I've preached on this before that about five or six years ago, there was a public opinion poll taken of self-identified evangelical Christians. Now, if you know anything about self-identified evangelical Christians, they are preached over and over again a message that says, “Unless you believe in a certain way, you are going to hell.” Go into any evangelical or most evangelical churches, fundamentalist churches, you'll hear that message. And yet 60 percent of self-identified evangelical Christians in this study said, “As long as you're a good person, you can get to heaven.”

That is the enlarging or an expression of the enlarging of empathy. So I try to remember this video. Perhaps it is empathy that is the Invisible Hand made tangible in the works of our visible hands that can really grow our hearts and grow our lives and our souls. I try to remember it at the times in which I feel overwhelmed by my awareness of our still-continuing capacity for inhumanity and cruelty. So this is one of the things I do believe – most of us just simply know more about the nature of the world than our parents did, or *their* parents did, or *their* parents did.

Sometimes, we confuse this fact with the idea that the world is getting worse, because we know more about many of the awful things that we do. But actually, I want to say our capacity to hold the greater awareness about our incapacity for inhumanity and cruelty towards each other is the greater sign of our potential to change. That we are more aware now of what harm really means and of what cruelty costs us. Now of course, this growing capacity for empathy does not happen all at once. And so where this returns me to when I feel in those moments potentially overwhelmed by despair about our capacity for cruelty is to enlarge my sense of the importance of my actions and our actions and to know the impact that those actions can and do have in other people's lives, in enlarging our capacity for compassion.

So this is the second part of the homework, and it's briefer than the first part of the homework. It's another video. If you Google “One Day” and “pay it forward,” you will come up with a [video](#) that a number of you have sent to me. It's a story played out to the soundtrack of the song – one act of kindness begetting another act of kindness,

begetting another act of kindness, begetting another act of kindness, begetting another act of kindness, until it all comes back around to the first person in the video, a construction worker who is offered the first act of kindness.

I'm a sentimentalist at heart, so I really love this video. It makes me feel good. But even more than that, there's a lesson here that's important, which is what happens when the video ends. We see the circle of kindness come back upon itself. But I also wonder about what happens when the video ends, imagining the actors were real. They take the influence from these acts of compassion, both receiving and giving, out into the rest of their lives and changes people that we don't see in the video. This hope – and it's not just a hope, it's a core belief about the nature of reality – is one of our core convictions here at WellSprings. We call it “ripples of connection.”

This is the image we use, like a pebble dropped into a pond. We have no idea how far our actions may reach. Just think about that for a moment. Think about how empowering that thought is, in our capacity for cruelty and in our capacity for kindness. Some people want to own their actions. And ultimately, we don't own our actions. We can own our intentions. We can own our motivations.

But just think that actions you take today will ripple outward, even if they're very small things. Perhaps especially if they're very small things that we do. They will ripple outwards and will influence people that you will never meet. This is why we say that a mature understanding of freedom, that freedom reaches its fulfillment with each other, not in spite of each other, but with and in connection with each other. Because in the broadest sense, how we act is not just what we do for each other, with each other, here right now. It is about influencing people we will never meet and we will never see. That is a profoundly liberating idea, to unleash our capacity for goodness and to want to limit our capacity for causing harm.

Some of you might know the teaching from the Iroquois people: Before any action is taken, one of their teachings is, think about seven generations in the future. What will be the effects here? I love this language exactly from this teaching, that before an action is taken, they take into account even “those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground.” I love that image. Those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground.

We tend to think the people whose faces are beneath the ground are those who have died. And that certainly is true. We are connected to them through the love of our hearts. But also the people who are yet to be, who will be risen up through the potential of our world, to continue growing and developing? That creation is not finished and done. This capacity to look forward and to anticipate – not to plan, but just simply to know – that the actions that we take have influences, can enlarge our sense of the fact that, yes, we can evolve.

One of the things I do when I feel particularly pessimistic, perhaps at times even cynical about human nature, I go back and read a book called *The Experts Speak*. It's a very

funny book. It is a collection of experts from thousands of years of so-called wisdom about the experts in their time completely, completely misjudging what's going to happen. So you get examples in the cultural section: The guy – who, trust me, paid for this – the guy from the record company who said about the Beatles: “We don't like their sound, and by the way, guitar music is on its way out.” They are paying for that.
[Laughter]

But in a more serious sense in *The Experts Speak*, we also get to hear some of the so-called wisdom of people who were very famous in their day and in their age. Names like Edison, Jefferson, and Lincoln who did some amazing things. We also get to hear that for all the amazing things they did, they also spoke some awful, odious, nonsensical, misogynistic, racist thoughts.

Now, many of those were of their time. So perhaps they can be forgiven. But here's the thing: As great as their lives were, our wisdom did not stop with them. We evolved beyond the wisdom of the past to find better ways of living together. It doesn't mean that suffering, that hatred, that aggression, have stopped being real. It simply means we have the capacity over time to affirm, really affirm in our hearts, what is one of the most successful PR campaigns I have ever seen. And I think it's so successful because it speaks to human hearts. It is that campaign that many of us have seen that is targeted at LGBT teenagers who are the objects of cruelty and bullying – older people telling them, “It gets better.”

I always like to say it *can* get better. Because when we're talking about moral and spiritual evolution, it's not like it just *happens*. It doesn't happen automatically or easily or quickly. But we know that we ourselves today are inheritors of people who made choices long ago that we will never meet, who envisioned the empathy and the hearts of our world could change and then acted that way. Today we inherit and are blessed by the conscious, mindful choices they made. We inherit the fruits of yesterday's seeds, just as someday, hopefully one day, people will harvest our own actions.

It kind of puts a different spin on just ourselves alone, doesn't it? That we are planting seeds that other people will harvest meaning from. I want to say whatever will happen this week, as it's being debated in weeks to come about current gun laws and gun safety... I know many of you, from talking with you over these last few months, have put time and energy trying to give this nation more sane ways, more healthy ways, in this kind of gun-obsessed culture. Whatever happens with these current gun laws, making a more peaceful, kind, and humane world? That work will continue for us. It doesn't end because one bill passes or another does not.

It's like in the song when Matisyahu sings:

“So when negativity surrounds, I know someday it'll all turn around.”

That capacity for turning a conversion to a more kind humanity, it takes our effort. It takes the strength, first and foremost, to believe that we can change.

This past week, I heard one particular story of someone whose life was visited by harm. An unimaginable, sorrowful harm. Not unimaginable to all of us, but just an awful thing. Someone who knows not in the same way, but deep in their hearts, what those parents at Newtown felt in our feeling.

This woman's name is Candace Lightner. Some of you might know her because she's the person who started M.A.D.D., Mothers Against Drunk Driving. She started it because her own daughter was killed by a drunk driver, killed by a person who was a multiple serial offender. And yet he had only got slaps on the wrist. Even after her daughter's life had been taken, he still got a minimal, minimal jail sentence.

Maybe you know these stories – I've heard more of them than I care to know – about how drunk driving used to be treated. It used to be a joke. Especially if you knew someone in power. I mean literally. I've heard stories of people, especially in small towns where they get pulled over and their blood alcohol limit is way, way beyond what it should be, beyond anything safe, yet they know someone in the local police force. And they make a call, and they get driven home rather than taken to jail. This is the lack of seriousness that drunk driving used to be treated with – until people's hearts broke open enough to change.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving estimates that something like 300,000 lives have been saved since they have started their efforts. We know in this congregation that it hasn't saved every life. Five years ago, we lost a child of this congregation to a drunk driver, right here on Route 100. Not all harm has disappeared. And yet, I think we can say that we do not treat this as a joke anymore, or just something people do as an accident.

This is what Candace Lightner said about her actions. She said, "You kick a few pebbles, you turn a few stones, and eventually you have an avalanche, an avalanche that can change some behaviors and change culture and change laws."

This awareness of harm, that it's not a joke? These are the seeds of empathy. And it makes a difference. One of the things the Harvard School of Public Health studied, quoted in the *New York Times* a number of years ago: During periods where M.A.D.D. had PR blitzes on, high media-exposure times, alcohol-related fatalities fell twice as rapidly as during low-media periods.

Enlarging our awareness makes a real difference. It cannot reduce all harm. It cannot take away all cruelty. It cannot take away all mindlessness. But it means when our consciousness enlarges and we want to shut down because we get scared by the cruelty of this world, vow not to shut down, but to keep our awareness and our hearts open.

Which brings me to a movie that I'm *not* going to preach about this summer during our SpiritFlix message series. It's *The Hangover Part 3*. I saw the first one. Actually saw it in the theaters and did preach on it. Didn't like it. Laughed once or twice, but really was

turned off by its rampant and totally casual homophobia and misogyny that are woven all throughout these movies. Also, its casual if not open-handed embrace of drunk driving. I mean literally if you've seen these movies.

I saw the first one in the theater, as I said. I saw the second one at home, Didn't laugh once. Sometime at some point, I will see this third movie. I just don't want to pay any money to see it, because I don't want to support it. I've already seen in the promos someone driving with a beer in their hand. This buffoonery, this jackassery, isn't funny. This behavior kills teenage girls. Here's the thing I like least about that world, the moral world, if you could say this of *The Hangover* series, It seems to be a Karma-free universe. The most immature understanding of human freedom. Not that our freedom reaches its fulfillment with each other, but that we act in total isolation from each other. And it really doesn't matter what we do.

Well, it does matter what we do. In *The Hangover* universe, there's no STDs. There's no crimes charged. There's no people killed. There are no consequences. That's what Karma means: We take actions, they have consequences. Don't make Karma into something metaphysical. Cause and consequence, that's what Karma is about.

When there are no consequences, or we imagine there are no consequences, there can be no change. Which means there can be no evolution, Which means there can be no transformation. There can be no opening of the heart.

This is why it really matters what we believe spiritually. We believe and affirm in a creation that is not over long ago. Not a creation story, a creation myth that happened once – and do we believe stuff happened a long time ago so that we will be in the right place when creation comes to an end? So we can go to heaven? Like some little reward we get?

No. It's more like what Thich Nhat Hanh is saying. "If we want to know heaven on earth," which if we will know any heaven later on, in whatever form that might be, I think we will be prepared for it by knowing heaven right here and right now. That is a relational understanding of reality. By relational understanding of reality, I'm saying we matter. Our choices matter.

This is an ancient universalist teaching, truly ancient, one of the first theologians after the time of Jesus. A man named Origen, who eventually was declared a heretic by the church that he helped to found, because his belief was that love, divine love, was the most powerful force in the universe. So powerful in fact that eventually even Satan himself, the fallen angel of all the fallen angels, would be redeemed.

That's how powerful love is. In the Buddhist tradition, there's the teaching of the Bodhisattva. I mean Buddhism has its same form of individualism as all traditions do. Originally it was thought, well, it's about individual enlightenment. Individual Buddhahood. The teaching of the Bodhisattva tradition says this: There are those who choose to be reborn age after age after age after age, even though they could pursue their own

individual enlightenment until all beings are awakened. We don't have to buy the ancient mythology in order to understand the teaching, which is that all of us matter and nothing is wasted.

Our own tradition says this with Ralph Waldo Emerson in his wonderful essay (which I would really encourage you to read) called *The Over-Soul*. We are part of a larger whole. It is our birthright and our destiny and it is our awakening to know that we are part of that larger life. Or perhaps simply put, as Rob Bell, an evangelical Christian with a big old open heart said a couple years ago in a wonderful book with an even better title, simply *Love Wins*. One day, love can win.

Love can win because of our capacity for enlarging that sense of belonging, of who is the us and who really belongs. One of our own great spiritual ancestors, William Ellery Channing, put it this way. (I love this sentence, but even more, I love to live in the awareness of this sentence. This is a spiritual practice.) He wrote, "I am a member of the living family of all souls."

Not "I am a living member of the family of Unitarians." Not "I am a living member of the family of my fellow citizens."

I am a living member of the family of all souls.

Channing's words encourage us to evolve into what we already are. Connected, so the "One Day" that the singer sings and hopes for will actually be, because of our possible actions. This day, the seeds that we plant of justice and kindness and love, are more powerful than literally any of us could ever know – whether they're large, huge actions or small little actions that we may not even notice ourselves.

I want to conclude with Theodore Parker's words. These words were quoted very often by Dr. King. Theodore Parker, one of our great Unitarian ministers of the 1800s, says (paraphrasing), "I cannot see the full trajectory of the moral universe. I cannot divine it. But I can with my eye and my perspective perceive that the arc of the universe bends in the direction of justice."

May we allow our perspective to see that today, and to commit our hands and open our hearts so that we know whenever the "one day" will come that our lives, we'll have helped to make it so.

And that universe will bend just a little bit more because of us, in that direction of justice and kindness and love.

May it be so. Amen. And may you live in blessing.

Let's pray together. Oh, divine invitation to creation, may we really know that the meaning of our lives is not fixed or final, that this invitation to creation is truly present-tense among us and within us this day.

This invitation says in whatever ways we can within our aptitudes, within our gifts and the expression of our heart's truest desire to connect, that we can know that our actions matter. And to know that because our actions matter, we are powerful with love.

We are powerful with goodness.

We are powerful with an evolving empathy that this day is bearing fruit and one day will bear an even fuller fruit.

Amen.