The harvest and plenty we celebrate this season seems unfairly distributed. Sometimes it just seems like too much unfairness, avarice and warring; it can be hard to make that pledge to all things living. Perhaps that’s just how I’m feeling this morning. Maybe it’s too much because I’ve been away from the office and am leaving again for another week, and so feel a little behind at work. We had a lovely all-day workshop yesterday, which, though terrific and starts this ministry off with hope, it also took me away from other work that also needed doing... Too much grief, perhaps, because I’ve had to announce the death of Carolee Allen this morning and I know that some of you are deeply grieving. And of course, it’s been too much going on in the world ever since I started here – Hurricanes Harvey and Maria, earthquake and wildfires. God is fed up. Our mistreatment of the planet has surely contributed to these disasters. And violence in Las Vegas and now New York City – which of course, are the newsworthy ones, but the course of constant ongoing violence and misogyny and sexual misconduct in this country is a backdrop to our lives occurring every single hour. It’s just too much.

That’s one reason I turned to Dr. Seuss this morning. Truly – his books are sacred text to me. Besides being fun to read and to listen to – nice, funny language and rhythm, his themes are real – from grappling with conformity and prejudice in the Sneetches to deep seated feelings of fear of difference in the story about the pale green pants with nobody inside them….

Don’t you just feel sorry for Mrs. McCave and how overwhelmed she must feel caring for twenty-three sons all with the same name? Even if she brought some of it on herself. The illustrations, which I didn’t show you because you couldn’t appreciate them from the distance – but the story is only three pages long. On the first page, she looks peaceful and content as all her Daves are outside playing tennis, practicing musical instruments, juggling, playing baseball, riding scooters and pulling each other in little red wagons.... She has this peaceful demeanor looking out over her clan with serene contentment – hands folded sweetly in front of her. The next page, she’s calling Dave into the house – her hand is cupped at her mouth, and she’s smiling with her other waving – like she’s got a nice surprise for Dave and she looks forward to his coming in to get it. The third page, she has collapsed. All the Daves have run straight over her, past her, and into the house, and she remains slumped on the front stoop, dazed, exhausted, and completely overwhelmed.

I’m afraid that last illustration of the overwhelmed Mrs. McCave is so funny to us because the feeling is so very familiar, even as the circumstances are completely ridiculous and unlikely. We know what it’s like to be overwhelmed with too much – too much family, too much to do, too much grief, too much life, just too much. Some people feel this sense of overwhelm a lot, and others rather seldom. But I do suspect we’ve all felt it at some time in our lives.

And it’s related to pressures of our society that seem to get worse over time. You know— how technology designed to improve the quality of our lives, can instead put undue pressure on them for more and more immediate responsiveness and increase our to do list....
I know that some of you this morning are filled with deep grief for the death of Carolee Allen – made worse, no doubt, by the surprise of it. Though she had a terminal diagnosis, her final decline was pretty quick. But some of you didn’t know Carolee, and could still be feeling overwhelming grief – many losses we touched on last week as we remembered our own loved ones who have died.

But feelings of grief could be instead about the continuing violence in the world, about poverty and injustice, global climate change affecting these new and difficult weather patterns and how long it is taking humanity to get its priorities straight.

You could be feeling overwhelm about school, pressures at work, a breakdown in a personal relationship, or things beyond your control. This kind of overwhelm is what people sometimes label as stress. Stress (or those overwhelmingly strong feelings that make up stress) actually interferes with our ability to think clearly. That’s why we can’t remember names or information, or what we walked into the other room to get.

So, it’s best to make your lifestyle plan for dealing with stress while you’re not stressed. But, if you didn’t get to it, you can still stop now.

When I was about 7 or 8 years old, I was playing in a little red wagon at my grandparent’s house with the girl who lived next door. We were taking turns pulling each other around. My grandparent’s driveway in Spokane, WA was very steep and once while I was riding in the wagon and Trisha next door was pulling me downhill, but the wagon got going too fast and was going to overtake her, so she had to get out of the way and let me run out of control down the driveway into the street. Fortunately, there were no cars going by and my only injury was a cut on my forehead made by the handle whipping back upon me seated in the wagon.

But I think of our lives being like that little red wagon – sometimes going too fast down the Mountain of Too Much, a term I borrow from David Kuntz[i]. And we can get seriously hurt. If we’re lucky it’s only a few stitches in your forehead, but unlucky, we risk our lives with a major collision. We know that stress compromises our health and kills – and so it seems important to name the tools we have to take control of the little red wagon and walk it down the steep hill of too much until we’re safely on even ground again.

One of the stressors we encounter regularly is that of choice. In The Paradox of Choice, Why More is Less, Barry Schwartz explains why it is not true that abundance necessarily makes us happier and that greater choice equals greater good. Through economics, psychology and neuroscience, Schwartz makes a compelling case that abundance exhausts us by sprouting unreasonable expectations and leaving us feeling unfulfilled.

My own obsession with this topic began in the pickle aisle of a grocery store in Pullman, WA. It was an IGA at the bottom of the hill in the town where I just happened to grow up. I had returned to that town about 15 years later, though it seemed like a lifetime. I left just I had completed the 5th grade, and I returned for graduate school, after having served for two years in the Peace Corps. For the two years I was in the Peace Corps, I lived in the poorest country in Central America: Honduras. I ate well, but the food was the same. Bananas, fish, rice, cassava root, occasionally red beans, and always coffee. There weren’t a lot – or actually any – green vegetables to speak of.
I missed pickled cucumbers for some reason. My parents used to pickle cucumbers when I was growing up – in that town of Pullman, WA – and perhaps that is why pickles were on my mind when I returned to Pullman after my two years in Honduras. So, I was finally back in the states, and I decided I would buy myself some pickles! What joy. I was really looking forward to eating a pickle. However, when I found the aisle where the pickles were, I was stunned by the sheer volume. It was disorienting. I was overwhelmed. There were so many pickles I didn’t know how to decide. What kind of pickles did I like? Claussen, Nally, Vlasic, Heinz – I didn’t know.

I nearly ran out of the grocery store, and certainly didn’t have any pickles with me! It was a frightening experience, really, one that I categorized as “culture shock” – or rather “return culture shock” which is what they warned us about as we left the Peace Corps.

To go from virtually no choice about what to eat – “oh, another banana, thank-you!” I don’t even like bananas. – to extreme choice, sweet pickles, dill pickles, kosher dill, baby dill – not to mention the brand names – it was a stark contrast and difficult to choose.

And yet, when we know that most of the world lives in poverty, in such countries as Honduras, talking about those unreasonable expectations and feelings of exhaustion and lack of fulfillment can be hard. We may feel guilty – to have all these choices, to have all this abundance – and we’re still unhappy? What’s wrong with me?! Nothing, says Barry Schwartz. It’s not you. It’s the myth you’ve accepted – that more choice is always good.

In fact, researcher Antonio Pedro Ramos of UCLA challenges the myth that democracy is always better for the poor. It is a widely held belief that being able to choose your leaders should improve the quality of life for most people, including the poor, but this research shows that it is not necessarily true. We don’t always choose what is in our best interest. I’ll let you draw your own conclusions from last year’s election.

In a class I’ve taught about money, spirit, and life, there’s always conversation around rampant materialism and how it affects rich and poor alike. It came up also among the facilitators of our chalice circles this month. It’s what Gretchen referred to this morning as well in her painfully honest recitation of the seven deadly sins in her complicated relationship to abundance.

There seems to be a threshold of enough below which is painful, and above which is painful.

If we don’t have enough, or we have more than enough, life can be difficult to navigate – either we’re always trying to get our next meal, or we can never decide what it is we want to eat for our next meal. We can make judgments about which kind of pain is better... but that doesn’t change the fact that both places can be hard.

I start here with this graph in order to acknowledge that even if you are feeling comfortable socioeconomically, and have enough food and shelter and things in your life, you may still struggle with choices. And if you are struggling economically, and don’t have enough food or shelter or things, you know you struggle with choices. Do I pay this bill or that bill? Do I buy healthy food or cheaper junk food? Do I spend money on gas to drive my car to get to the farmers market where the healthy food is cheaper, but I have to drive elsewhere to get the other items I need to feed my family? You get the idea. Choices.
And yet there are some choices that we want to make, that we need to make. How we spend what money we have, how we spend the time we have, how we relate to those we love and those we find a challenge to love, how we cope with feelings of overwhelm and the consequences of our own bad decisions, like having 23 sons and naming them all Dave.

One of the best ways of dealing with too much – and Carolee Allen knew this – was in a community such as ours. And community such as ours sustains itself by joining with other communities such as you’ve done in this Faith Action Network, partnering for the common good. We can help each other, individuals and communities, when our Mountains of Too Much pile up, and be kind to each other, when we judge ourselves too harshly. We can grab the handle of each other’s wagons – when it’s safe to do so, and help steer each other to safety. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed with too much because we think that whatever the too much is is ours alone – that we’re alone in our work, or alone in our grief, or just plain alone.

I wonder about Mrs. McCave all alone in that house with 23 Daves. No wonder she looks a mess on the last page! Doesn’t she have any help? A partner, a friend, a neighbor? Anyone to tell her that it’s probably not a good idea to give your children the same name? That this will just lead to trouble down the road...

Dr. Seuss, that wise old teacher, shows us the way. We need to name our Daves – figure out just exactly what they are: Hot Shot or Soggy Muff – then they don’t seem like quite too much. Name just what it is that is too much – the email, the fear, the sadness? We need to take time to do that. To get clear and centered and whole, and we need to pay attention. Just which Dave is Marvin O’Gravel Balloon Face? And no judging – just name one of them Stinky because he is. And Dr. Seuss says we have to love them. I can tell that Mrs. McCave loves her Daves by the illustrations. And though Dr. Seuss doesn’t actually say so, I think it’s quite implicit in the story, that she needs to find a community, she needs some help. We all do.

I think Mrs. McCave actually will go back and name one of her Daves Zanzibar Buck-Buck McFate... because despite the words of Dr. Seuss. I believe it’s never too late.

*Benediction*

We know there is more love out there and in here and somewhere. We work to create and cultivate abundant love in this world, a world someday without violence. When despair for the world gets to be too much, we turn to one another and the natural world for help. Abandon, as in love or sleep, holds us to our way, clear, in the ancient faith: what we need is here.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.*