The contrast between the song we just sang and the parable you just heard is intentional. We will get there, heaven knows how, but we know we will...is a musical expression of hope and tenacity, all that is lacking for the woman in our story who leaves the store without buying anything. It’s that last line that stings, isn’t it?

“Parables,” says McKenna, “draw us in, softly and with subtlety. They are revolutionary, subverting reality and undermining the existing structures and systems and relationships and attitudes – all the trappings of the status quo that keep the least among us in slavery and without hope while we look the other way, choosing to be oblivious to their claim upon us.”

She left the store without buying anything. Ouch. No patience for the unknown, the mystery, the uncertainty. We are going, heaven knows where we are going...

Some of you here at church are taking a class called Examining Whiteness, which is exploring the ways of being white in a white-dominated society that impact everyone; and some recommendations and tools for developing a positive anti-racist white identity. Through the exploration of that class, my hope is that we will learn to undermine existing structures and systems and relationships and the trappings of the status quo that keep the least among us in slavery and without hope.

I’m uncomfortable with the term “least among us” - it’s from the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus tells all these parable, which Megan McKenna draws upon in her present day versions. “Least among us” sounds like it means those who are lesser, but of course, it refers to those who are treated as lesser. We reference a third candle each week in Joys and Sorrows for those who feel an essential part of their identity lies in the margins of society, and that’s what “the least among us” means. Those who have been treated as lesser, discounted, disregarded, ignored and worse, abused and killed. People of color, especially of African descent, enslaved as this country was founded, or Japanese descent, interred, here in the West during WW II, or of Mexican descent, or trans identified, or differently abled or gay or poor or addicted or homeless, etc. The #metoo movement reminds us that even cisgender women are still treated by some as “the least among us,” even though we’ve been through waves of feminism and women’s movement in our history. Clearly, we still seek liberation from the existing structures and systems, relationships and attitudes.

I did not try to make a complete list of oppressions, or this sermon would never end. Nor am I equating these oppressions as equal. I simply wanted to flesh out the term, “least among us” for a little more clarity. The Examining Whiteness class is just one example of a conscious way to engage the revolutionary effort of liberation from existing structures and systems of oppression. The trappings of the status quo must die for a new way of being to be born. But that is painful and hard. It is hard to give up the comforts of the way things are to plant something new. The woman in our parable this morning doesn’t even try. She leaves the store without buying anything.

Because, the truth is, we live in a society that wants quick fixes and fast solutions. We buy products that help us lose weight or quit smoking, make us money or make us happier. We buy products that are environmentally responsible rather than actually being responsible with our environment. We want to see the fruits of our labor in this lifetime, and are less patient about how long it takes to make real changes that last.
Especially when you’re talking about changes like world peace, eliminating poverty or ikracism, reversing global climate change.

W.E.B. DuBois understood that. He was one of the co-founders of the national association for the advancement of colored people (of which early members included Unitarians Jane Addams and John Haynes Holmes). The NAACP is one of the oldest civil rights organizations in this country, founded in 1909.

“Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime.”

Now is the time. Now is the time to plant the seeds of peace and justice, of environmental sustainability, and kindness to others. Now is the time. This moment. Take a moment to look around the room, or listen to the sounds in the room, and notice who is here with you on this journey.

'This is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like... You plant the seeds. You go home and nurture them and help them to grow and someone else reaps the benefits.'

Our current era is not always so wise. Not only do we want the quick fix, the fast solution, we have no patience for slow growth and change, but we also tend to think about our own benefit, our own gain, and not further down the road that future generations might gain advantage. We think of ourselves..... Well, we think of ourselves mostly.

One of the best lessons I learned was as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I decided to volunteer after a sermon given by the minister of my youth, the Rev. Dick Henry. He himself had been an ambulance driver in World War II, a way of being a conscientious objector and not fighting the war, but also serving in a way that mattered and helped. Inspired by his example, I volunteered for the Peace Corps and accepted a position as an education volunteer, teaching mostly illiterate women, to read and write in Spanish. (The native language in the village I served, Garífuna, or Black Carib, is a spoken language, not written much at all) So, I taught them to read and write in the language of power; Spanish, the language of school and church and government. But mostly I wasn’t the teacher, but rather a teacher of teachers. ‘Work yourself out of a job,’ was our motto, in the Peace Corps. Because we were there temporarily, two years, generally, and not much longer – and when we left, the programs we started, if they were at all beneficial at all, could continue.

I taught young women in high school to teach their elders, their mothers and grandmothers to read and write. The men mostly worked on ships and were away, but the women held the village together, raised the children and took care of business. The literacy circles we began weren’t dependent on this foreign peace corps volunteer, though I may have started them, but rather the passion the women had for learning and the desire to not be left out of the system of power, where reading and writing matters. It was just one example of a conscious way to engage the revolutionary effort of liberation from existing structures and systems of oppression. The trappings of the status quo must die for a new way of being to be born. But that is painful and hard. It is hard to give up the comforts of the way things are to plant something new.

Death, in village life, was closer to the surface. Mostly, people weren’t hospitalized when sick, but cared for at home, and therefore died at home. Death wasn’t hidden away. The illusion of permanence was not apparent.
Illusions occur when blind spots prevent us from seeing changes before our eyes, we learn from the scientists who study the magician’s disappearing act. Illusions occur when blind spots prevent us from seeing changes before our eyes. The illusion of permanence, for example, when change is the constant. We lose our sight for just a few milliseconds when our eyes make tiny shifts in focus. It is too short for us to notice but long enough to miss changes in visual scenes. Magicians rely on this fact, and by knowing this, we can learn to see things and not look away, choosing to notice the claim upon us of the marginalized and oppressed.

Perhaps the ability to distance oneself from the reality of death, or accept the illusion of permanence, is a privilege afforded some in society but not others – those who can afford health care and hospitals and treatments that keep one alive temporarily. There was no such illusion in the village of Travesía where I lived and learned. We all knew, children and adults, that life was a gift with an inevitable end to it. Being aware of that ending can change how we approach the living part. I think it’s when we forget that this life is temporary that we get into trouble, that we cling to the transient as if it were permanent.

Dave takes from his friend, Jim, what he remembers. And though Jim isn’t around to passionate, honest and irreverent, Dave is. Jim’s influence on Dave remains and has changed who it is Dave is today.

I think we are all working ourselves out of a job. We are all here temporarily, and we are, perhaps, less important than we think we are while at the same time matter more than we will ever know.

There was something magical in the Peace Corps about knowing we were assigned to villages temporarily, that made our roles clear. We are not there forever, or even very long. We are temporary.

And isn’t that true for us all, in all of life? We are temporary. We are temporarily able-bodied. Temporarily in this congregation. Temporarily on this earth. (or temporarily in this form on this earth; when we die we may still be here, but it’s not the same, I am pretty sure) Temporary. And as long as we see our role as temporary, our role as helping others learn what we have to teach, and learning from others what they have to teach, life and work stays in perspective, and others may reap what we sow.

Just because life is temporary, doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter. But the temporality can provide us comfort – even our mistakes are temporary, and what continues is larger than our small efforts. We do not do this work alone, for ourselves alone, but as a part of a larger effort.

The board of Trustees of this church met this weekend, at the Menucha Retreat center, where we explored our vision for this congregation which we have been entrusted to lead. We discussed the important work of anti-racism and examining whiteness, our desire to reach out into the interfaith community and make ties with other communities for joint projects, building on our successes with projects like the Winter Hospitality Overflow helping those in need during winter’s coldest months. And our alliance with the neighborhood school, King Elementary. We imagined an institution with the infrastructure to support our volunteers better so that you can explore your gifts without fear of being stuck for life holding together one little piece of this work. Where people come and go, learn from each other, and move on into different temporary work, learning and sharing different skills. Where we care for one another when volunteering is no longer possible, but community is necessary, and include those who have means to financially support the institution and those who cannot.

It is religious work, holy work, we do. The holy work of showing up, says my colleague Ashley Horan. Showing up, despite the knowledge that we will all disappear someday. Showing up because we will disappear.
And showing up, not just for ourselves, but for others. Because it matters to others that we show up, that we are here, temporarily engaged in this holy work, building that world we know possible but have not yet made visible.

One of my favorite scriptures is the Tao Te Ching, a classic Taoist text dating from at least the fourth century BC, ascribed to a single author or many – traditionally Lao-Tzu which means Old Master. Chapter 25 of the Tao Te Ching as translated by Stephen Mitchell. A note on this translation, though this chapter features the pronoun, he, in this translation, Stephen Mitchell, alternates the pronouns, using she for every other chapter. Chapter 25, however, goes like this:

*He who stands on tiptoe*

*doesn’t stand firm.*

*He who rushes ahead*

*doesn’t go far.*

*He who tries to shine*

*dims his own light.*

*He who defines himself*

*can’t know who he really is.*

*He who has power over others*

*can’t empower himself.*

*He who clings to his work*

*will create nothing that endures.*

If you want to accord with the Tao

just do your job, then let go.

I love this scripture, in part, because the authors make it sound so easy and in my experience it is hard. Hard to do your job and let go, to create something that endures by not clinging to our work. It can be hard to work ourselves out of a job, and yet in this big magic show called life, it is what we can do so that life might continue after we have disappeared.

The Greatest Disappearing act may be an illusion, but in our disillusionment, we can come to see what the seeds we plant might produce. The trappings of the status quo must die for a new way of being to be born. It is hard to give up the comforts of the way things are to plant something new. The woman in our parable this morning doesn’t even try. May we choose another way.
Benediction

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown. (Sara Moores Campbell)

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