

Well, hasn't this been an interesting week? The snow, the cold, the cabin fever. This week was a good test of our relationships, of our ability to live with ourselves and others in forced seclusion. I went crazy the second day and told Joan I was going for a drive. Our neighbor had plowed our driveway, but not completely. The path he cleared was funnel-shaped, narrowing the closer one got to the street. But I thought if I were going fast enough, I could break through the snow, so I gave our Ford the gas, but got wedged in tight and was stuck, like a cork in a bottle.

I opened the door to get out and start digging the car free, but the snow was piled high against the door and it wouldn't open, so I climbed over the gearshift and tried to go out the passenger door, but it wouldn't open either, so I climbed over the back seat and tried to go out the back end, but there was no inside handle, so there I was stuck in the car. I called Joan on the phone, who had been watching from the kitchen window and said she would come let me out of the car when she had a moment, but that she had several other things to do first, so just to relax and she'd be there when she could.

It gave me time to think, and what I thought about was all those times in my life I tried to jam things in where they don't belong.

When I was a kid, I had a little wooden bench with holes of various shapes—circles, squares, rectangles, and stars—cut into the top. It had these matching blocks that fit into the holes. Circles through the circle, squares through the square, rectangles through the rectangle, and stars through the star. Its purpose was to help me recognize shapes and suitability, to learn what went where. Circles go in a circle. Squares go in a square. Dirty clothes go in a hamper. Towels go on a towel rack. There's a place for everything, and everything is in its place. Those are the easy things to figure out. What is a bit more tricky is trying to figure out where we fit, where we should place ourselves in the world. We become teenagers and people ask what we want to do with our lives, and suddenly placing ourselves in the world, placing ourselves in the "right" category or vocation or relationship becomes a real challenge.

Other people, intending to help us, say things like, "You can be anything," which is a big, fat lie and something we ought to stop telling children. In her book, *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, the author, Ann Patchett, tells about being at a booksigning and a woman coming up to her and saying, "I think everyone has one great novel in them. Don't you agree?" Ann Patchett said, "Yes, absolutely, of course," because she didn't want to get into an argument with someone she didn't know. But she thought about it later and concluded everyone didn't have one great novel in them, just as everyone doesn't have a five-minute mile in them, or one algebraic proof in them, or one symphony. No, no, no, no, no.

We've been talking about Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualized people, or in our words, people with awakened souls, people who live at the peak of their creativity and capacity, people who are fully alive. Maslow believed these people possessed specific qualities or characteristics. This morning, I want to talk about one of the qualities, which is *the acceptance of self and others*. Self-actualized people, people with awakened souls, accept themselves as they are, without guilt, shame, or anxiety. To continue our metaphor, they are perfectly happy being a circle, and don't spend all their lives trying to jam themselves into a square-shaped hole. And they don't feel bad about it. Or anxious, or shameful. They are content with who they are, and what they are. If someone were to come up to them and say, "You can be or do anything you want!" they would say, "No I can't, nor do I wish to." They have accepted themselves, and do not feel guilt or anxiety about what they are not.

As we read the gospels, we notice people had different expectations of Jesus. In fact, early on, the Tempter met him in the wilderness and urged him, three separate times, to be something he was not, to do something he was not made to do. And each time Jesus refused, without apology, without guilt, without shame, without any need to defend himself, or justify himself, or make an excuse for himself.

Jesus accepted who he was. But Jesus went beyond acceptance of self. And this was one of Maslow's points about self-actualized, soul-awakened people. Jesus not only accepted who he was, he also accepted who others were. And while it is true Jesus occasionally challenged the morality of someone, he never challenged the basic humanity of someone. That is, he never demanded others be something they were not capable of being.

Now let us talk for a moment about our children. Can you accept them as they are? Perhaps they chose a vocation you did not imagine for them. Can you accept that? Perhaps they married a person you would not have chosen for them? Can you accept that? Perhaps they do not maintain their home the way you maintain yours. Can you accept that? Perhaps their religious choices are not yours. Can you accept that? Or do you, in various ways, signal to them that who they have become is not quite good enough?

I know a family who had two sons. One son did everything his parents wished. Went to college, married the "right" person, was successful in his job, then supplied them with grandchildren. The other son cast about, unsure of what to do with his life, moved to another city, and died, suddenly and tragically. Decades passed, I saw the couple and mentioned their son who had died, telling them of a time in our childhood he had been kind to me.

"We don't know who you mean," they said. "We only had the one son."

The failure to accept ourselves and accept others leads, almost invariably, to a denial of our humanity and the humanity of others. To accept the self and accept others is to fulfill the great commandment—that we love others as we love ourselves.