

To Be of Use

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

August 24, 2025

"To Be of Use" is one of my favorite Marge Piercy poems. It is the oldest poem and the one she reads most often at the beginning of her poetry readings. Marge shared that it has a "strange afterlife of being read at memorial services for radical sage warriors, activists and organizers, and so on."¹

*The people I love the best
jump into work headfirst
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of
sight.*

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.*²

"What can I do to respond to all that is happening in the world?" This is a question I hear almost daily. Almost as often I hear, "I feel badly that I can't do what I used to be able to do or wish I could do." Or conversely, "Why aren't people doing anything?" implying of course that others are doing it wrong, or perhaps differently than you.

I've spent a lot of time this summer thinking about these questions and our role in the world, both as a church and as individuals.

My reflection today is one response to those questions. The answer about the role of church will come in early September.

What can I or you, or you, (pointing to folks) do in response to all that is happening? How can I be of use? I have three responses to that question that I would like to share with you this morning.

First and foremost, as your minister, pastor,

1 "Marge Piercy reading 'To Be of Use' at the 2015 Mass Poetry Festival," May 12, 2015, <https://youtu.be/OKF4yX7knWo?si=ecpL5SWwNbTpZjxQ>.

2 Marge Piercy, "To Be of Use" in *Circles on the Water* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

leader, and friend, I need to tell you that *You are of use*.

You are of use because you are here. You do not have to do anything to be of use and to be of value. You have nothing to prove. You and all people, other animals and creation are worthy, by our very existence. Your use is evident by your existence.

The belief that "use" equals productivity is one of the harmful beliefs that perpetuates guilt, exhaustion, and low self-esteem. People hurt their souls and injure their connection to their true selves trying to win approval ratings established by capitalism, greed, and a system that oppresses earth and all living creatures, including humans. That is not being of use, it is harming yourself, and thus others.

We need to be as whole and truly authentic as possible.

You are of use.

My second answer to the question "How can I be of use?" is to *Choose wisely and check in with that wisdom regularly*.

We cannot do it all, nor ought we to aspire to do exactly what others are doing, just because they say so. We need to be true to ourselves, aware and compassionate to the situations in our own life and be willing to share our gifts and passions with the world in service to love and justice.

We do not have to prove our worth or our concern about what is happening in the world by actions dictated by others.

We choose how we are called to be of use by being honest with ourselves. Pay attention to what brings you alive and then work in concert with others in this and other communities to put your aliveness to use.

How we are of use will evolve and shift. We need our spiritual practices and good friends to remind us to keep in touch with what is calling us into use. The call will change and it will evolve. Allow it to do so.

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We are of use when we show up at the rallies and when we care for our loved ones who are sick. We are of use when we offer warmth and care for those who are on the streets and are tired. We are of use when we see other people for who they are, and loudly and lovingly applaud the work they are doing at this time.

Being of use is not a competition.

My third answer as to how we can be of use is to *Listen and be true to the pace of our souls*.

We are not machines.

People fear that if we are not driven by this relentless dehumanizing pursuit of meaning that we will become careless, self-indulgent, unaware, and unconcerned people, thinking only of ourselves. We are taught to believe that if we do not do more we don't care. We fear that stopping the relentless pursuit will result in us only caring about ourselves.

Those are lies, my friends.

People turn to overindulgence and "not caring" when they are overwhelmed, fearful, or feel powerless. People only *appear* to stop caring. Many are frozen or shut down in response to the barrage of political lies and hate messages combined with the reality of the atrocities and prolific images of violence being perpetrated by fear mongers and media. People also shut down in response to messages of shame coming from those who tell us what we would be doing if we cared.

My friends, this is not working.

What works is allowing people to honor who they are. Encouraging people to use and apply their innate gifts and emerging interests to resist and push back in ways that are sustainable over the long haul and authentic to who they are.

When we see art and song as important acts of resistance, we understand the wholeness of human needs.

When we know that rest is essential and can also be an act of resistance to a system of capitalism and endless productivity—or the "grind culture"—

we are getting somewhere.³

When we stop judging others and start being true to ourselves, we are learning to be responsible for ourselves and curious about others' journeys. When we stop comparing and start collaborating, each of us doing what we can, we are co-creating. How we do or don't respond to what is happening is as important as the need to respond.

So, as we consider how we can be of use, I invite us to remember: 1) *You are of use*. By your very existence you are of use. 2) *Choose wisely and check in with that wisdom regularly*. And 3) *Listen and be true to the pace of your souls*.

Close your eyes my friends and join me:

When was the last time you allowed your body to tell you what it needed?

How can you let your heart show you the way toward useful actions?

Where can you let yourself sink into honest reflection and then brave honest expression of who you are called to be as we work together to save and create the world we believe in?

Do not give up.

You are of use, and we need you.

Amen.

3 Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2022), audio book.