

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Altared Stories
Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, November 27, 2016

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"
328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota 55115
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READINGS

Our first reading is from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, nonfiction writer and short story writer. These words are from a TED talk in 2009.

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another."

Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali (na-call-ee): How they are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power.

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid (Moo-rid) Barghouti (Ba-rooh-tee) writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

Every time I am home I am confronted with the usual sources of irritation for most Nigerians: our failed infrastructure, our failed government, but also by the incredible resilience of people who thrive despite the government, rather than because of it. I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories.

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.

The American writer Alice Walker wrote this about her Southern relatives who had moved to the North. She introduced them to a book about the Southern life that they had left behind. "They sat around, reading the book themselves, listening to me read the book, and a kind of paradise was regained."

When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

The second reading is *Inventing Sin* by George Ella Lyon

God signs to us
we cannot read
She shouts
we take cover
She shrugs
and trains leave
the tracks

Our schedules! we moan
Our loved ones! we moan

God is fed up
All the oceans she gave us
All the fields
All the acres of steep seedful forests
And we did what
Invented the Great Chain
of Being and
the chain saw
Invented sin

God sees us now
gorging ourselves &
starving our neighbors
starving ourselves &
storing our grain
& She says

I've had it
you cast your trash
upon the waters
it's rolling in

you stuck your fine finger
into the mystery of life
to find death

& you did
you learned how to end
the world
in nothing flat

Now you come crying
to your mommy
Send us a miracle
Prove that you exist

Look at your hand, I say
Listen to your sacred heart
Do you have to haul the tide in
sweeten the berries on the vine

I set you down
a miracle among miracles
You want more
It's your turn
You show me

SERMON

From Ellie Wiesel:

When a great Rabbi saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, another Rabbi, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to yet one more Rabbi to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

God created (humans) because (God) loves stories.

Stories shape who we are. How we tell them shapes who we are. Which ones we listen to shape who we are. Which ones we pass on, which ones we don't, which ones we ignore, change, shift, adapt, refuse, resist – shape who we are.

We know this.

Stories are what define who we are – who are our people.

We place stories – narratives – as on an altar – a sacred table of what we hold dear and deem worthy.

Unitarian Minister Ralph Waldo Emerson said,
"A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behoves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

Many of you have been following what has been happening at Standing Rock – at the reservation there – native communities coming together to protect land and water – land they believe doesn't belong to any of us.

Recently, religious leaders from across the country gathered for a time of prayer and witness.

They gathered, close to the camp where many native people have gathered to stop construction of the pipeline, near a bridge.

On the other side of the bridge were law enforcement and military personnel, in protective gear.

The religious leaders, led by elders from 7 different native tribes, walked toward the bridge. There, in a sacred circle, clergy read statements from many traditions, repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery – an ancient papal bull or religious text which allowed explorers in the 15th and 16th centuries to claim land from savage heathens – meaning, among others, the indigenous people of North America.

It provided a religious basis to the mass genocide of native tribes and the conquest of land, which is now the United States. Clergy read their repudiation, their denouncing, of the doctrine, and one by one, handed over the doctrine to tribal leaders, who burned the document in a ritual of confession and witness.

In tragic beauty, ritual power was handed from the oppressor –
white religious people –
to the oppressed –
indigenous people –
in hopes of changing the narrative
confessing the narrative
and moving toward solidarity, honesty, integrity –
to a future more true
and more mindful of the many stories that live and die on this land.

There is a danger that comes
in a single story.

Tom Russell, in a harsh satire about hubris and arrogance –
a critique that is perhaps needed now as much as ever of humanity –
comes in this poem, *self-made man*.

*I gave birth to myself.
I discovered fire so that I could eat
whatever I, alone, produced.
I didn't read your books,
you read mine.
I coined all the phrases.
I invented the wheel
and built all the roads
that wheels carry my money on.*

*I did all this with no help from anyone.
I created the dial tones and cyberspace
and made all the deals.
I forged all my own tools,
and that includes you.*

*Now you want to abuse me
with your regulations and taxations.
Blathering about responsibility
and shared sacrifice.
Suck it up, weasels.
Next you'll be wanting your own bootstraps.*

*I don't care who among you
gets sick or dies.
It pleases me
to see the spite you have for each other.
You are blind and weak.
Even if you could see my curtain
you wouldn't be able to move it
and know that I am there.*

Well – now there's a story.
There's a narrative that time and time again we know humanity
has placed on the altar of ego and domination and conquest.
An individualism so extreme
it is drenched with hubris and arrogance.

We hear that story all the time.
We hear that story in the inevitable greatness of
countries, or philosophies, or ideologies.

We hear that story
of disintegration and an unraveling of the interconnected web of all things – as if our
actions and lives and stories
don't live in relationship to other actions and lives and stories.

There is danger in a single story –
because more often than not, we know that a single story casts the others to the
margin – the single story is those with the power to make it so –
because when the stories of the wider human family are lifted up,
no one story will suffice to hold all the brokenness and beauty held within us all.

And each time a single story is told
as the one, true, only way
without humility and reverence,
without acknowledging diversity and particularity –
each time one story trumps all the others
the sacred story unravels –
the sacred story and the larger fabric of life
becomes tattered and frayed.

Another strand is frayed
 when the story says, “you don’t look right”
 when it says, “you don’t belong here.”
Another strand is frayed
 when the story says, “be like this – be like us – which is not you.”
Another strand is frayed
 when the refugee is turned away,
 when the marginalized is kept at the margin
 when those with power and privilege
 perpetuate the systems which keep them safe
Another strand is frayed
 when we only look to the comfortable, the familiar
 and fail to notice the large, beautiful fabric
 that is all of us – together – woven with particular color and story

The blessing of many stories is that it calls us to be skeptical of any one story that
claims all truth –
it places us in a posture of reverence, and humility,
to the complexity of life, and for centuries,
religious teachings have found ways to keep our stories in check – rituals, traditions,
scriptures, songs –
reflecting on how we fail to be our best selves and how to move toward wholeness
and healing again.

There are old religious words for these things:
Imperfections: sin.
Reflecting on how we fail: confession.
How to move toward wholeness and healing: repentance.

There’s something about the brevity and the weight of the historic religious words
that I love – imperfections doesn’t have the punch that sin does...

But I’ve become more versed in the modern words – with a toddler –
it’s not really conducive in our household to say,
now, honey, let’s talk about your sins today.
Good – now let’s confess and repent.

I more often hear the modern language that children can grasp, as a song often played at our house now:

*We're not perfect – no we're not – but we've got what we've got.
So we do our very best, do our very best, we do our very best each day.
we're not perfect – but we love each other that way.*

There's something powerful in that simplicity, too.
And it's amazing how much I'm learning from the cartoon Daniel Tiger –
the modern cartoon adaptation of Mister Rogers neighborhood -
I didn't realize how bad of a person I was before – I can do better.

But there is a clarity and beauty in that simple language:
We're not perfect – we do our best – we love each other.
That is Universalism in the language of a child.

So, maybe for all of us, we can hold those older religious words
as a point of poetry and wisdom that actually have a lot to say to us:
we can hear that simple song, and we can hear the old song that we'll sing today –
these old words, so piercing in some ways, yet so painfully true of the tendencies of
humanity:

*Cure thy children's warring madness – bend our pride to thy control.
Shame our wanton selfish gladness – rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, and courage, lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.*

I think we can say, with certainty,
that we, as a people – humanity
has a history of warring madness
and selfish gladness – rich in things and poor in soul –
think of Black Friday.

We have missed *the kingdom's goal*
that is – the kingdom of God, of heaven,
spoken of by prophets and sages and poets –
of welcome to the outcast, liberation for the oppressed
freedom to the captive –
I think our pride, as the old hymn suggests
may have gotten in our way – of heaven on earth, or the beloved community -
whether you use sin or confession or repentance –
the meaning stays true:
greed, individualism, narrow vision
has gotten in the way, over and over, of justice and beauty and love.

Our theme this month has been *“Worth-ship – the practice of holding what matters.”* It means holding the largest questions life has to offer – grace and love and forgiveness and beauty and hope and suffering – holding them with openness for what we are yet to learn.

And what we do together on Sunday mornings is worship – we hold the largest questions of life together, because we believe it best not to go it alone. We lean toward a vision of justice and beauty and hope – which is the ancient vision of the Kingdom of God.

Worship need not have a direct object to bow to. It can be an intransitive verb, like *play* – meaning it *can* have a direct object like: *play the flute* – or, it can be a state of being: *playing*, like children do.

One can worship something or someone or someplace, or someone can be in the state of *worship* – leaning in reverence toward something larger than ourselves, a posture of reverence and humility – rapt in wonder and awe at the beauty and mystery of life – toward that which is quite undefined, and beyond all naming.

Annie Dillard, writing about Sunday morning worship, writes, *“It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”*

Sounds like a great new training for our usher teams.

What we do on Sunday morning is an act, a communal experience – where we are set smack dab in the middle of the largest questions life has to offer – we come face to face, heart to heart, soul to soul with justice, compassion, love, life, death, hope, resilience, meaning, purpose, sorrow, joy. You need a crash helmet, sometimes, to be woken up to a world that is filled with the potential of more justice and compassion, and a life preserver to stay afloat in the sea of clarifying truths that can surprise us at any moment.

Asking, *what stories do we worship*, is another way of asking: toward what do we lean in reverence that is larger than ourselves?

Maybe it's God,
in a thousand different understandings of what that means.
Maybe it's the source of life,
from ancient scriptures and modern science.
Maybe it's the natural world,
and our complete dependence upon and integration with it.
Maybe it's the fabric of life,
the interdependent web of life and nature, soul and spirit and soil.

And maybe all those things point to something
that for each of us, is quite similar:
*To what altar do you come,
and what stories are written in it's sacred book?
Toward what do you bow, do you lean toward in reverence,
which is larger than greed and self-interest and ego,
that calls you to your best self and beyond yourself –
what do you bow before in awe and wonder
at the sacred mystery of it all?*

Emerson reminds us – we will worship something, so it might be good to figure out what it is.

What stories, what vision of this world
are we giving our hearts and minds and souls to?
What stories make up the sacred book we place on our altar?

What stories are we ready to repudiate?
What stories
of empire, of commercialism, of capitalism,
of conquest in the simplest forms
of placing our narratives on other people –
what stories are we ready to hand over
to let go of and let sacred embers burn away?

It begins small.
It begins by the stories we tell ourselves.
Of who we are – of who we aspire to be.

It begins by what stories we tell each other,
tell our children
about what it means to be human – to be kind – to be compassionate –
how we hold difference and be mindful of how our lives
impact the lives of others.

It starts, as so often it does,
when the table is set. The candles lit.
The stories told, the prayer offered, the food shared.

At the table, set with tablecloth like altar-cloth,
set with grace and compassion, we remember -
ours is to lean in reverence toward one another
toward the larger fabric that holds us together
to the moments that break open our heart
which for some, is the dwelling place of God.

It starts when we spread the welcome at our table wide -
wide enough to hold all the stories within us
to hold all the brokenness and beauty within us -
certainly one story is not enough for a feast of love.

It is a table so that those on the margins,
the outcast, the stranger, the unwelcome and oppressed,
find a place at the table.

Here, at the table,
we hold what matters: love. justice. beauty. grace. resilience.
Here, we bless our work:
do justice, love mercy, walk humbly.
Here, at the feast,
many traditions are celebrated
many scriptures are read
many names give us glimpses of glory in our midst.

At the table we remember good teachers who said,
there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the ground
in God's house there are many rooms

At the table, we find our place.
We become nourishment for each other.
We confess to each other how we have failed.
We encourage each other in the longings of our hearts.

And thread by thread,
we weave the fabric back together
until every table is an altar
and every meal shared is a sacrament
and every story told is one more stitch
toward something that can hold us all.

May it be so, and Amen.