

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Home Economics

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday 6 May 2018

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651.426.2369 vsafford@wbuuc.org

FIRST READING from Joseph Millar*Red Wing*

Here's where they make the good work shoes
 in the long brick buildings beside the road.
 Shoes whose stitched, crepe-wedge soles
 and full-grain, oil-resistant leathers
 bless tiny bones in the ankles and feet, shoes
 of carpenters balanced on roof beams,
 electricians, farmers, iron workers, welders -
 cuffs frayed with sparks from the torch.
 At shift's end the socks emerge tinged
 pale orange, tops of the arches crisscrossed
 with lace marks, propped up in front
 of the six o'clock news. Here's to the sweet
 breath of pond mist filling the lungs of summer.
 Here's to baked beans and twelve hours off.
 Here's to dust from the trucker's shoe, dust
 he stepped into three states back.
 Here's to shingles, aluminum flashing,
 wall studs, rafters, ten-penny nails,
 here's to tomatoes, onions and corn,
 here's to squatting down and here's to reaching over,
 here's to the ones who showed up.

SECOND READING from the Rev. Dr. James Cone, author of *Black Theology and Black Power*. He died this past week.

There can be no reconciliation with God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given to the poor. The justified person is at once the sanctified person, one who knows that his or her freedom is inseparable from the liberation of the weak and the helpless.

THIRD READING from Elizabeth Alexander

Praise Song for the Day

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking...

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin...

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance...

praise song for walking forward in that light.

Home Economics

Bless the good, leather, steel-toed, Red Wing work shoes,

and bless the tiny bones of the ankles and feet inside.

Bless carpenters electricians, farmers, iron workers, welders

Here's to dust from the trucker's shoe, dust

he stepped into three states back.

Here's to shingles, aluminum flashing,

wall studs, rafters, ten-penny nails.

Here's to tomatoes, onions and corn...

Here's to baked beans and twelve hours off...

Here's to the ones who showed up.

I think of these images, these glimpses, these people who show up for their shift, for the job, for the money, and who show up also for a kind of love, a kind of dignity and decency and pride – as so many of you do, or did when you were working, or as you long to, if only you could find a job. I think of these images of working, ordinary people, and on this Sunday close to May Day, I think of the history of labor in Minnesota, a history that some of you, or your parents or your grandparents have been part of, both now in your workplace, or in the early days, a hundred years ago and more, of the Farmer-Labor Party, and the Worker's Alliance, the IWW and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, up on the Iron Range, women and men insisting that labor isn't cheap and human life is not disposable. At a memorial some years ago for a woman who'd grown up somewhere between Tower and Virginia, I learned about the People's Church, the Mesabi Church, a small Unitarian church started in the 19th century by free-thinking socialist Finns, and how in addition to providing night school and music lessons and art classes and history and philosophy discussions and free meals and no judgement to very poor people in a remote place where none of those things was abundant, that little church on the range was also a refuge for miners and their families who risked their lives to start a union in the basement, because workers were dying of illness and injury and hunger, and they were considered expendable by the big iron ore companies. These were intelligent, hard-working, radical people who built their church by hand and filled it with sermons and hymns and politics all in the language of their native Finland - and yet they would have recognized as kindred someone like James Cone, the theologian of African American liberation who died last week, who said,

There can be no reconciliation with God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given to the poor. The justified person is at once the sanctified person, one who knows that his or her freedom is inseparable from the liberation of the weak and the helpless.

Is that politics or is that religion? Where exactly is the line? I've never been able to trace it.

Roque Dalton, poet of El Salvador, wrote

I believe the world is beautiful

And that my veins don't end in me

but in the unanimous blood

*of those who struggle for life,
love,
little things
landscape and bread
the poetry of everyone.*

That confidence in the beautiful world, that covenant with everyone in it, the unanimous blood, expresses exactly the universalism that defines both my faith and my commitment, my covenant, as a citizen, of America, of earth.

I believe the world is beautiful, and that every person is born into it, out of mystery, with equivalent stature, and born with the same name, every one of us, and that name is *child of God*, a name that we can never shake, that never can be taken from us, nor obliterated or forgotten, despite what names our parents give us – joyful, hopeful names – or the names we claim ourselves as we grow, or whatever names –
 terrible, cruel, deadly labels, typecasts, statistical categories, demonizing slogans,
 slanders, slurs, profiles –
 whatever names we slap down on each other.

I believe the blood in our veins is unanimous, like the rain from which it derives, and we all bear a common name and that name is Beloved. That name is Worthy.

The inward light which burns within each soul is a living ember of Divinity, the starlight and the larger Love transcending all our understanding - and thus, when millions and millions of beautiful, shining souls are thrown away, discarded, disregarded, trampled, scorned, wasted in poverty or prison and forgotten, then every other spirit is diminished, the sacred fabric is frayed. Our work in the world therefore, say the Jews, is *tikuun olam* – the continuous work of repair.

Is this religion or politics or both? I've never known.

Long ago, someone said, famously, “While there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.” That was Eugene Debs, labor organizer at the turn of the last century, socialist, activist. He ran for President five times and twice won more than 6% of the popular vote, back when the popular vote was ... popular. He spent a lot of time in Minnesota and North Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, the great populist prairie. Reading his words many years later, the writer Kurt Vonnegut said he had never known a more cogent exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount (Vonnegut- who was by no means a theologian, but who *was* a Unitarian). This is the spirituality of solidarity.

Cornel West, who *is* a theologian, writes of the iron cage – the iron cage of poverty, within which currently more than 40 million Americans are held; the iron cage of prison, within which a million and a half Americans are held (most of them non-white, and this does not include the

almost 50,000 immigrants, many of them babies and children, held now in detention). West writes of the iron cage of poverty, the iron cage of prison, and the golden cage of privilege, the bars of which are invisible to those held inside, but just as strong as iron. However desperately, even involuntarily, I may squint my eyes to pretend the bars of that golden cage do not exist, that they do not surround me and protect me, I know that they are there, and the integrity of any work for justice I believe I'm called to – the integrity of all my work and really, all my life - depends on my willingness in every moment to name and own the implications of my lifelong privilege, to reach beyond the bars. We're all born with the same name and with equal stature within everything that's holy, but we do not arrive nor do we dwell on level ground. Until, unless, I do my first work first, and do it constantly, that golden cage is going to constrict all my best intentions and make false all my righteous words, and it will (conveniently) limit the risk that true justice work requires. My faith calls me, like it or not, to look with open eyes on every kind of prison bar – because the golden cage of white privilege and class privilege depends upon, requires, and it reinforces all the other prisons where so many other people dwell.

Often we say here that we are called to *beloved community*. It is not a destination, nor some utopian ideal, but is instead a way of being – spiritually, politically, economically- a way of seeing, and being, in relation. Dorothy Day spoke years ago about its opposite when she named what she called “this filthy, rotten system,” which is another way of being; she was talking about poverty, racism, war, how everything is intertwined, and were she alive today she'd be talking about profiling, policing, sentencing, the militarization of the street and the border and the heart. She'd be talking about the minimum wage, and corporate greed, and health care and people who die for the lack of it. The beloved community is set of goals toward which we're travelling and it is the way we travel; it is a daily practice, a spiritual politics that requires radical solidarity, radical nonviolence, radical interrogation among ourselves in this brave space of every assumption, and it requires radical love.

When I was growing up, my father was a teacher, which was unusual for men at that time. He was so proud of teaching English to 8th graders in a public school. My mother worked through most of my childhood as a clerk in a department store. I know now that they didn't make much money, but at mid-century, in mid-life, they were in the middle of the middle class. It was not always so. My father went to college on the GI Bill, and before that, before the war, he'd grown up in the Depression, in a kind of deadly poverty he preferred not to talk about. He and his two sisters saw and survived truly terrible things. As a teacher, he was always active in the teachers' union. I remember they were on strike at least twice when I was growing up, and one of those times, in the 1970's, did not involve a local contract issue: the teachers in New York walked out in solidarity with the United Farm Workers in California. It had nothing to do with him or his school, except for the “unanimous blood.” Looking back, I think he felt a sense of solidarity with the despair of his childhood, a lifelong kinship with every economic underdog – and I took that all in. I say all this – but I also have to say that when I first met Ross and brought him home to meet my parents, my father was unkind, and did a terrible thing. Ross was in culinary school then, and my father asked him right out loud, “Do you think you'll always have to work with your hands?” This happened several times over several years, this despite my father's deep devotion to labor and worker's rights and civil rights. His own history of poverty was a source of sickening shame, and it made him more than a little crazy. I think in that way my father was like a microcosm of our whole country, even now. We don't speak easily of class or the crushing

reality of really big money, on our values and our spirit, on our land, and so we're all a little crazy, as the most recent presidential election bore out.

When I was 15 I had my first job working as a cashier in the A&P supermarket where I was proud to join the union and carry the card of the Amalgamated Butchers and Meat Cutters of America which bound me by my dues and by my pledge not only to the actual butchers in the back room with their bloody aprons and their cigars dripping ashes in the hamburger, but also to the long history of the labor movement, which is a proud history, from the origins of May Day in Chicago to the origins of Occupy Wall Street, to the miners on the Iron Range and now, this year, to the revival of the Poor People's Campaign. This is the noble history of the people who brought us the weekend, the end to child labor, and the dignified beauty of an eight-hour day.

We've drifted far afield: American workers put in more hours than anyone in Europe, and our unions are diminished in numbers, in reputation and in clout, but always and everywhere there rises new resistance.

The Poor People's Campaign, a national call to moral revival, began in North Carolina based on the vision of Martin Luther King in 1968 to build collaborations of people, black and white, concerned with civil rights, systemic poverty, and militarization – both the war in Vietnam and other covert efforts all around the world. It was a radical risk, and King was killed before this vision could go deep, but that seed is germinating now. The New Poor People's Campaign has chapters now in 41 states, including Minnesota, and beginning on May 14, the Monday after Mother's Day, there will be demonstrations and civil disobedience in all those state capitols, including St. Paul, around those same interconnected issues – race, poverty, war, and also environmental degradation. This “moral revival” - is it religion, or is it politics?

Yes.

Years ago, in 1980, Ronald Reagan posed a question with echoing repercussions, a question that propelled him twice into the White House. There was just one Presidential debate in that election year, between Reagan and incumbent Jimmy Carter. On stage, Reagan turned from Carter toward the camera, and asked the whole country, “**Are you better off now than you were four years ago?**” It was a fair question – the economy was weak; foreign policy distressing; Carter was a good man but not a good President - it was a fair question, but a small-minded and hard-hearted question, sapping the national conversation about the common good and common ground of all its moral energy, to focus us only on fear and self-interest. That question shrank, then and there, our moral imagination, and we have not yet recovered. It worked, just as similar small-mindedness, similar hard-heartedness, worked, in 2016. In 1984, Reagan asked it again, with wars waging hotter than ever, people dying of AIDS, with some wages rising but poverty exploding. Economists agreed, that for those who tend *always* to be better off, the wealthy, the white, there was one way to answer that question. And for those who tend *always not* to be better off, an ever-growing number, there was another way. And that's still true. How wide is our circle of concern? What does “common good” or “common ground” even mean to us as a people? What story, what narrative, do we hope to dwell in, and teach to children?

One historian says that the history of May Day in America is both a green story and a red story. The green story goes back thousands of years to the Celtic rite of Beltane in the greening spring, a festival of fertility and frolic and abundance and profligate gratitude. From Beltane came the May Pole and the May Queen and flowers left on door steps, and traces of it echo in the May Day we know now as International Worker's Day, in the unequivocal arithmetic of the IWW, the International Workers of the World. In the late 19th century they made a radical demand to cut the average work day just about in half, from 16 hours down to eight a day, and eight hours of rest, and eight hours of what they called "play." This is what they meant by "bread and roses."

The red story of right livelihood continues the green story of glad living, the red story so-named because there was a time, in the late 19th and very early 20th century, when you could be an out-loud Socialist in America and even a Communist (when that ideal was still an ideal and had not been overtaken by brutality). International Workers Day on May 1st was first celebrated to honor American workers hanged in Chicago in 1887 for a riot they may not have started. There were huge demonstrations there, and elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of workers marching in cities and small towns. Populist, progressive, in some places the movement was interracial in a time when nothing else was, welcoming women leaders in a time when nowhere else did. Business bosses and veterans groups become alarmed enough to press Congress to establish an official "Labor Day" way off in September and to rename the first of May "Americanization Day," and later "Loyalty Day," (essentially anti-immigration day) while elsewhere in the world (everywhere in the world) May Day still remembers American workers who died in common cause with workers internationally – ordinary people doing ordinary jobs and standing up for one another's interests, not only for their own. It does sound now like a suspiciously un-American idea – but it is not.

Our theme this month is gratitude – the practice of reckoning. The grateful heart is the generous heart, the open heart which knows no fear because it trusts that we are all in this together, that the rising tide will raise all boats or none, that our blood is unanimous. The grateful heart is the generous heart, and its reckoning is not a miserly tally of money in the bank, not measuring the stuff you have against the stuff you want, the stuff that other people have, and always coming up a little short and wanting more. Our moral reckoning, as a people, as a country, is a more intimate and comprehensive economics. *There can be no reconciliation with God - or anybody else - unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given to the poor,* said the Rev. Dr. James Cone – and Eugene Debs and Dorothy Day, and Jesus, and so many others. *The justified person is at once the sanctified person, one who knows that his or her freedom is inseparable from the liberation of the weak and the helpless.*

Each day we go about our business, says the poet

*walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking...*

*Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.*

*Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.*

*A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin...*

*Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,*

*picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.*

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.

*Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?*

*Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,*

praise song for walking forward in that light.