

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

When Necessary, Use Words

The Reverend Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, October 11th, 2015

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

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The Thread by Denise Levertov

Something is very gently,
invisibly, silently,
pulling at me—a thread
or net of threads
finer than cobweb and as
elastic. I haven't tried
the strength of it. No barbed hook
pierced and tore me. Was it
not long ago this thread
began to draw me? Or
way back? Was I
born with its knot about my
neck, a bridle? Not fear
but a stirring
of wonder makes me
catch my breath when I feel
the tug of it when I thought
it had loosened itself and gone.

A reading from the Hebrew Bible, the book of 1st Kings

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before God, but God was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

A reading attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.

SERMON

When I was a young boy, after noticing my grandmother's constant seemingly unnecessary hospitality and generosity, as well as beginning to categorize people into why they do what they do, I asked my Dad,

“So, do you think Grandma is so nice because that's just the way she is, or is it because she's trying to get into heaven?”

My Dad quizzically grinned a bit, but wanted to honor my earnest question. “I'm pretty sure that's just the way she is.”

You see, I had begun to figure out that Grandma and Grandpa were, and my father in a distant past – Methodists. From what I knew, Methodists were about works – not like the pure and good theology of grace in my Lutheran mind. And, fate would have it that I would end up marrying a Methodist – but who knows – maybe she was just marrying me to be nice and to get into heaven.

Beyond the goofy categories I was placing upon my family, and myself, I was noticing something. Grandma wasn't much into talking about religion – she didn't share much about her particular beliefs about God or Jesus, about church or an afterlife – at least not specifically. But she always, like many people, lived her values authentically. She believed people were sacred children of God – and she honored them by acts of service and generosity, by opening her house with hospitality and welcome.

Her living was a testimony to the values she held – values of determination to find joy in life and to appreciate the simple things in life – values of hospitality and gratitude – values of service.

I remember a Christmas when my grandparents had their lit-up angel choir on the front steps, and one day – the heads were gone. Nothing says Christmas like a headless choir. A neighbor boy found them, brought them back, she gave him some money out of thanks and he turned around and brought her flowers – a cycle of generosity and giving.

And Grandpa, the good plumber – bolted the heads back on and chained the choir to the steps. That's a value of determination to life joyfully.

She embodied the old John Wesley phrase, that the local Methodist minister here in White Bear Lake calls the “Methodist Can-Can” – *do all the good you can, for all the people you can, in all the places you can, as long as ever you can.*

That's how my Grandma lived.

In the last year, after Grandma passing a few years ago, my Grandpa has moved out of their house of 65 years – a transition that many of you know is difficult, like losing part of your own body, or soul. I wrote this poem for the house, reflecting on my own memories, but more so, reflecting on what places and memories tell the story of our people – the values infused in the stories of living. These are the words I wrote for my Grandpa:

*In every board and nail,
every thread and fiber;
through every threshold and
infused in every brick of foundation,
are the words of this house.*

*Oh, these walls can talk.
They tell the stories of years;
of Christmas Dinners and Birthday cake,
of working hands, belly laughs
and grateful hearts.
It was in this house that
the generations met
and dined together
cried together
lived together.*

*It was in this house that
the couple became parents
and boys became men
and dreams of home, of work, of wonder,
came true from time to time.*

*It was in this house where
roofs turned into ski slopes
and bedrooms into swimming pools;
oh yes, mistakes were made here, too.*

*This was the house that would
meet every season
with festivity and feasting,
and would meet every guest
with hospitality and welcome,
and would meet every meal,*

*and the common day,
with gratitude and grace.*

*This house has been a shelter in the storm,
when the heavy rains came
and the cold winds blew,
and the harsh moments of life
rocked us all back on our heels.*

*And in this house,
we got up again to face the day.
Oh, yes, these walls sure can talk.
About death and loss.
About new life and hope.
About parents, grandparents, great grandparents,
about children, grandchildren, great grandchildren.*

*About the ordinary miracles
of engine and wheels,
and the soaring dreams that fly.
About the daily chores like prayers,
folding laundry and raising children
and making the house shine like the sun.
About tables spread with
bounty enough, love enough,
to feed the world a thousand times.*

*Beyond the stone, the brick,
the cement, the wood,
beyond the paint and fixtures,
there are the words of this house.*

*Those words are eternal.
Like the angels and saints that have filled this house every day – with no wings, no halo –
just big hearts and common work.
And every cup of coffee shared with friends,
and every meal shared with family,
and every prayer for the days to come,
have been blessing upon blessing upon blessing.*

Letting our life speak is about infusing each day with the values we hold – it creates an essence, it envelopes the space we inhabit, and casts a sacred fabric around how we do what we do, whatever it is – not just our way of doing, or our job, or one’s paid work or official role, but our way of being in whatever we do, the many identities we inhabit:

How wide we open our door in welcome,
How we balance our own wisdom with humility to learn more,
How we do whatever it is we do on any given day,
In the board room or the garage,
In the classroom or the kitchen,
In the laundry we fold, or the canvas we paint,
The hands we hold or the dirt we move,
Letting our life speak is beyond the words we use to describe what we do –
It is the very way we hold open our heart
To the moment we are in.

The words attributed to St. Francis – preach the gospel; when necessary, use words – are about the content of our living. This phrase may not have been shared by St. Francis specifically, but the actual phrase that inspired it that we know Francis wrote was, “All the brothers should preach by their deeds.” Religion, for St. Francis and others across religious traditions like him, is about how we love God, love this world, and love our neighbor.

It is about the way we embody our values in the world – the way that the religious life is not primarily about doctrine or explications of our theology – although those can be important; it is about how those doctrines or creeds or theologies and beliefs about life and death, about ethics and God – take root in the real, everyday world.

How do our beliefs take on flesh, become infused in our living and actions.
how do our beliefs
about inherent worth and dignity,
universal salvation and heaven on earth,
justice and equity and compassion,
take root in our own hearts
and become expressed through how we live each day?

How does the message of our religion, personal and collective,
go beyond words and ideas and the intellect,
to provide bread for the hungry,
to sit in silent vigil with the dying and grieving,
to open the door to the stranger,

and to work for release of the captive.

How does our religion, our beliefs,
personal as they may be,
break out into the communal dimension,
where it is less important to explain every little thing we think
but more importantly
to share every little compassionate act we can.

There is a story of a person who fell down into a deep hole.
It was far too deep to climb out.
a rich person walked by and threw down some money.
a priest walked by and threw down a prayer.
a Unitarian walked by and threw down an Emerson excerpt about self-reliance.
Finally, a good friend walked by, and jumped in, too.
The one who fell said, “What are you doing? Now we’re both stuck!”
And the friend said – “No, I’ve been down here before – and I know the way out.”

To let your life speak is about putting flesh on the words we profess. It is about following our passion and purpose; not about believing that there is a “purpose out there for us to find” for our lives of how to be of service to the world, but about living life purposefully – with intention, mindfulness, about our impact and our ability to impact the world around us through our actions, our inactions.

To let your life speak is to lean into the idea of vocation – or calling for your life – to listen to the calling of your own heart for how to live life in a way that expresses your values and deepest hopes for this world. The old phrase was “let your life preach” – that each of us is proclaiming the world for which we hope through how we live our lives each day.

Vocation, then, is not about figuring out what some faraway or outside entity has planned for your life – but rather looking deeper within yourself, and finding affirmation from the community of peers or colleagues or trusted friends, and finding and following a life that resonates with the deepest core of who you are, with the best gifts you have to offer and the deepest wounds which have helped you grow. It is about finding and following the thread, weaving through your heart and soul, that gives you joy and serves this world.

William Stafford writes,

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

What thread are you holding onto, or have you let go of without knowing it? What threads are you holding onto that infuse what you do each day, how you do it, what you give your heart and life to?

Ours is a tradition that is not anti-creed, but rather, at our best, our creeds of belief – which are varied and wide ranging and not uniform, even if they have very similar values and principles, our creeds are about how our beliefs find embodiment in our lives – how our beliefs guide our hearts, and thus our living in the world. The word creed comes from the Latin *cordo*, which is the same root as the word *heart* – a creed is that to which you give your heart.

What is the creed by which you live?

Like the thread that weaves through our lives, our calling, our purpose, our vocation, is a thread weaving through our work, our family life, our many roles and many ways of being in this world – it is beyond our resume or a test or a summary of credentials or accomplishments – it is that which jumps off the page, beyond our words, and sets our hearts and minds and bodies to the creation of beauty in this world, to the demanding of justice, to the simple, everyday moments where we find our deepest sense of meaning and relationship and joy in this world.

Gregg Levoy, author of *Authentic Living*, writes about the sense of call in one's life that guides how we live. He writes,

In many traditions, calls – in the form of sounds – precede prayer, rites of initiation, spiritual healings, and major life events. The purpose of calls is to summon adherents away from their daily grinds to a new level of awareness, into a sacred frame of mind, into communion with that which is bigger than themselves.

Calls, of course, beg the question "who, or what, is calling?" But in an attempt to answer this question, even an exhaustive list of every name for Soul or Destiny or God would be beside the

point. It simply doesn't matter whether we call it God, the Patterning Intelligence, the Design Mind, the Unconscious, the Soul, the Force of Completion, the Center Court, or simply "life's longing for itself," ...whatever or whoever is addressing us is a power like wind or fusion or faith: We can't see the force, but we can see what it does. Primarily this force announces the need for change, and the response for which it calls is an awakening of some kind.

A call is only a monologue. A return call, a response, creates a dialogue. Our own unfolding requires that we be in constant dialogue with whatever is calling us...Saying yes to the calls tends to place you on a path that half of yourself thinks doesn't make a bit of sense, but the other half knows your life won't make sense without it.

What would your life not make sense without – or what is missing in your life that is calling from within, or beyond you?

Beyond the cacophony of words and the frenetic-ness of a noisy world, there is, as the Hebrew scriptures remind us, depth and power in silence beyond words – *God was not in the great wind, or the storm – but in the sound of sheer silence.*

I invite you into a time of shared silence, begun and ended with the singing bowl, and offer just a few brief moments in the midst of the cacophony of our world, with these questions:

What is calling from within you that you can't imagine your life without?

How do you balance the realities of everyday life with the calling of your heart?

For a time, we'll be silent together.

Something is pulling at us – a stirring of wonder;
There's a thread you follow.
There's a life that flows in endless song.

And through it all – there is a longing for our lives to be authentic and full, deep and rich within the simple moments of the common day.

And to that thread, and to where it calls us, may we move beyond ourselves to ask the spirit of life, or God, our own inner calling or the sacred circle of those who surround or support us, to guide our feet – to hold our hand – to search our heart – so that our living might not be in vain.

These words come from Martha Postlewaite,

Do not try to save the whole world
or do anything grandiose.
Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life
and wait there, patiently,
until the song that is your life
falls into your own cupped hands
and you recognize and greet it.
Only then will you know
how to give yourself to this world
so worth of rescue.

Don't let go of the thread.

Preach your gospel – when necessary, use words.

Amen.