

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

It Starts When You Say “We”

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

“Grow Your Soul & Serve the World”

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READINGS

From Thomas Merton

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . . .

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which [Godself] became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.

And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

***The Low Road* by Marge Piercy**

What can they do to you?
Whatever they want.
They can set you up,
they can bust you,
they can break your fingers,
they can burn your brain
with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember,
they can take your child,
wall up your lover.
They can do anything you can't stop
them from doing.
How can you stop them?
Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back
can cut through a mob,
a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon,
an army can meet an army.

Two people
can keep each other sane,

can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.

Three people are a delegation, a
committee, a wedge.

With four you can play bridge and
start an organization.
With six you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no seconds,
and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your
own newsletter;
ten thousand, power
and your own paper;
a hundred thousand,
your own media; ten million, your
own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care to act,
it starts when you do it again and they
said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean,
and each day
you mean one more.

SERMON

Martha grabbed her shovel,
the story goes
in her 1800s dress,
this strong prairie woman.

She walked right down to the dam,
armed with her shovel
and wagons-full of love and determination
and righteous indignation
as fever had overwhelmed her people.

If you want to be somebody
the government said
If you want to be a place of worth, a place of note
the officials said
If you want to matter
the society said

Then build a dam
drown your valley
and let the canal boats come and go.
Put yourself on the map.

And so that's what they did.
They built the dam
filled their valley
to claim their place
in the growing and bursting expansion of a young country.

And so the water filled the valley
and the drinking water was effected
and the people began to grow sick.

Because greed and profitability
was placed before community
and the water was poisoned
which couldn't happen anymore, could it...

And Martha had had quite about enough of it.

So she went down to the dam.
With a hoe and a shovel.

And soon she wasn't alone
along came Elizabeth, Sara, Rose, Eva, Clara, Ruth
and eventually,
the men,
sometimes a little late to the creating of change,
but came around -
Calvin, Eli, Scott, Timothy, David, Paul

And together,
before the sun came up
they tore down the cursed wall

and let the valley drain
so that their wells would be clear again
to find the sacred, healthy water of earth.

Not a single soul, jury, or judge
could think to fine or jail them.

And so the story ends by proclaiming
When it's time to say enough,
and to set things right -
and the whole world is waist-deep in trouble;
never doubt or question the power of love
and one woman with a shovel.

This story is from a song by Carrie Newcomer based on a true short story by Scott Russell Sanders.

*When it's time to say enough
and to set things right
and the whole world is waist-deep in trouble.*

It's reminiscent of
*and it's gone on far too long
and we won't be silent anymore.*

Martha,
with her shovel
was doing a most religious and sacred ritual
what religion, at it's best, calls us to do:

pay attention. notice. read the signs. stay woke.
listen to the voices of the suffering.

Ground yourself in who you are and who you are called to be.

Step out in compassionate and courageous action
to do something tangible, timely, and humble
for the betterment of your people
letting the circle widen from the self to community..

1 – Pay Attention. 2 – Ground yourself. 3 – Act in solidarity.

It's like a phrase my mother said,
which she heard from her dad, a Lutheran Pastor –
when you pray – move your feet.

Lest our spiritual practice become self-serving and self-centered
which is to miss the point entirely –
prayer is meant to expand the heart beyond ourselves.

Rev. Dr. William Barber II, leader of the moral Monday movement and the
movement for a moral revival of a social justice centered interfaith religious voice,
spoke in Minneapolis this past week.

Speaking of prophets and prophecy,
a good word for Unitarian Universalists to engage and explore,
he said of the Hebrew prophets:

*"The prophets combine
powerful dissent
painful rebuke
and unwavering hope
in the hard business of truth-telling."*

Rev. Barber reminded us of harsh realities close to home.

That racial disparities in Minneapolis
between those classified as "white"
and those classified as "black"
are greater than in Birmingham, Alabama.

And it is a complex history, an often hidden reality here in the north -
around being northerners,
not having plantations or cotton farms,
that the narrative of what racism looked like in America
was somewhere else – somewhere further south – not here.

And both the statistics
and the sacred lived stories of communities and individuals
remind us that we can't pretend race doesn't matter.

That we can't pretend we're all the same
and we can all get along
and that colorblindness is a virtue.

Because that's not the world we live in.

The world we live in
means that I can walk into the Cub Foods in East St. Paul
at 11:30 at night
to buy bread or milk or whatever.

And I can walk out of the store
without a bag, holding my items in my hand,
throw my receipt in the bin
without a second thought.

And then I hear a seminary classmate
speaking about shopping in the same place
at the same time,
they know that the manager has kept an eye on them
as they walked around the store
they know they *have* to keep their receipt to prove their purchase
if they are questioned on the way out
they know they *have* to use a store-specific grocery bag
to make it clear they got that bag from this store
and already paid for their products.

And still,
they have been questioned. Or followed.
And if not this time, then maybe next time,
because it has happened before
and will happen again.

Because their skin doesn't look like mine.

Or it's like
listening to a friend or a family member
speak about being whistled at
or told their pretty
by a stranger
or a not-so-presidential nominee
or a colleague
at a bar, a busstop, at work,
or everyday on TV,
and as they tell the story,
most of the women around them
nod their head in annoyed agreement
because it's happened to them, too.

Because they express their gender differently than me.

Or it's like
hearing from a colleague in justice work
that they are asked regularly
where are you from
because it's assumed not here...
Or more severe
stop taking our jobs
go back home
we're building a wall

Because they don't look as Scandinavian as I do.

It begins when we say "we."

It begins when we listen, and notice,
that all people are shining like the sun
brilliantly filled with light and love and sacred worth -
and we wake up from the illusion of our separateness
and notice more deeply - something is terribly wrong
the whole world is waist-deep in trouble
and we can't be silent anymore.

It begins when we say "we."
And know who we mean
and each day, we mean one more.

What do we mean when we say "we"
a longtime member of our social action team often asks.

What do we mean by that?
Because it's good to say we,
but as the poet reminds us,
it is important to know who we are talking about.
And noticing and honoring and appreciating our diversity
and recognizing and attending to the different ways
we live and breath and have our being
in this world –
the different stories we hold within us
the different ways the world views us
the different realities that frame our life.

Ours is a religion
that seeks to be a home for *All Souls*.
Ours is a tradition of the open canon
meaning that wisdom and truth come from many sources –
that scripture takes many forms,
from ancient texts to modern poetry to social science and the arts
as well as spoken story of life experience – or in another word, *testimony*.

If we are to say “we” and each day mean one more,
that means expanding our hearts –
and our minds and souls while we're at it -
to something deeper and broader
than a lowest common denominator religion.

It means drawing the circle wide
and wider still
not to pretend we're all the same
but knowing that the wider we can draw our heart
the more stories we will hear and notice and honor
from those on the edges
the margins
just outside the circles of power
of agency
of voice.

It calls us into deeper community and deeper reflection
out of the temple of individualism
into the open canon of wider wisdom and learning
and to put particular focus, emphasis, and our best listening
to those who the wider culture ignores, discounts, disrespects –

being inclusive,
in a liberal religious tradition
is not saying “all stories are equal”
or that we listen equally to every perspective -
it is saying – I will open my heart to the imperative to listening to those
whose stories and identities get trampled everyday.

Justice asks us to tip the balance of the everyday world
the other way – lifting up the stories often not heard, often disregarded.
Because it is not an even playing field.

In our faith, if you think about it,
you can’t believe anything you want.
Same with justice work.
Not every story, every narrative,
is sacred scripture to be heard with reverence.

Because our beliefs,
and our discernment of story,
is filtered through values
of human dignity
of compassion
of not equality of all things –
which minimizes their impact –
but equity of things –
which lifts up the voices and stories of the unheard.

Stretching the heart to listen to the stories on the margins
can be hard work.

Anyone with a type of back pain that tightens up from time to time
will tell you keep stretching – it might hurt, but it’s good for you.

That is like stretching the heart –
entering this work might hurt sometimes, but it’s good for you
particularly good for those with the rigidity of privilege -
always striving to listen more, to be more mindful
and at times it means acknowledging our failures and faults –

it means entering sometimes straining and painful conversations
but we know, from experience

that's it's good
to keep stretching
to keep moving
to keep from tightening up again in rigidity
that makes us fearful of every step that might cause us pain
keep that mantra:
ouch
this is good for me
ouch
this is good for me
ouch
it's getting better.

The more we stretch the heart
which can often come with growing and loosening pain
and seem to take forever
the more we are able
to breathe and live and move
more freely, more openly, with less fear and more grace.

Is our "we" large enough, nuanced enough, mindful enough,
to realize that we have differences, often vast,
and we are humble enough to hold our own story
as part of the larger canon of many stories
that create our fabric?

Is our "we" large enough
that jokes about sexual assault is not offensive
simply because we have family members who are women,
but because it is morally irreprehensible in every way.

Is our "we" large enough
to hear coded language by a dominant culture
that says *tough on crime*, practices *law and order*
speaks of *entitlement reform* and *taxes*
as if that is not code for prejudice fear and oppression.

Is our "we" large enough
to know and name white privilege and white supremacy
without being quick to personal defensiveness
and without sinking down to the lowest forms
of what it means to be human
and speaking of security and safety

as if those who speak their stories of oppression
are not our kindred.

Is our “we” large enough
to name our entitlement
that influences our attitudes toward
different theologies and religious expressions?

Is our “we” large enough
to name our own prejudice and insensitivity
toward those with different abilities,
toward those with mental illness,
toward those with addiction,
and act as if those are not important for how we treat
and know and act toward each other.

Is our “we” large enough
to grab our shovel
and do our small part
to the building of heaven on earth?

The stories that are told
are often stories of empire – of conquest crushing the stories of the marginalized –
often doing so in covert ways.

We're all the same.
Race doesn't matter.
Gender doesn't matter.
Class doesn't matter.

Any attempt to minimize our identities, is a strategy of empire.

And the constant struggle, the constant question, that is not easily answered but a
necessary mantra to ask ourselves,
that was asked to a group of clergy not too long ago,
with a scathing question like the prophet Amos:

Are you chaplains for the empire, or prophets of the resistance?

Like often, I think my aspiration is not where I currently am.
But that is my spiritual work, our collective work –
to ask what world are we helping create,
what stories are we living into and telling,
who are our people,
and is it large enough to keep moving outward
in ever expanding circles.

Rilke said, *I live my life in widening circles that reach out across the world. I may not complete this last one but I give myself to it.*

Am I ready to give myself to it –
to the widening of my heart
toward all that is yet to be learned
toward the stories I have yet to hear
toward the world that is yet to be.

Arundhti Roy says it this way:

*Our strategy should be not only to confront empire,
but to lay siege to it.
To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it.
With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness,
our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness –
and our ability to tell our own stories.
Stories that are different from the ones
we're being brainwashed to believe.
The corporate revolution will collapse
if we refuse to buy what they are selling –
their ideas, their version of history,
their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability.
Remember this: We be many and they be few.
They need us more than we need them.
Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.*

Is our “we” large enough
to break us out of our individual silos
to realize that our well-being is dependent
on the well-being of the whole
and that sometimes it is important for us to name
our own complicity – our own participation in
the structures of oppression – and *confess*
somebody’s hurting my sibling,
our children,
our families,
and it’s gone on – far too long
yes it’s gone on – far too long
I tell you it’s gone on – far too long.

And we won’t, we can’t, be silent anymore.

Amen.