

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Saved by Love

*Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer and Rev. Victoria Safford*

Sunday 15 January 2017

---

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH  
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115  
651.426.2369 [vsafford@wbuuc.org](mailto:vsafford@wbuuc.org)

## **FIRST READING**

*the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from his sermon, "A Knock at the Door," 1963*

And those who have gone to the church to seek the bread of economic justice have been left in the frustrating midnight of economic privation. In many instances the church has so aligned itself with the privileged classes and so defended the status quo that it has been unwilling to answer the knock at midnight. The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will.

But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the human imagination and fire the human soul, imbuing women and men with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travellers at midnight.

It is midnight in our world, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn. The most inspiring word that the church must speak is that no midnight long remains. The weary traveller by midnight who asks for bread is really seeking the dawn of love and hope. Our eternal message is that dawn will come.

## **SECOND READING**

*Qiyamah Rahman, Unitarian Universalist*

Now is the time to call on the memories of the ancestors who thought they could not walk another step toward freedom—and yet they did.

It is that time and place to call on the memories of the ancestors who, when the darkness of their lives threatened to take away the hope and light, reached a little deeper and prayed yet another prayer.

It is that time and place to remember those who came through the long night to witness another sunrise.

It is that time and place to remember the oceans of tears shed to deliver us to this time, to remember the bent knees and bowed backs, to remember the fervent voices asking, begging and beseeching for loved ones sold off.

Time to remember their laughter and joy, though they had far less, and little reason for optimism, yet they stayed on the path toward a better day.

Time to hold to the steadfast hands and hearts and prayers of the ancestors that have brought us this far.

Time to make them proud and show them, and ourselves, what we are made of.

Time to show them that their prayers and sacrifices and lives were not in vain and did not go unnoticed, nor have they been forgotten.

Did you not know that this day would come?  
 Did you not know that we would have to change places?  
 Did you not know that just as our ancestors were delivered that you would also be delivered?  
 Have you not seen the greatness and power of the Creative Energy in the Universe called God  
 that moves and has its being through human agency?  
 Have you not seen God in your neighbors' faces? In the homeless? In the battered woman? The  
 trafficked child? The undocumented worker? The dispossessed?

It is that time and that place to know that it is our turn, that we must leave a legacy for our  
 children. And all the children.

It is that time and that place.

We are the ones we've been waiting for!

For that, let us be eternally grateful.

Amen and Blessed Be.

### **Saved By Love**

*My heart is moved*, said a poet, the great American poet Adrienne Rich,

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
 So much has been destroyed  
 I have to cast my lot with those  
 who, age after age,  
 perversely, with no extraordinary  
 power, reconstitute the world.*

She wrote this many years ago, sometime way back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and it has always been a  
 kind of touchstone for me, almost like a prayer or piece of scripture that you tuck into your  
 pocket and hold against your heart till the paper becomes soft and the words almost invisible, as  
 if they've seeped into your skin, into the marrow of your bones. These lines remind me that I am  
 not alone, when I feel most alone, because of some personal struggle or loss or fear, some great  
 and quiet thing – loss or fear, or regret, or sadness or shame or worry or doubt)- when much has  
 been destroyed.

This poem reminds me I am not alone when I feel most alone and desperate in the face of larger,  
 more public devastations, such as some of us have felt in recent weeks since the election. I'm  
 reminded that I'm not alone and that in fact my sense of isolation and despair is in itself  
 indulgent; it is a mark of privilege to bow your head and look away; it is a choice, and I mean to  
 make a different choice, to live within a different story, which is to say, inside a different faith,  
 one that calls me out to love and struggle once again:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
 So much has been destroyed  
 I have to cast my lot with those  
 who, age after age,*

*perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute, recreate, reconcile, the world.*

This is about love. It is a reminder that people have been struggling for a long, long time, against destruction, against disappointment and despair, against desecration of the planet and desecration of each other, devastations of the spirit and the body and the body politic, and people have been grieving for a long, long time; and for generations, those who came before us threw in their lots again and again, age after age, for hope, for compassion, for justice, for freedom, for human rights and civil rights (people with a lot more to lose than most of us here); they cast their lots for dignity and kindness, for beauty, truth and mercy. Perversely, ironically, against the odds and against powerful, normative rules and realities, people come together, people sometimes from very different places, backgrounds, histories, in every age, combine their ordinary powers and reconstitute the world, and it is an honor and an act of love to sign on to that history and carry it on, to gift it (as it says in the Declaration of Independence) with your life, your fortune and your sacred honor.” *Which side are you on?* sang the old labor song. What story do we choose to live in? What do you love in this world with heart, mind, soul and strength – with fierce and faithful strength, set as a seal upon your heart?

This is about love, not politics, or the kind of love that is politics, the faith that unfolds in the public square and the private heart, and everywhere.

*It is midnight in our world, said Martin Luther King, and the darkness is so deep that we can hardly see which way to turn. ... if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the human imagination and fire the human soul, imbuing women and men with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.*

The King holiday is not remembered every year to honor a solitary hero. Dr. King himself was an uncommonly intelligent, articulate, cogent, courageous, strategic, talented theologian, minister and prophet, but the holiday is about the uncommonly common courage of millions of others as well, who might have indulged indifference or despair or cynicism or violence - but didn't. They cast their lots with hope and hard work instead. They (and some of them were you) stayed faithful to a larger Love, a longer arc of vision. I think of 1968, the year he died, and the early 1950's, when his ministry began - another universe, back then- and I like to think that if not King himself then someone, or many someones in his time, held in their mind, their mind's eye, the impossible vision of an African American president; a Latina woman on the Supreme Court; Muslim Americans in Congress; the impossible reality not just of marriage equality but of revolutionized understandings of gender identity and sexual politics. I like to imagine, and I believe it's true, that someone or someones looked back through the long history of the labor movement, the abolition movement, the suffrage movement, marked their place on that continuum, and then peered into the gauzy future, the unimaginable future, and they saw the streets of Ferguson, New York, Chicago, Orlando, Minneapolis, everywhere, filled with people marching for justice, led by young, queer, African American millennial leaders. I like to think

that they squinted into the future from the church basements where they organized and sang, and saw *us* gathered here, not for sentimental celebrations of a safe and sanitized civil rights figurine, but taking up the tradition of radical love and prophetic imagination: the heavy, gritty, sometimes risky, unglamorous work, casting our lot with other lovers of life and answering anew the same call in a decidedly 21<sup>st</sup> century key.

One such call came to us just before Thanksgiving. *Isaiah Minnesota*, is a faith-based social justice coalition of more than 100 congregations. Reading the signs of the times, and particularly threats from a new Administration to deport millions of undocumented people, including families, including children, including the young adults brought here as kids and protected under current law (*DACA*, or *Deferred Action for Immigrant Child Arrivals*, which may be revoked at any time by Executive order), hearing these threats and mindful that 90,000 such people live in Minnesota – they live and work and go to school and pay taxes and raise families here in Minnesota, adding millions of dollars to the economy and enriching the whole community in countless ways we never even think to see - Isaiah called a meeting for communities of faith who might consider sheltering these neighbors, if the time came, might consider sanctuary, as many, many churches did throughout the 1980's. They hoped a couple dozen people would come out on an icy night in the middle of the holidays but more than 200 were there in the basement of Redeemer Church in St. Paul, from more than 20 congregations, and in the intervening weeks they have kept coming to trainings and teach-ins on the implications and risks of sanctuary and the moral urgency of love. About a dozen folks from our church have been going.

*Our hearts are moved by all we cannot save  
So much has been destroyed*

Our immigration policy is broken through and through, and the human toll, the human suffering, the injustice of it, the racism, families ripped apart, the profit that is made, are unspeakable. But finally, people are speaking. As one pastor said, in answer to a reporter's question: *Why move on this now? President Obama deported more people than any president before him.* The pastor said, *It's true. Some of our congregations in Minnesota have been active on this issue, but most have been asleep. And we're awake now. This election, and the very real, and frankly, wicked threats, the escalated threats of the new Administration, have awakened us from a shameful indifference. We're awake now, and we won't go back to sleep.*

We are casting our lot “with those who, age after age, with no extraordinary power, but mighty power nonetheless, reconstitute this world.”

Four days before he died, Rev. Martin Luther King preached a sermon at the National Cathedral, called *Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution*. He told the congregation:

*On some positions, cowardice asks the question, is it expedient? And then expedience comes along and asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? Conscience asks the question, is it right? There comes a time when one must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but we must do it because conscience tells us it is right. And I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in*

*motion. And it will be the kind of soul force brought into being as a result of this confrontation that I believe will make the difference.*

It is that dimension of King's rigorous, radical, pragmatic dreaming, that we commemorate tomorrow, not with a day off, but with new resolve to put our faith in action. To wake up now and stay awake must be for us an act of love.

We do not know yet what this might mean. Together with other congregations committed to sanctuary we are asking legal questions, liability questions, practical questions. We are well accompanied by people from many faith traditions all around us, and by scholars and attorneys. But this must be an act of great love, intimate, personal, our willingness to imagine the circumstance of someone else. This is the love that saves us always. It's love that makes us who were called to be.

*Here we were honored to hear the powerful, first-person accounts of two women currently working for immigrant rights and protected under DACA.*

We are on the threshold now of a terrifying moment in our country, in our world, when we will be called as never before to clarify, to testify, to a faith that sometimes even we cannot articulate. What do we believe in, and what do you believe? The answer comes in whispers, when we're most afraid, confused, unsure, when someone's story touches us, someone's courage, their humanity, and we remember: we are saved by love.

## **Heaven Has No Borders**

*Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer*

Where was it  
where we first fell into the delusion  
of our separateness. Of our "other-ness"

Was it somewhere between the Tigris and the Euphrates,  
or at the Rio Grande – or near the Mississippi.  
Somewhere down from the tower of babel,  
we fell into the first sin – of fearing difference.  
And we began to build walls.

In the dry air and hot sun,  
families longing for life and freedom,  
for food on the table and safety for their children,

cross the desert.

The ancient texts remind us  
and the justice workers remind us  
and the modern poets remind us  
that it is in the desert  
where God has a history of travelling  
hand in hand with the oppressed  
searching for life, survival, hope.

The desert is also a condition of the heart –  
the hardened heart of indifference, intolerance, apathy.

And the walls that we place to seemingly protect ourselves  
we soon realize  
are prison walls  
locking us in our golden cages  
of privilege – isolating us from the fabric of life  
from our kindred – which is all people.  
We've built walls of prejudice, fear,  
and a delusional false sense of rightful ownership –  
as if we all aren't guests on any land we inhabit.

*Salvation is created in the midst of earth*  
sang the choir  
proclaimed the prophets  
that salvation, heaven, the beloved community  
is created here, now.

Heaven has no borders.  
When we forget this, we set up the gates of hell.

But something happens.  
When the hard heart is watered with empathy  
and the closed soul soaked in compassion  
the rigid borders dissolve.

Something happens  
when we begin to feel the hot desert sun  
and feel the weeping of parents for their children

and feel the heartache of longing for a different life  
 Something happens  
 when we remember the "other" is actually in our midst -  
 earning paychecks and buying diapers,  
 studying physics and writing poetry,  
 living the dream of their ancestors  
 against a waiting line longer than their chance of survival.  
 Something happens  
 when the people remember they are family  
 and we have the tools we need  
 like Joshua at Jericho to dance down the wall -

And so the wall came down  
 and children embraced their parents  
 and the people found dignified work  
 and the hardened heart melted into love –  
 yes, when the people remember who they are  
 and that salvation is ours to create  
 then the walls come tumbling down  
 crumble to dust  
 from the dancing rhythm  
 of the songs, the poems, the common work  
 of love made flesh – enough love to save us all.

And again, the question from ancient scripture  
 echoes in our moral conscience –  
*behold, says the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee,*  
*behold, I stand at the door at midnight, and knock,*  
*are we prepared to lift up our gates?*

**BENEDICTION** (Reinhold Niebuhr)

*Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime;*  
*therefore we must be saved by hope.*  
*Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of*  
*history;*  
*therefore we must be saved by faith.*  
*Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;*  
*therefore we must be saved by love.*