

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

A Home for Your Soul

*Reverend Victoria Safford*

Sunday 4 March 2018

---

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

**FIRST READING**

A Prayer among friends      *John Daniel*

Among other wonders of our lives, we are alive  
 with one another, we walk here  
 in the light of this unlikely world  
 that isn't ours for long.  
 May we spend generously  
 the time we are given.  
 May we enact our responsibilities  
 as thoroughly as we enjoy  
 our pleasures.  
 May we see with clarity,  
 may we seek a vision  
 that serves all beings, may we honor  
 the mystery surpassing our sight,  
 and may we hold in our hands  
 the gift of good work  
 and bear it forth whole,  
 -as we were borne forth by a power we praise -  
 to this one Earth, this homeland of all we love.

**SECOND READING**

Made From Bone      *Mark Nepo*

When I can be the truth,  
 it grows more and more clear  
 when it is necessary to tell the truth.  
 That is, when I have access to the place  
 within me that is lighted, I don't have  
 to speak heatedly. I can just give away  
 warmth. When I am still enough to brush  
 quietly with eternity, I don't have to  
 speak of God. I can just offer peace  
 to those around me.  
 A tree grows so it can convey wind.  
 It is not the wind. And a person grows  
 in order to convey spirit.  
 They say that animals recharge  
 their innocence each time they hoof  
 the earth.  
 And we are reborn  
 each time we touch what matters.

## The Home of Your Soul

*Note: The choir's anthem, preceding the sermon, was "Wayfaring Stranger."*

---

Do you believe that?

*I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe,*

or as Johnny Cash sang it, "this world below," this world of tears and trouble, sorrow and sickness – do you believe that, that we're all just passing through this sorry world, this shadow life, on our way to the bright land over Jordan, the beautiful green country *where God's redeemed their vigils keep* and there's no more toil or danger?

I know that certain songs like this one came out of slavery, sung by people in chains whose survival required a tangible metaphor; their physical and psychic survival required a wild articulate vision, and that land across the great river was not heaven, it was freedom. It was Ohio. Pennsylvania. New England and New York. From the little I've read, I don't think "Wayfaring Stranger" is one of those songs; I think this is a white song, born in the same era, but of a very different circumstance. It comes from a very different theology that sounds the same, and isn't.

This song is about eternal paradise, the place we'll go, if all goes well, once our trials and tribulations in this dusty realm, this earthly realm, are ended – and I don't believe it. I don't know a thing about heaven, but I know about earth and I can't believe that this moment here, these days we've been given together, is just some kind of shabby, incidental way station on the path to greater glory. This world - heartbreakingly beautiful, breathtakingly broken – this world is just a warm-up act.

Do the trees believe that?

Does the snow believe that, or any of the other animals, our kindred?

Are we part of this, natural this world of birth and death, and beauty in between, and struggle in between?

Are we part of it, or not?

This is our only home, a sufficient paradise for creatures like us, despite the potholes and the icy roads and cancer and addiction and sadness and war - a sufficient paradise, this world, though our very presence in it as humans means that it will be, by necessity, a fixer-upper kind of heaven.

John Daniel, in his poem which is a prayer, "Prayer Among Friends," says

*Among other wonders of our lives, we are alive with one another, we [abide] here in the light of this unlikely world that isn't ours for long.*

*May we spend generously the time we are given.*

*May we enact our responsibilities as thoroughly as we enjoy our pleasures.*

*May we see with clarity, may we seek a vision that serves all beings,*

*may we honor the mystery surpassing our sight,*

*and may we hold in our hands the gift of good work and bear it forth whole,*

*-as we were borne forth ... -*

*to this Earth, this homeland of all we love.*

Whatever you believe about heaven or hell or reincarnation or any of that – this world right here, this day right now, these people and all the other people living and breathing right now, breathing in, breathing out, wherever, whoever they are on this earth, whatever they are doing, or enduring, creating, enjoying, sleeping or waking– these people and this world right here, this life, is worthy. It is worthy of our love and work, worthy of devotion, *worthy* as in the old origin of the word *worship*, *worth-shippe*, to consider, to hold what is of worth, to ponder, to wonder about, argue about, talk about, sing about, pray over, laugh and weep and light candles for, that which is of worth.

*They say that animals recharge their innocence each time they hoof the earth,*

says the poet, Mark Nepo, *and we are reborn each time we touch what matters* – which is what we're trying to do here: we are trying to touch what matters so that we may be reborn once a week, renewed, restored, replenished, reminded of who we are and who we mean to be. We are trying here to touch what matters *in our lifetime*, and sometimes that means touching each other, literally, hand to hand or hug to hug, or brushing cookie crumbs or playground mud off someone else's kid at coffee hour because that's just what we do here; or reaching for the arm or shoulder of someone you don't even know, who is crying in the seat beside you. You don't know them, but you know enough to touch what matters, to share the silent sacrament of tissues, because that's just what we do here. (It's very brave what you all do here, to offer and receive that gift.) We touch what matters here, sometimes physically, sometimes matters of the spirit and the heart and the mind. Truth and goodness matter here, as in *may love of truth forever guide us*. Lately that seems like a confrontational statement, like a radical, dangerous prayer. Maybe it is. We touch what matters, sometimes justice or injustice, because they both bump up, inevitably, against theology; in fact they shape it, give it relevant ground. We ask ourselves and each other and our God what does matter, *what lives matter* in this world right now, our country, in our covenants – and our whispered answers one by one, maybe tentative at first, are amplified and multiplied by shared courage and conviction and we take our voices to the street and to the halls of power, where they blend with other voices and we remember what a shallow fallacy it is to ever believe that we are in this work alone. We come here to be reminded and we travel out from here to be reminded that we are just a part of a sparkling interdependent web of brave hearts and brilliant minds resisting and resilient in this most troubled time. We bring our theology. We lend our voices to a mighty choir of resistance, singing a most glad and hopeful gospel. But it is not about some future heaven in the far-off sky; this is about our life on earth,

right here, right now, and work that has been held and faith that has been kept, for a long, long time.

*They say that animals recharge their innocence each time they hoof the earth, and we are reborn each time we touch what matters.*

We come here to touch what matters. That's what our choir is doing, and our pastoral care team, and our social justice workers, and the Land Stewardship Committee, and the volunteers in our classrooms, and all of you, all of us.

What I do love in the song the choir sang – and here I'm stumbling into typical Unitarian Universalist amateur hymnody, where you just pick apart every little thing – what I love, of course, is our choir singing anything they sing, including *Wayfaring Stranger*, which really is a haunting and powerful song, because I do believe is that every one of us without exception is a wayfaring stranger, lonely at times, lost at times, frightened for ourselves and our planet and our children and our loved ones a lot of the time, never more than in these most harrowing days. We are alive together, as the poet reminds us, but it feels so often as if we live worlds apart, galaxies apart, and our soul is always trying to get home, to be at home, to belong, to a place, and to other people, to a story, a good story.

*I am a poor wayfaring stranger, traveling through this world of woe, this world below...*

Well, that part of the song you know is true – if not all the time, then sometimes, and that is why this church exists, and every church, every kind of church and temple and minion and mosque; every deliberately gathered beloved community exists to make a home for the wayfaring soul. One writer says,

*We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been - a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.*

Those words from the feminist theologian Starhawk were brought to us by Shay MacKay, and she often reads them to our welcome teams here on Sunday mornings, the volunteers who greet us at the door, give us our orders of service and help us find our way. She reads it to remind them that their work is holy work. When they say “welcome” to you, they mean it. They know the weight of the word.

Last Sunday was a snowy day and we were a small congregation at each service. We called our guest speakers and musician late on Saturday and urged them not to drive out; we cancelled children's classes and stayed all together in a circle here – kids, teenagers, everybody – with a few poems, a few songs, some lovely silences, and the snow shawling down in the sunlight and the wind. Into the silence we cast a few questions lifted out of the poems, and the people here

held their answers silently, or shared them aloud as blessings offered and received – the most tender communion:

*What do you love about winter?*

*What's making you weary?*

*What gives you strength?*

Some people spoke about the weather; some about the news; some spoke of other things. After one of the services a child came up to me, he waited in line to speak with me. This is a child I've known a long time, all his life, since his dedication in 2008, one of the first in what was that year a brand new sanctuary. So he is ten, or eleven, and he owns this place entirely; this house is the home of his soul (and that makes you his family). He said, "Victoria, I held my answer in my heart, but I want to say what makes me weary." *Weary* is a word that ten year-olds don't often speak. He was serious and he looked right at me as if he trusted utterly, because he does, that his minister – who is actually a representation of his church, and nothing more – as if he trusted utterly that his congregation could hold the matter on his heart. He said, "What's making me weary is gun violence in schools." He paused. "It makes me weary because so many of us kids are just there to learn and it feels dangerous. It doesn't feel safe." His parents were right there. We talked about fear and hope and hard work. We talked about good guys and bad guys and how I don't really believe there are good guys and bad guys, and neither does he, but evil actions are real, danger is real, and weariness is real. I'm telling you this because it matters that this child and other children have a home, a liberal religious home, which they trust will hold their wonder and their weariness, their fears, their indignation, their dreams, their joy, their silliness, their ethical formation as agents of change, their spiritual growth and their wisdom as wayfarers, wanderers, lovers of life.

Another snapshot: a few weeks ago we ran a series of conversations in the evening on Robin DiAngelo's work on white supremacy, what it means in our time to be white (white and well-meaning). On one of the nights there were maybe two dozen people in a classroom, intrepid explorers of really hard material who surely had other things to do but they came out for this, and most of them came for three weeks. They were divided at one point into pairs to discuss some aspect of the reading, and across the room I saw a beautiful thing, a glimpse of beloved community: a young woman who grew up in our church and went away to college and now she's back with a baby and a toddler (she's very young), paired with an older woman, maybe in her 70's, who was here for the very first time that night as a visitor. The two of them were deep in conversation, stretching across generations and vastly different life experience here in this space that the younger one knows intimately and the elder not at all, thrown together on a Wednesday night by their need to touch what matters, even if it's white hot, their need to speak and name and ask what matters so they can live in here (in their hearts) and out there with integrity. Together with others in the room they made not "safe space" – because nothing in this work around white supremacy is "safe" – but *brave* space. And I'm telling you this because it matters that this church exists, to make room for brave hearts and brave space in dangerous, demoralizing days that threaten to blast us apart. This church will hold us. It stands strong and ready, no matter how often you decide to come. It is always here.

Mark Nepo says in the reading,

*When I can be the truth,  
it grows more and more clear  
when it is necessary to tell the truth.  
That is, when I have access to the place  
within me that is lighted, I don't have  
to speak heatedly. I can just give away  
warmth.*

What could be more important, in this troubled time?

*When I am still enough to brush  
quietly with eternity, I don't have to  
speak of God. I can just offer peace  
to those around me.  
A tree grows so it can convey wind.  
It is not the wind. And a person grows  
in order to convey spirit.  
They say that animals recharge  
their innocence each time they hoof  
the earth.  
And we are reborn  
each time we touch what matters.*

Around here, people ask sometimes, “Well, what matters most right now, in our time: environmental justice, climate change, the war on science – or racial justice, the devastations of white supremacy?”

And we say, *yes*.

Or someone asks, “What is this church about? Is it justice in the wider world, or community right here, the web of relationships that holds us all together, the celebrations of new life and marriages, and mourning our beloved dead? Which one matters more, justice or community?”

And we say, *yes, that's right*.

People ask, “Isn't it about the life of the spirit, soul-work, what we mean when we say God? Isn't it about the ways that music here, and art, call us to devotion? Or is it more about relationship, and how we're governed here, how we keep our covenants by keeping order through wise administration, effective and efficient planning, strong committees and good stewardship? Is all this “church work” tangible or intangible?”

And we say, *Yeah. Exactly*.

Rob Hardies, a colleague whom I cherish, says, “The world is too beautiful to be saved by one voice and too fragile to be held by one set of hands.” Our church holds many things, for many people, all at once, in many, many hands and everything we’re holding matters.

If I had a million dollars, I would build a church that could hold that kid I told you about, and several hundred others, and their parents, hold them through childhood and the turbulent adventures of middle school and high school into young adulthood and beyond, hold them not only in affection but in the divine embrace of a powerful story which we here did not write but which we guard and cherish with our lives: the ancient story which insists that

all are beloved,  
 all are worthy,  
 all children and all living things dimensions of the sacred whole,  
 born of mystery, to mystery returning,  
 and here on earth for just a while to learn and practice compassion, gratitude, forgiveness and hope unceasingly.

That’s the church I’d build, but I don’t have to because you already have.

If I had a million dollars I would build a church filled with music, with a mighty choir and an awesome director companioned by a savvy theo-musicologist who would make the people sing whether they’re ready or not in the morning, so they’d have the music in their bones and sing it everywhere they travel, in their showers, in their cars, in hospitals by the bedside, in graveyards with the beloved dead, in the woods with their dogs and at demonstrations with thousands of others. I’d fill the church with music and with art, and study groups, support groups, theme circles and classes (just as you have done) and I’d hire an Assistant Minister and a membership coordinator to help me hold it, help us all hold it, in strong hands.

If I had a million dollars (and you can play this game yourself), I’d take care of the building as if it were a temple for the spirit, a holy place and a beacon to the wider world of welcome, peace and openness. I’d keep it clean and in excellent repair (which in fact you do).

If I had a million dollars to make a church in Mahtomedi, Minnesota in 2018, I’d find a way to give some of that money, a lot of that money, away, through programs and tangible gifts that serve the whole community, transform the whole community, not just the people inside on Sunday morning. The windows would face out as well as in, and the money would flow out as well as in (as in fact it so generously does. You give away a lot of money here. This congregation pays its rent.).

I’d recognize that a congregation of nearly 800 members and two or three hundred active friends, plus a couple of hundred children, a congregation of twelve or thirteen hundred people needs a vibrant and talented paid staff to keep everything in place and keep everything moving – custodial staff (we have 2); admin. staff (we have 2.5); religious education staff (we have the equivalent of 3); music staff (2.25 equivalents) and ministry.

For everything we're trying to hold, this is a small staff team. It's a mighty team, it's the best team, but it is too small to hold with you what we're all trying to hold safely, brightly, resolutely, for the long haul. Few other congregations of this size in the Unitarian Universalist Association (or most other denominations) operate with as few ministers as this congregation has for as long as it has. The word which came to mind for me this fall when someone asked me about it was "fragile" – and that just can't be right. It dishonors the strength and vibrancy of this community. I know it's because we've invested so deeply and well in the building, but now we've done that, and now maybe that can shift.

The operating budget here for the last two years, generated by committees, put forward by the Board, is just under a million dollars – which to my ear sounds like a fortune until I look at the budgets of other congregations and non-profits. The budget here is responsible and principled and lean. It is funded almost entirely, year to year, by members and friends – and I like that. That feels right and real to me, close to the bone as it is. Some people give a few hundred dollars a year, or less – and that's a beautiful gift, because it's what they can afford. Some give ten and twenty times as much, because it's what they can afford. We know the average needs to be somewhere between 2100 and 2500 dollars, and we know for some that's more than easy, and for others it's not possible. The diversity in this church is economic, and all across this wide financial spectrum, the generosity, the spirit of generosity, is the same, which is beauty of this place. Every gift of every size is a gift of love.

This year the budget asks that we raise our pledges by 10% - and again, some can do it, some just can't. Ross and I are stretching now; we thought we were stretched last year, but we're stretching more, by 10%, because it matters to us – not because I work here, but because our souls have found a home here. We believe in this congregation, in you, and in others who are not even here yet, and in those who built this church decades ago. They saw us all in their imagination, and they made a place for us. So we're stretching, Ross and I. Our pledge is huge for us and we wish it were more because in these times this church matters more than ever. It's a gift of love.

If I had a million dollars, which I don't, but we all do, we'd build a church to hold what matters to us, to grow our souls and serve this world, because

*Among other wonders of our lives, we are alive with one another, we [dwell] here  
in the light of this unlikely world that isn't ours for long.  
May we spend generously the time we are given.  
May we enact our responsibilities as thoroughly as we enjoy our pleasures.  
May we see with clarity. May we seek a vision that serves all beings, may we honor  
the mystery surpassing our sight,  
and may we hold in our hands the gift of good work and bear it forth whole,  
-as we were borne forth by a power we praise -*

O Mystery of a thousand names and beyond all naming,  
Bear our work whole to this home that we love.

Amen.