

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

In Your Empty Hands

Reverend Victoria Safford

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WHITE BEAR UNITATRIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

Red Brocade

Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength
enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be
such good friends
you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world.

I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.

SECOND READING

A Gift

Denise Levertov

Just when you seem to yourself
 nothing but a flimsy web
 of questions, you are given
 the questions of others to hold
 in the emptiness of your hands,
 songbird eggs that can still hatch
 if you keep them warm,
 butterflies opening and closing themselves
 in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
 their scintillant fur, their dust.
 You are given the questions of others
 as if they were answers
 to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
 this gift is your answer.

In Your Empty Hands

A few years ago, before my brother died, he lived with us here in Minnesota, and he spent a lot of time at the VA hospital in Minneapolis, where they took beautiful care of him. More precisely, he spent a lot of time in the “smoking shed” at the VA, a kind of enclosed porch where he could go several times a day if he felt well enough. It was winter, and the smoking shed was freezing, with its concrete floor and plastic benches, a few space heaters sputtering in the corners. It was noisy, too, with one of those giant smoke-sucking machines on the ceiling, roaring away but not really sucking any smoke. It was thick in there, a greasy haze, with ashtrays all around.

I took Mark there many times and stayed the whole time with him because if he needed to leave he’d need me to take him. We couldn’t always sit together on the same bench because the smoking shed was almost always packed. So there we’d be across this big expanse of smoky space, and every time – *every* time – a person sitting next to me (sometimes both of them) would see me sitting there not smoking, just coughing and wheezing and tearing up, and they’d say very quietly, so as not to embarrass me, they’d just kindly whisper, “Need a light?” Or even, “Here-want a puff? Need a hit? Here, take this...” and pass me their half-smoked cigarette. In that space, this was complicated. I couldn’t just say, “No thanks, I don’t smoke,” because I didn’t want to sound judgmental or self-righteous, or holier-than-thou, or healthier-than-thou. (*No, thanks, I don’t smoke and I’m not sick and I don’t belong here and I’m not part of this.*) I had to find a way to let *thank you* be the loudest part of my refusal, because it was. Sometimes,

someone would see me sitting there, and thinking I was alone, they'd get up and walk all the way across the concrete floor, hospital gown flapping under their coat or a blanket, in those colored hospital socks with the white grippers on the bottom, catching on the rough cement, and sometimes a whole IV pole clattering behind them - they'd come all the way over to give me a cigarette. Cigarettes are expensive. Walking is expensive, if you can't afford to waste your energy, if you're really sick or really old, or really cold in the horrible, freezing smoking shed. It took a lot to do that, and I saw people do it all the time – strangers caring for each other (in a somewhat ironic way). These were gifts of love, these gestures: bodies and lives broken open in a holy communion of humans just trying to get by, trying to get well, just hoping to go home. My brother caught on quickly (he'd moved in spaces like this all his life) and at one point he asked me to help him. He never had money to buy cigarettes in packs; he'd send me to those little shops all around to buy bulk tobacco and rolling paper, and together in his room we'd roll cigarettes at night, some for him to smoke, and some to share in the smoking shed. We made dozens. *Where'd you learn to do that?* he said. I smiled at him and said, *I went to the same high school you did. We learned all kinds of stuff there, right?* And there, late in his life, across a canyon of differences between the ways our two lives had turned out, there opened this little communion of understanding between us. *Well, well, well,* he said. *I had no idea that you knew how to roll ... "cigarettes" ... like that.* I smiled at him. *Well, I'm a little rusty,* I said. *It's been a long while.* Communion is a bridge of trust between one soul and another. Communion puts us all right in the same boat.

(And I can't believe I just told you that story with my mom sitting here in the room...)

The thing about holy communion in the Christian church, at least theoretically, at least originally, essentially, the thing about the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of bread and wine, or grape juice in tiny plastic cups and factory-pressed wafers that melt like chalk on the tongue, the thing about holy communion is that everybody's welcome at the table. This is not universal practice now, I know. In some churches, some denominations, there are stipulations and prerequisites and rules: it's only for those who've been confirmed in the church, having made their first communion; it's only for those who are members of the parish or enrolled in the denomination; it's only for those who've given their lives to God, or confessed their sins, and so on; only for those who truly believe whatever it is that community believes about the bread and the body, the blood and the wine.

But the thing about holy communion in the early Christian church, before it was even called the Christian church because it was still some kind of wild and weedy offshoot of Judaism, the thing about holy communion in many congregations even now, is that the table is a welcome table, as in *I'm gonna sit at the welcome table*, as in *I'm gonna drink of the healing waters...* This is not about being at a happy, easy dinner party relaxing with your friends; this is not a song of privilege; this is a slave song about who gets to be a person, dating way back to when singing like that was illegal. It has all kinds of verses centuries old: *I'm gonna tell God how you treated me... I'm gonna shout and never get tired...* This is a song about the transformation of the world into a place where everybody eats and everybody drinks and no one even owns the table because everyone has equivalent standing, or sitting, at the table of love and justice, because everyone has a right to be there, because everyone is hungry. That's the bottom line – no matter how wealthy or poor, how entitled or marginalized, how humble or obnoxious, how smart and self-

centered and smarmy you are, or however generous and gentle you are; Democrat, Republican, sinner and saved, we're all hungry in these bodies, at least once a day. The sacrament of the communion table is visceral, primal, animal, in a way. It can *only* be open to everyone, or else the communion table becomes a kind of restaurant, open only to those who have paid at the door, or whose credit is good, or who called ahead to make a reservation. *Let all who are hungry come and eat*, says the ancient Passover text, and it was on this foundation of radical hospitality that the early followers of Jesus gathered for their agape meal.

Let all who are hungry come and eat. Rev. Sara talked about this two weeks ago in her sermon, and last Sunday Pastor Danny Givens told us how for him, raised Pentecostal, educated in Catholic schools and now a Baptist, for him, communion is always more tangible than theoretical, or theological, or symbolic. He said communion is what we do whenever we bring our full selves, our bodies broken and whole, our stories, our full presence to each other, to the word, in love and hope; whenever we offer our cracked open hearts in love and service; whenever we bring our small crumbs of meager courage to the common table, trusting that no one will sneer at the poverty of our gift, or chastise us, because sometimes, actually, that's all we've got. Bring what you can and take what you need. Communion comes from the same root as "communist," and "community," and "common," as in common struggle, common good, common ground. The thing about holy communion is that the table is open to everyone hungry in body or spirit, which, at the end of the day, is everyone.

That's what I saw in the smoking shed— a space filled with the fear of dying, and filled with hope for healing and living, and filled with compassion, this generous compassion, for all of us, making our way, for just a little while longer, together.

People often ask, "What kind of a church is this?" They ask me, as I'm sure they ask you if you let out that you come here. One kind of answer is a catalog of all the differences between this place and other sacred spaces, differences of doctrine and theology, liturgical practice, pluralism, politics and polity. Another way to answer is to rattle off the dreary list of all the things you don't believe, which chances are the person asking doesn't believe either, at least maybe not in the ways that you assume they do. *What kind of church is this?* It's also possible to start with the many ways, some of them important ways, ways that really matter, that this congregation is not much different from most others, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, any kind of religious community. If a person asked me today what kind of church this is, I might begin by talking about memorial services – partly because the one taking place here later on is very much on my mind, and partly because the tradition we practice here is so anachronistic and so common and human and humane, and therefore often unexpected. I would talk about memorials, and communion.

When someone dies, whether a beloved from within the congregation, or someone we have never met, when someone calls and needs to hold a service here, we move heaven and earth, and sometimes every single chair in the building, and we make space. The service happens in here (in the sanctuary), but even more important is what happens in the Social Hall. Volunteers, some of you, with no connection to that family whatsoever, usually, show up. They lay out the tablecloths, which likely they themselves have ironed since the last memorial reception. (*Iron!* Talk about anachronistic...) On a moment's notice, they head out to Costco and Aldi and the

farmer's market in the summer, and come back heaping platters high with sandwiches and cookies, urns of lemonade and coffee, basic, simple, ample fare. This, literally, is comfort food. They place flowers on the tables, and when the service ends and the people stumble out of this room sniffing and crying, numb, blinking in confusion and loneliness and sorrow, when they step out of this space into the permanence of loss, the land where they'll live for the rest of their lives, they walk across the hall to where the table is set for them, and the volunteers say, just as we say here in the sanctuary, the sanctified, Eucharistic words:

Come in.

Eat, they say,

drink,

sit down.

We've got this.

We've got you.

We've been waiting for you.

We're so glad you're here.

They are offering the bread of life, a holy communion of crackers and cheese, humus and carrots, coffee and brownies and bars. And then when everyone has left they stay and do the dishes, and take out the garbage and bundle the table linen to be ready for the next time. I can't believe that this can happen still, this tangible kindness incarnate. I can't believe you do this.

This past week on Monday at a memorial service here I met a man whom apparently I've met before who told me he's been to six funerals here in recent years, all for close friends. He said, "We have to stop meeting like this." And then he said, "If I had to come to a church, I'd come here. And I'm starting to think maybe I do have to come... When you get old you lose so many friends." He said, "You know, every time I come here for a funeral, I feel like I've come home." He looked down at his coffee cup and his cookie in a crumbled napkin, and *that's* what he was talking about. He said, "Thank you. Tell your people thank you."

Thank you.

The Arabs used to say,

When a stranger appears at your door,

feed him for three days

before asking who he is,

where he's come from,

where he's headed.

That way, he'll have strength

enough to answer.

Or, by then you'll be

such good friends

you don't care.

So says the poet, Naomi Shihab Nye.

Let's go back to that, she says.

*Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water
to your horse.*

*No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on
to pretend they had a purpose
in the world...*

*Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint
into your tea.*

I want every person who walks through the door of this church to be welcomed like that. I want to walk with that welcome in my face wherever I go, instead of this armor of pretense and busyness.

In a couple of weeks, on the day after Thanksgiving, *Buy Nothing Day / Black Friday*, we'll hold a service here to gather our gratitude and gather our intentions, to gather our wits, before the onslaught of the holidays ahead. It's a lovely, sacred circle, informal, with music and sharing and stories. It lasts about an hour. Near the end we work together, children and adults, on small projects to serve the wider world and remind each other why we're even here, why a church exists: we write letters to people in prison to let them know they're not forgotten; we pack birthday bags for children who are homeless; we wrap prayer shawls in tissue paper for our pastoral care team to bring to members and friends (prayer shawls handmade by Reggie Buresh, a member here, one by one by one). This year, for the first time, at the very end, we'll share a simple meal of soup and bread, and any Thanksgiving leftovers that people think to bring – you're all invited and you don't have to bring anything, unless you want to and it's easy. But be warned: right in the middle of this service, on that Friday morning when the whole country is out shopping patriotically to feed the ravenous capitalist machine, we stop and take a breath and take communion: bread with gluten, bread without gluten, and apple cider in a common cup, passed hand to hand around the circle. *Receive what you need*, says each person to the next one, *Receive what you need, and share the gift abundantly*.

What do we have to offer each other? What do we bring to the table?

The whole point of communion, the common meal, is not to serve those who are filled up already, but to feed the hungry – and that's what we bring first and foremost, our hunger. Our longing. Not our perfection and our fullness, but our emptiness, our need. Our vulnerability and fear. We lay our imperfections on the altar of one another's understanding. Our longing to be seen and known and ushered in. Our longing to belong and to be cherished a little, and honored a little, not for anything we've done, but in the plain dignity of our humanity, inherent worth and dignity. Every little gathering here is a circle of communion:

-- the grief group that meets this afternoon, where people offer as a holy sacrament not their knowledge and their bright façade, their shiny “I’ve-got-this-all-together”-ness, but their broken hearts and emptiness, and they offer also the fullness of their presence, their listening in love, their trust that every story, every loss will be held and honored as a sacred thing, a gift, in fact, to others in the circle.

-- the poetry reading later today, where two artists will take a breath and do the bravest thing, say, “Look, I made this. I want you to have it, to hear it, to receive it,” and the gift of beauty, like holy water, will wash over us in love.

So many sacred circles.

Sometimes we’re so starving ourselves for acceptance, for belonging, for forgiveness, we forget that we have a place at the table, and not only that, we forget that we ourselves are good gifts, that we bring to the table more than we know by simply showing up for one another.

Denise Levertov’s poem is called “A Gift:”

*Just when you seem to yourself
nothing but a flimsy web
of questions, you are given
the questions of others to hold
in the emptiness of your hands,
songbird eggs that can still hatch
if you keep them warm,
butterflies opening and closing themselves
in your cupped palms, trusting you not to injure
their scintillant fur, their dust.
You are given the questions of others
as if they were answers
to all you ask. Yes, perhaps
this gift is your answer.*

What we offer one another is our empty hands, our open hearts, and all our holy questions.

*Who are you?
How are you?
How is it with your spirit?
Do you need a light?*

I want to invite you into a spirit of communion,
to take a breath,
and hold gently in your lap your open hands, your empty hands,
breathing in and out.

When you're ready, I'll ask you to turn to the person next to you (either one, on either side – I'll ask you in time to turn to each of them).

You'll turn to the person sitting next to you, each of you with open, empty hands extended.

One of you speaks first.
Tell your neighbor your name and the pronouns you go by (she/her, he/him, they/them, ze/zir, whatever they are).
Offer them your name.

Your neighbor will say to you,
Hello _____ .
Be at home here.
You have a place at the welcome table.

And then you'll switch. And then you'll turn to your neighbor on the other side,
offering your name, your empty hands, your wide-open human heart.



These words in benediction come from Charlotte Preston:

May today there be peace within.
May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be.
May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others.
May you use the gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that has been given to you.
May you be content with yourself just the way you are.
Let this knowledge settle into your bones,
and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.
It is there for each and every one of us.

AMEN.