

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Walking With the Wind *Reverend Victoria Safford*

Sunday 19 January 2020

FIRST READING

John Lewis represents Georgia's Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. Congress. He tells this story from his early childhood in the 1940's, from rural Alabama where his parents were sharecroppers.

This little story has nothing to do with a national stage, or historic figures, or monumental events. It's a simple story, a true story, about a group of young children a wood-frame house, and a windstorm. On this particular afternoon – it was Saturday, I'm almost certain – about fifteen of us children were outside my Aunt Senevea's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified. ... As the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, Aunt Senevea herded us all inside. Her little house felt even smaller with so many children squeezed inside, small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, has stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Aunt Senevea was scared, and she was crying. And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend, and then, ***a corner of the room started lifting up... The storm was pulling the house toward the sky - with us inside it.***

That was when Aunt Senevea told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said. And we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift. And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies. More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has stuck me more than once that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together, and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest. And then another corner lifts, and we go there. Eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle and the house would still stand, but we knew another storm would come, and we would do it again.

We're still doing it -- all of us. You and I are like children holding hands, walking with the wind, in the endless struggle to respond with decency and dignity to all the challenges that face us. It is the way to which I remain committed to this day, extending beyond the issue of race alone, and beyond class as well, and gender and age, and every other distinction that tends to separate us as human beings. That path involves nothing less than the pursuit of the most precious and pure concept I have ever known, an ideal I discovered as a young man, that has guided me like a beacon ever since: this is the way of Beloved Community.

SECOND READING *from Barbara Kingsolver*

Hope: An Owner's Manual

Look, you might as well know, this thing
is going to take endless repair: rubber bands,
crazy glue... heartstrings, sunrise:
all of these are useful. Also, feathers.

To keep it humming, sometimes you have to stand
on an incline, where everything looks possible;
on the line you drew yourself. Or in
the grocery line, making faces at a toddler
secretly, over his mother's shoulder.

You might have to pop the clutch and run
past all the evidence. Past everyone who is
laughing or praying for you. Definitely you don't
want to go directly to jail, but still, here you go,
passing time, passing strange. Don't pass this up.

In the worst of times,
you will have to park it and fly by the seat of your pants.
Tiptoe past the dogs of the apocalypse that are sleeping
in the shade of your future.
Pass your hope like a bad check.
You might still have just enough time. To make a deposit.

If somebody says "You money or your life," you may have to say: Life.
And mean it.

Walking With the Wind

Thomas Dorsey's gospel hymn, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*, was Martin Luther King's favorite hymn, one he requested often from the choir at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and often on the road. Whenever we sing it here, I wonder how it falls on your ear, not only the literal image of a big, strong God with big, strong hands reaching down to help, but also the unabashed expression of dependency, the full out acknowledgement of limitation, imperfection, exhaustion and despair: *I am tired, I am weak, I am worn*. We don't always sing like that in here, or speak like that or act like that, so vulnerable and exposed, so honest: *hear my cry, hear my call, hold my hand, lest I fall*. This song is a prayer. It's one thing to hum it by yourself, but to sing or pray it publicly is a show of significant trust, and maybe in that trusting, in that risk of disclosure, lies a key to resilience - for surely we can't be nor even pretend to be

sturdy and hopeful and powerful and brave all the time, not in these precarious times. *Lead me home* is a line for people who intend to keep on keeping on for a long, long time, for the long, long haul. It's not "lead me home to heavenly glory and feather rest on pillows of clouds (and denial)." It's "lead me back to the true home of my conviction, guide me back to my center, to my deepest commitments and covenants with those I love and this world I cherish." It's "lead me home to my brave and hopeful heart, and to my people, and my trust, my unshakable faith, that this life is a holy gift, and my whole purpose on the earth is to be worthy of it, and grateful, and laughing and loving and courageous." This song about weakness is an anthem of resilience.

When I'm weary and worn, when I'm dazed and confused,
when yet another fire is burning on yet another continent,
when yet another glacier melts into the ocean,
when yet another makeshift boat sinks beneath the weight of desperate people, drowning in despair,
when yet another missile is launched by a deluded leader,
or a factory closes,
or a copper nickel mine or pipeline runs through sacred land,
or a wall is built where a wall does not belong,
or a gun fired,
or a person, any person, discarded, deported, denied, locked up, locked down, desecrated-

take my hand, hear my prayer, guide my feet, lead me home to what I know is true and good and right.

Ruby Sales, a public theologian who grew up in Alabama and came of age in the civil rights movement, makes another point about gospel songs like these and the spirituals that came before. She comes from three generations of Baptist preachers, but the spirituality that shaped her was not from the church, where ministers held all the influence, but from Black folk religion, the ancient ground underneath the church. She says, "It was a religion that combined the ideals of American democracy with a theological sense of justice. It was a religion that said that people who were considered property and disposable were essential in the eyes of God and even essential in a democracy even though they were enslaved. And it was a religion where the language and the symbols were accessible to all. As a 7-year-old, I could sing 50 songs without missing a line, and everybody in the community had access to the theological microphone. And when we prayed or sang to 'the Lord' or called God 'Sir,' we were contesting, out loud, the power of the slave master, proving that the enslaver was not the alpha and omega of black life. The master was not the ultimate meaning of us. This was not patriarchal; it was a way of slapping the enslaver in the face." What takes your hand and leads you home is something way larger than fear, no matter what you call it.

The King holiday we observe tomorrow is not about nostalgia. It's not about larger than life-size heroes who marched across the nation's stage 60 years ago singing songs and righting wrongs with the mystical force of legislative light sabers, before they faded into statues and commemorative postage stamps, having eradicated racism as if it were a strain of scarlet fever, inoculating future generations against the quaint, unpleasant problems of a distant past. This cannot ever be about nostalgia, because while some things changed (significant, world-shattering, redeeming, gleaming things), yet other things didn't change, they couldn't and they

won't, not soon, not in our lifetime. Maybe you're following the news from Richmond, Virginia this weekend, where the governor has declared a state of emergency and the people are bracing for a massive demonstration tomorrow of thousands of gun rights activists and armed white supremacists who are threatening to storm the capitol and wreak havoc in the city. The people are bracing there the way we braced on Friday for a blizzard, with official warnings to stay indoors and off the streets, the capitol shut down. Some things have definitely changed for the betterment of all of us, the moral and tangible benefit of everyone, and other things, deeper causes, insidious ideas, have mutated and festered, gone underground or exploded in ways that no one could have foreseen in 1968 or 1964 or 1864 or 1619, when the first ship landed bearing prisoners in chains, kidnapped children and adults from Africa. The core idea that made that voyage possible is still alive among us and within us and around us, and its name is white supremacy. **The church exists to illuminate a different core idea.**

Congressman John Lewis tells a strange and wondrous story about being in a mighty storm with 11 cousins and his aunt Seneva when he was four years old. They were all outside when the sky got dark, the wind was wild, she called them in and a hurricane (or tornado?) shook the wood-frame house so powerfully that they could see the floor boards peeling up from the dirt below, as if it were a tent. They were terrified, but they joined their hands and all their weight, walking toward the spot to press it down, then walked the other way when another corner threatened to rise up, and they kept on like that, walking hand in hand, until the storm died down. Lewis, who is 80 now, says that for him this is a metaphor for the concept, the principle, the spiritual idea called *Beloved Community*. "We're still doing it," he says, "You and I are like children holding hands, walking with the wind, in the endless struggle [*endless* struggle] to respond with decency and dignity to the challenges that face us." It's not only about saving the house, nor even staying alive; it's about moving with dignity and decency, together. How we go is as important as any achievement, goal or destination. That's hard for high achieving Unitarian Universalists to understand or want to believe.

Beloved Community is an old idea. For the 12 most active years of his public ministry, from 1956 until his death in 1968, Martin Luther King used the phrase in speeches and sermons, articles, interviews, and most of his books, but he learned it from his study of nonviolence, from his reading of Gandhi and his reading of Josiah Royce, philosopher and co-founder, on the eve of World War I, of the international Fellowship of Reconciliation, which still thrives today and of which King was a member. For 100 years, they have been committed to the reconciliation of nations and peoples, and also to a kind of reconciliation *within* people, within us: the balance of conscience against the record of our daily life and practice, the balance of hope against paralyzing fear, the balance of action (activism) with reflection and prayer. The Beloved Community was not a goal or destination, and it was not any kind of idealistic, Christian utopian dream, but instead a *way of being* - spiritually, politically, economically, emotionally, intellectually. Beloved Community is an attitude, an orientation of the heart; it's a disciplined understanding of your own relationship to other people, to everyone else on the planet, to every living thing. If you are religious, this is a religious discipline, and it goes by many names. If you are seeking spiritual wholeness, spiritual balance, it is a spiritual discipline. If you are an ethical humanist, it is a deliberate moral stance. It is a daily practice, a spiritual politics, that requires inclusivity, nonviolence, and the hard discipline of radical hospitality. It requires love, *agape*. Of all the legacies that Dr. King bequeathed to us, including legislation, including the Voting Rights Act, including the dismantling of legal segregation, including so many tangible advances,

I think the construct of Beloved Community may prove in time, over the long arc of time, to be the most radical, durable and transformative.

Alex Kapitan, a Unitarian Universalist minister who, together with Rev. Mykal Slack, is leading powerful, transformational work now on transgender inclusion on our congregations, says that for them, Beloved Community is defined as much by what it is not as by what it is, and this matters because we toss the term around now all the time and we should be clear about its meaning. Beloved Community, says Alex Kapitan, is not small, it is not an enclave. It can't be a gated community, nor one with a door, nor any barriers at all. Thus a congregation cannot be Beloved Community, because a congregation can never include everybody, every living cherished thing, nor does it intend to. A congregation intends to one among many, many others. A church like this can *practice* Beloved Community, and live by and lean toward its intention, but *The* Beloved Community is something way larger. It is the widest circle of inclusive love you can imagine, embracing all persons, ancestors, descendants and all of us, and thus it cannot be homogenous in any way, and no single voice or party or position or denomination can own it. It intends a welcome so wide and deep that everyone within its sphere has equivalent standing, and their power derives from the shared risk of their diversity. For this reason, the Beloved Community is not devoid of conflict, but brave in the hard work of listening and forgiveness, the hard work of working it out, with no souls overboard. Ruby Sales talked about slapping the master, but she meant slapping down enslavement, not hitting a human being. Anger flares sometimes, and righteous outrage, and the community is strengthened thereby, if everyone stays at the table, learning and growing all together. The goal is reconciliation, not to destroy your opponent, nor cast them out, but to stay in the struggle till love wins – which means all your life. This is no easy thing, as we all know from living in close quarters all the time with our families, our coworkers, our neighbors, our annoying Facebook friends, and in this political moment, where dehumanizing others is so tempting, even feels urgent and necessary. In this moment it even feels virtuous. When a reporter asked John Lewis once what the Beloved Community would look like in real time, he said, “***It would be a country at peace with itself-***” peace among the citizens and peace within each conscience. Beloved Community means that every day, every action, every interaction, has to have that goal in mind. We can't heal the wounds of the nation by killing each other, even metaphorically. This is what makes it so beautiful and holy and hard.

John Lewis had his skull fractured at Selma by white police on horses with batons. Another time in Mississippi, during the Freedom Rides, he was beaten unconscious and left to bleed to death under a bus. Another time he spent 40 days in a Mississippi jail, and no one knew where he was nor what was done to him – but still, even now, he talks about nonviolence as the central tenet of his life. Ruby Sales' life was changed when at age 17 she was standing on a sidewalk and a white man pointed a gun at her. She didn't see it but another white man did, a young Episcopal divinity student. He leapt in front of her and was instantly killed by the bullet. Her life as a black woman has been defined, thus, by her relationship, in a single second, to two white men – and she's still talking about the holy imperative of right relationship and love.

Last weekend your Board of Directors met in retreat to process all the responses from all the small groups that gathered in October and November in the project called “Creating Belonging Together.” About 250 of you took part in those groups – an amazing showing for something not very clearly defined at the time. (You'll be hearing more about this project in April and May as

their work moves forward.) Last week Board read the notes from every sheet of newsprint, every evaluation, every comment and concern, trying to really understand what matters to you now in this congregation, what it is and what it could become. They were attentive to common ground and also to outliers, holding it all with reverence and care. At one point, reading through comments and wishes for justice work and outreach, one person said, “There are so many worthy projects and endeavors, so many partnerships either underway or yet to begin. But,” she said, “I also see a different kind of longing, a deeper kind of commitment. It shows up in the way we’re holding race and white supremacy; it shows up in the way we’re grieving climate change and acting on environmental justice; it’s under the foundation of what we mean by trans inclusion, and what we mean by sanctuary” It’s more than single issues, as worthy as they are, or singular identities, as sacred as they are. She called it *holistic justice*, a longing and intention for holistic justice - not a social action agenda, not a to-do list, of causes to champion and goals to accomplish, but a way of seeing the world and being in the world, that is holy and whole, for the long, long haul of our lives. This, too, is Beloved Community, what it means to dwell within and be devoted to what Dr. King called a *garment of destiny*. It is the “city called heaven,” here on earth.

In an interview with Krista Tippet, Ruby Sales talked about how in the years following the heyday of the civil rights movement, people (black and white people) lost track of its core intention. She said we misremembered that the movement was not essentially about jobs, position, status, nor even desegregation. These things mattered, of course, but “when King talked about ‘the mountaintop,’ she said, “he was talking about a higher level of consciousness,” an existential shift in how we hold ourselves in relationship to one another and to God, the mystery, the eternal. “The movement became materialized,” and the next generation went out brightly expecting integration everywhere, when what was needed and wanted was community, a redefining of sacred relationship. It was hard for people – it still is (black people, white people) - not to feel disappointed, defeated and bitter, *tired, weak and worn*, because they (we, our country) lost track of the ultimate goal, which was and remains a spiritual goal.

Ruby Sales says, *I became involved in the Southern freedom movement not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. So it’s where you begin your conversation. Most people begin their conversation with I hate this — but they never talk about what it is they love. And so I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage. And I don’t see those things as being over and against each other.*

She goes on: *I grew up in a folk tradition that positioned us to stand against the wind, against the winds of Southern apartheid. Our parents were spiritual geniuses who created a world and a language where the notion that I was inadequate or inferior or less-than never touched my consciousness. I grew up believing that I was a first-class human being and a first-class person. Our parents were spiritual geniuses who taught us something serene about love. The old song goes, “I love everybody. I love everybody. I love everybody in my heart.” And so “hate” was not anything in our vocabulary. I knew and I know that I can’t control the world, but I can control myself, my internal life, and you are not going to coerce me into hating. That was very revolutionary and very profound.*

No coercion into hate.
No spiral to despair.

Your inward life is yours alone to cultivate and cherish, and your life in community is held safe by the bonds of history and hope, which are larger than you are and stronger than you are and more various and variegated than your small, thin strand and singular perspective. You are part of, an essential part of, not just a party or a family, or a congregation, but the Beloved Community, which is a radical and revolutionary household. And when you are weary and worn, when the weight of war and greed and ignorance and arrogance, devastation all around, presses in from every side, rises up like the waters, other hands will reach for yours, other feet will hold the fragile house of hope secure to its foundation, other voices take the song, till you're strong enough to sing again, and then you'll find your voice and let the others rest. This is what we need to honor on the holiday tomorrow, this spiritual inheritance of wisdom, power, hope and love.

Barbara Kingsolver, the novelist and poet, reminds us how holy and hard and gritty this is. Her poem is called *Hope; An Owner's Manual*, and it's about religion for the long, long haul:

*Look, you might as well know, this thing
is going to take endless repair: rubber bands,
crazy glue... heartstrings, sunrise:
all of these are useful. Also, feathers.*

*To keep it humming, sometimes you have to stand
on an incline, where everything looks possible;
on the line you drew yourself. Or in
the grocery line, making faces at a toddler
secretly, over his mother's shoulder.*

*You might have to pop the clutch and run
past all the evidence. Past everyone who is
laughing or praying for you. Definitely you don't
want to go directly to jail, but still, here you go,
passing time, passing strange. Don't pass this up.*

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Tiptoe past the dogs of the apocalypse that are sleeping
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