

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

How to Love a Country

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FIRST READING

The first reading is from Richard Blanco. Born in Madrid to Cuban exiles and raised in Miami, he served as inaugural poet for President Barak Obama.

Declarations of Inter-Dependence

Such has been the patient sufferance...

We're a mother's bread, instant potatoes, milk at a checkout line.
 We're her three children pleading for bubble gum and their father.
 We're the three minutes she steals to page through a tabloid, needing to believe even stars' lives are as joyful and bruised.

Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury...

We're her second job serving an executive absorbed in his *Wall Street Journal* at a sidewalk café shadowed by skyscrapers.
 We're the shadows of the fortune he won and the family he lost.
 We're his loss and the lost.
 We're a father in a coal town who can't mine a life anymore because too much and too little has happened, for too long.

A history of repeated injuries and usurpations...

We're the grit of his main street's blacked-out windows and graffitied truths. We're a street in another town lined with royal palms, at home with a Peace Corps couple who collect African art. We're their dinner-party talk of wines, wielded picket signs, and burned draft cards. We're what they know: it's time to do more than read the *New York Times*, buy fair-trade coffee and organic corn.

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress...

We're the farmer who grew the corn,
 who plows into his couch as worn as his back by the end of the day.
 We're his TV set blaring news having everything and nothing to do with the field dust in his eyes or his son nested in the ache of his arms.
 We're his son.
 We're a black teenager who drove too fast or too slow,
 talked too much or too little,
 moved too quickly,
 but not quick enough.
 We're the blast of the bullet leaving the gun.
 We're the guilt and the grief of the cop who wished he hadn't shot.

We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor...

We're the dead,
 we're the living amid the flicker of vigil candlelight.
 We're in a dim cell with an inmate reading Dostoevsky.
 We're his crime, his sentence, his amends,
 we're the mending of ourselves and others.
 We're a Buddhist serving soup at a shelter alongside a stockbroker.
 We're each other's shelter and hope:
 a widow's fifty cents in a collection plate
 and a golfer's ten-thousand-dollar pledge for a cure.

We hold these truths to be self-evident...

We're the cure for hatred caused by despair.
 We're the good morning of a bus driver who remembers our name,
 the tattooed man who gives up his seat on the subway.
 We're every door held open with a smile when we look into each other's eyes the way we behold
 the moon.
 We're the moon.
 We're the promise of one people,
 one breath declaring to one another:

I see you.
 I need you.
 I am you.

SECOND READING

The second reading is from the Gospel of Matthew.

When he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to
 him, and he began to teach them. He said:
 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of
 heaven.
 Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against
 you because of me....
 You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It
 is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine. Let your light shine that all that may see your good deeds and glorify your God.

How to Love a Country

This has been a hard week for decency and politics, for decent people who mean to be “good citizens” but can’t quite even see what that could rightly mean anymore. The state of our union is fragile. One person this week, whose household is in the midst of catastrophic medical crisis, told me “the whole world outside of me feels just like the storm inside of me; I don’t know where to go.”

Carol Caouette sent me a line from a speech by Antonio Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations: *A wind of madness is sweeping the earth; we need to break the vicious circles of suffering and conflict and create a "virtuous" circle that leads to progress.*

“A wind of madness is sweeping the earth.”

So let’s take a minute. Let’s take a breath. Eyes open or closed, I invite you into that space of rest and wide-awake readiness that is the spirit of prayer. Breathe in, and return this morning to what it is you trust, even if for now it’s as simple as beauty of the snow. Return to what you trust, return to what you know, return in your mind to your people – your family and circle of friends, your children, your beloved dead. Return to the wisdom and example of people you don’t know, not in person, maybe, but whose lives inspire you, shine a bright light, beckon your tentative hope out of its well-guarded shell. For we are not alone in this; we are encircled always by so great a cloud of witnesses who keep the faith, shine the light, kindle hope, practice joy, and drag us, against our better judgement, back to life again. Breathe in. Return to what you trust, return to what you love, return to what you know, and breathe out a prayer of thankfulness for your people, who are legion in this world. May we ever remember that we are charged to call each other toward the light.

Writing in India a century ago, Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore spoke words that could have been written this week for us and for everyone:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason
Has not lost its way into the dreary desert of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward ... into ever-widening thought and action –
into that heaven of freedom, ...*

O let my country awake.

And from Teresa Soto, brilliant UU minister serving in Oakland right now:

*To what have we promised ourselves?
To this moment in time and place.
To this community and even,
tenderly interconnected, this planet.
We promise ourselves to the idea
that we are each and all human beings.
We promise that there is something moving between us
that we cannot tame and cannot measure.
[Our] chalice is a reminder that what flame we keep inside us cannot light the way.
The light must spill to shine.*

The light must spill to shine.

We're not here to cower or conserve our energy. The light we keep inside us, under bushels, under bowls, will never light the way or ease our hearts or heal the world. We need to figure out in the weeks and months ahead how we are going to shine.

How to Love a Country is the title of a book of poems brought out last year by Richard Blanco, the second inaugural poet for President Obama, gay, immigrant, Latinx voice of our people. "We're the dead," he says, "and we're the living amid the flicker of vigil candlelight. We're the promise of one people, one breath declaring to one another: I see you. I need you. I am you." But are we? How do you love a country if you're pretty sure that half the people in it stand for something you can't ever recognize? (Or more than half? A little less? It's so hard to tell when you're standing on line at Costco, or at school conferences, or on the highway. Who are all these voters?) How do you love a country, your own country, if you're kind of hating it right now, if you're pretty sure that vast numbers of your compatriots, are living, in their minds and hearts, in their houses right next door, in a completely different nation, that they are in fact hell-bent on overthrowing your beloved country, precisely what you cherish? What is it really that they want, that we want, that everybody wants? What scares them, us, all of us, the most? Where is there a space, a literal space, even to ask such questions of each other?

Richard Blanco talks about America with breathtaking sympathy – a gritty, tender and forgiving sympathy so visceral, so intimate, you can feel the kitchen chair against your legs, the saggy cushions of the worn-out couch, the calloused hands of the farmer and the fine imported wool of the executive's suit. *We're a mother's instant potatoes at the check-out; a black teenager who talked too much or too little moved too quickly, but not quick enough; we're the guilt and the grief of the cop who wished he hadn't shot...*

Ask a person what this country, this far from perfect union, is about, what it stands for, what it means, America, ask one person and they'll tell you about sympathy and empathy, inclusion. Freedom tempered by compassion; justice by mercy, an ever-widening and unfolding understanding of pluralism and promise.

Ask someone else, and they'll start with the free market, with money, which might mean greed and might just mean survival.

And someone else will speak in barely coded terms about "law and order," or bootstrap economics, "good neighborhoods" and "good schools," and who belongs in those and who belongs in jail or on the far side of a wall they long to see from sea to shining sea. They'll speak or shout or tweet out about a golden age when America was great -

Meaning what?

Meaning white.

- a moment which has never existed, when the country was simply, simplistically, sufficiently great. To me that's a promise under construction. It's a theory. It's a summons. It's a dream and it's a dare. What will we risk imagining?

Ask someone what they're even talking about when they say they love their country and they might mention flag or freedom. But from the poet we're reminded that really, when it comes to love - true love - things get messy really fast. You can't speak in lofty, intangible terms. We have to speak of one another. We have to speak to one another, and we have to listen.

I didn't watch the State of the Union on Tuesday; I couldn't bear it in real time. Instead I went back to a prior State of the Union speech, given by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964. America wasn't great then, either, nor was Johnson himself, but here's part of what he said half a century ago:

Many Americans live now on the outskirts of hope -- some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. This administration here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America. No single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won, to help that one-fifth of all American families with incomes too small to even meet their basic needs.

Whatever the cause, our joint Federal-local effort must pursue poverty wherever it exists -- in city slums and small towns, in sharecropper shacks or in migrant worker camps, on Indian Reservations, among whites as well as Negroes, among the young as well as the aged, in the boom towns and in the depressed areas.

And, as an aside: Native historians point out that this was first time that indigenous people were ever listed equally among other marginalized populations, that their poverty was acknowledged as a threat beyond their own perceived "failing." Johnson went on that night to talk about hunger across every demographic, and food stamps, health insurance, hospital insurance, construction of public hospitals and libraries, school funding and teacher support, a domestic service corps like the Peace Corps, nursing homes, the minimum wage, unemployment insurance, mental health, housing, mass transit, and an "automation commission," which was about early technology training and public access, as well as a plan for new programs called Medicare and Medicaid. They were launched within a year.

As far as the writ of Federal law will run, he said, we must abolish not some, but all racial discrimination. For this is not merely an economic issue, or a social, political, or international issue. It is a moral issue, and it must be met by the passage this session of the bill now pending in the House. [This was the Voting Rights Act.] We must also lift by legislation the bars of discrimination against those who seek entry into our country, particularly those joining their families. We should not be asking, "In what country were you born?" but "What can you do for our country?" For our ultimate goal is a world made safe for diversity, in which all men, goods, and ideas can freely move across every border and boundary. We must advance this goal not as partisans, but as patriots.

America was not "great" in 1964, but certain truths seemed much more self-evident. The War on Poverty was systematically eviscerated by successors from Nixon to Reagan— but not all of it. The country was forever changed by a shared and spoken definition of what it means to be a decent, civilized society. By contrast, this current administration has pledged to cut 750,000 recipients of SNAP benefits (food stamps) in the current year. Last Friday it added 8 new countries to the ever-expanding and bizarrely arbitrary travel ban. It has narrowed in every conceivable way our common understanding of who belongs and who does not, who is worthy and who isn't, of food, water, land, housing, medicine, dignity, and what it means to love a country, to love and hold in esteem its people, one by one.

What would it be like to hear a President, or a candidate, talk about poor people? Not the middle class, but the poor. To speak about people who aren't working or can't work or can't find enough work or proper work, work with benefits and hours to support a person, a household, a family, a life? What would it have been like on Tuesday to hear someone speak of despair, the kind of hopelessness that comes from the absolute certainty that you're invisible, that you or your addicted loved one who injured their back on the job

and got laid off
 and has no health insurance,
 or else some scrappy nearly non-existent coverage,
 and they lost their house
 and also their car
 and so can't get to physical therapy and occupational therapy,
 even if these were covered,
 which they often aren't,
 let alone therapy for mental health, depression
 and shame,
 and so of course when the walk-in clinic prescribed oxycodone, or fentanyl, just to move them
 out of the queue,
 they took it
 (as would anybody)

and now ...

What if that were spoken as a deep sadness in the land, with tenderness, for lives squandered and our common wealth diminished? What if poverty were named as a liability, a lethal liability of capitalism, not a moral failing by someone too lazy or stupid to know better, but a criminal injury, a crime against the humanity of a person or a family? What if people heard themselves in the story and knew themselves worthy not of blame but of restoration?

We hold these truths to be self-evident... says the poet,

We're each other's shelter and hope:

We're the cure for hatred caused by despair.

We're the promise of one people,

one breath [and declaration]:

I see you.

I need you.

I am you.

“You are the light of the world,” said a teacher long ago to a frightened and uneasy crowd. They weren’t wealthy people, and the shadows of corrupted power were lengthening around them. He told them, “Let your light so shine that everyone can see it. You’re the salt of the earth, but when salt loses its saltiness, or a people loses its courage, its radical and risky compassion, forfeits its purpose, veers from its moral center... when salt loses its saltiness, when you forget or ignore or despise the poor and poor in spirit, the humble, the hungry, the persecuted, when salt loses its savor, what good is it? You could be a city on a hill, a lighthouse, a beacon. Why don’t you take the risk of shining?”

Later today, this evening, I hope you will come back to see Mick Caouette’s film about Frances Perkins. Mick is a nationally known historian and documentarian and this new work tells part of the story of how Frances Perkins came to be the first woman in a presidential cabinet (the Secretary of Labor) and the architect of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, which laid the ground for the War on Poverty and every reform since. She went to Washington in the depths of the Great Depression, and quietly set her hand, a resolute hand, to a transformational agenda: massive unemployment relief; public works programs on an unprecedented scale; establishment of the minimum wage, the 40 hour work week, workplace safety and the right to organize; the protection of refugees and immigration reform (all under the Department of Labor then); the abolition of child labor; and the establishment, out of thin air, of the Social Security system, entirely funded by the people themselves. There is no Federal aid program, or state program, no social welfare department or policy in existence now, including Medicare, Medicaid, WIC, and SNAP, that cannot trace a line to the moral vision, pragmatic brilliance, interior courage and steadfast faith of Frances Perkins. Her understanding of what our country should and could be was, in her words, a “common sense” understanding, but it was also radical, revolutionary, and prophetic – as common sense so often is.

I came to Washington, she said, to work for God, FDR, and for the millions of forgotten, plain, common workingmen.” She worked for women too. She began with women, with children, in the slums and tenements of New York and Philadelphia. She saw firsthand how poverty and despair could crush the dignity out of the bones of a human body, the spark of light out of a soul – and she saw, or thought she glimpsed, how preventable that was.

Perkins was doing social work before social work was a thing. She had stumbled unawares into the Social Gospel movement, some of it explicitly Christian, some of it implicitly socialist and communist, this movement to alleviate suffering and the root causes of suffering by centering the agency of those most affected, to bring to bear not compassion exactly (which can separate people, elevating helpers above those needing help), not compassion but rigor, to expose government corruption, corporate privilege and systemic injustice - because to ignore it was to perpetuate it, to be an accomplice, and thereby to allow something to die inside your own being. Compassion was part of it, but mostly it was a steely understanding of her own soul. Perkins was an intensely private person and an intensely religious person, but for her there could be no privatized, individual spirituality. There was no way for her to love God or be faithful except through service and tangible policy change. You love a country by loving people, by respecting them and yourself too much to normalize brutality. What kind of citizen, of what kind of republic, do you want to be? Frances Perkins said she was trying to bring the whole country more into alignment with the City of God.

David Brooks, in an essay, says that she was “summoned.” She was called, not to a career nor even a cause, but to a vocation, to an orientation of the spirit to which she tuned her entire being. It was triggered by her witnessing the Triangle fire, in New York, in 1911. She happened to be on the sidewalk that day, and she saw the faces of the young women garment workers, locked in their factory by a greedy owner. She saw their faces pressed against the windows, and saw them as they leapt from the windows to their deaths. It galvanized her, not just the one factory and not just those particular women and girls, but through them, through their particular lives and their deaths and their condition, she saw what Dorothy Day called “this filthy rotten system.” She could not then un-see it, that violation of right order. It wasn’t just bad policy, bad politics, but *evil*. Sacrilege. Resoundingly wrong. Vocation, says Brooks, is not about your heart’s desire, or the pursuit of happiness, “though nothing can bring more joy than alignment with it.” It’s as if your life were an instrument, tuned to a larger orchestral intention, and that intention is the City of God, or “heaven below,” or the peaceable kingdom, or Beloved Community, or whatever holy name you give it. What music are you moving to? What song will save your life? Vocation, says David Brooks, doesn’t come from inside you – you are called by the world outside yourself, by your times, by your place, by what you’ve seen and what you know, by the broken world and by its beauty, by a longing for right order; you are called by a love that will not let you go.

This moment now is calling us to bring to bear the full force of our faith, and by faith I mean love, and by love I mean the fiercest allegiance to what you most deeply know. I am not a Christian, I’m not even a theist, not in any way that real theists would accept or recognize, but this moment we are in now is calling us to bring to bear, in to the public square, the full force of our faith, one by one and all together in ever-expanding and sometimes unlikely circles of resistance. Normally, I’m nervous whenever religion weasels its way into politics. We have seen what kinds of mischief, sometimes lethal mischief, ensues when people smuggle their gods and their fears and their homophobia and their transphobia and islamophobia and their misogyny and their school prayers and god only knows what else into our courtrooms and policy and laws. But in the weeks and months ahead and in the years beyond, ***we must bring to bear the full force of our faith***. I’m not talking about doctrine, nor even theology – but conscience, the seed of morality planted in you as a child, and nurtured all this time. I’m talking about the light within,

the spark of divinity which connects us to each other and to everyone and to the living earth and to the holy. It is a light that's made to shine, a light that has to spill, and we have to risk believing that the shadows shall not overcome it.

From Teresa Soto once again:

*My prayers for these stressful days
Have become sharpened. Unadorned.
A single word to the bereaved and
Wailing Mother God - mercy.
Two words to
The infant child God, on trial in
an unjust system--
Tender love. And for the God who
is not a
White, robed, bearded father, but
a migrant laborer
Daddy, with a red baseball cap,
who only cries
When he thinks no one can see,
not a word, but
A silent squeeze of his calloused
hand to telegraph
Reconciliation, wholeness. There
was a time when
More words brought comfort, but
now my heart
Wants most to be true. Ready for
resistance by
Unapologetic clarity and fueled
by moving toward
A future in which we have made
all of us free.*