

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

20/20 Vision

Reverend Victoria Safford

Sunday 1 March 2020

FIRST READING *from Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible*

Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:
 There was a man all alone; he had neither child nor [friend].
 There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth...

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor.
 If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.
 But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.
 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
 But how can one keep warm alone?
 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves,
 and a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

SECOND READING *adapted from Ross Gay, poet and essayist*

I adore it when I see two people sharing the burden of a shopping bag or sack of laundry by each gripping one of the handles.

Today it was, from the looks of it, a mother and child here on Canal Street in Chinatown.

Bag-sharing at first seems to encourage a kind of staggering, as the uninitiated, or the impatient, will try to walk at his own pace, the bag twisting this way and that, whacking shins or skidding along the ground. But as we mostly do, feeling the sack, which has become a kind of tether between us, we modulate our pace, even our sway and saunter — the good and sole rhythms we might swear we live by —
 to the one on the other side of the sack.

I suppose part of why I so adore the sack-sharing is because most often this is a burden one or the other could manage just fine solo—which makes it different from dragging Granny's armoire up two flights of steps, say, or wrestling free a truck stuck hip-deep in a snow bank. Yes, it's *the lack of necessity of this act* that's perhaps precisely why it delights me so. Everything that needs doing—getting the groceries or laundry home—would get done just fine without this meager collaboration.

But the only thing that needs doing, without this meager collaboration, would not.

20/20 Vision

It's because of the music... and it's more than the music. From this amazing choir; or from Carol; or from all of our voices, shaky and off-key and uncertain as we are, so strong and lovely when we sing together; or the Youth Choir; or a single cello at a memorial service; or a child with half a year of flute lessons under their belt at a wedding... It's because of the music - and it's more than the music.

It's because of the words... from Reverend Jack, preaching with his open-ended questions; or from Reverend Sara, preaching with her open heart; or from Pastor Danny, gifting us this year with grace and power; or wisdom from Amy or Nico, or from Tehya Daniels, or Steve Kahn, or brave members on a "This I Believe" Sunday... It's because of the words, spun round a provocative idea or a haunting question or a wondering; words answering a poem or piece of sacred text, or responding to the harrowing news, or telling a story, a sliver of the sacred story we're all in... It's because the words - and it's more than the words.

It's because of the commitment here not just to words but to action, and not just to action but to transformation, starting from within ourselves and radiating out, turning the tables of power, turning our attention away from what Danny Givens calls the comforting, convenient, conventional light of the status quo, renouncing our allegiance to complicity, to things as they are... It's because of earth justice, climate justice, gun justice, trans justice, immigration justice, the dismantling of white supremacy culture, and misogyny and nationalism, militarism, islamophobia, poverty, privilege and greed. It's because of social justice and the way it intertwines here inextricably, in every way, with the life of the spirit, and it's more than social justice.

It's because of the art in the Atrium, creativity, beauty, visible signs of inward grace, which is a variation on the old definition of a sacrament - but it's more than art.

It's because of the Wednesday night dinner, a midweek miracle made from scratch for us by volunteers time after time just when we think the mountain of Thursday is too steep to get over... and it's more than that gathering.

It's because of the presence of pastoral care, visitors who come to the hospital, or make phone calls; cards of care from strangers when we're sick or sad or struggling, all of it so old-fashioned (ancient really), these ways of tenderness as old as grief, as old as loss and suffering themselves. This is love that can't be accomplished by text alone or email; it requires breath and touch and tissues and tears, salty and snotty and sacred; and hugs in the hallway, hands across a table in a coffee shop... and it's more than this as well.

It's because time and space are shaped in this place to hold young children and youth and their families and also elders, and all of us, as we travel from age to age, from day to day, teaching and learning round and round in this covenanted family of friends. It's because of the OWL curriculum, for kids and teens, on human sexuality, or Building Bridges, where a circle of adults is learning with Amy and Jack about world religions by visiting local houses of faith, beholding

how other people pray and sing and bless and name the holy. It's because of religious education... and it's more than RE.

It's because of the coffee and cookies and suppers in each other's homes, and memorial receptions and sandwiches made for students living in their cars in the parking lot at Century College, and hot lunches cooked here and then shared with neighbors who live with chronic homelessness and mental illness in St. Paul (and is that social justice or pastoral care, or worship, or religious education, or what?). It's because of the Eucharist that any ordinary bread properly blessed can become ... and it's more than the food.

It's because there's no dogma, no doctrine, no outworn, hypocritical orthodoxy here. It's because we strive here for accountability instead of judgement. We don't always get it right, but we try and keep trying. It's because we strive for transparency instead of secrecy; vulnerability instead of posturing; forgiveness rather than fear. It's because of reverence and light and delight. This was named not long ago by Josie Caouette, who was sitting with her nana, Carol Caouette, and their family, and one of Josie's friends, to whom Josie was explaining what Carol does and what kind of church she works for. "Don't worry," said Josie, "It's not the kind of religion where you have to die inside." It's because of progressive theology... and it's more than theology.

It's because of community, and the promise of community, friendships that are decades old and strong as Cor-Ten steel, and connections made maybe only once or twice, sharing a hymnal, sharing a task, but you have this sense that these truly are your people, even if you don't yet know their names, and that if you asked for help they would come through, and if they asked for your help, you would step up. A circle of strangers and comrades and friends maybe not like-minded, but like-hearted, a circle larger than it looks because the beloved dead are gathered up into it – they're all right here beside us, right inside us - and there are others not yet even here, who'll arrive long after we're all gone, and sit right here in our seats, right here in our places, because we imagined them in our lifetime, as those who came before imagined us, and made this space for us, cast this circle, set the tone and the foundation.

Because of community, and music and words; because of spirit and art; because of justice and the living earth; and how we hold children, and how we hold sorrow, and how we hold scriptures, and death and new life, and all the names of God; because of goofy laughter and righteous anger, a religion anchored in integrity and imperfection – because of all of this together, no single thing but all the things, it matters that the congregation exist and that we have a hand in its thriving.

It's all the things, and not any particular thing, because you could find any of the singular things just about anywhere, and likely more shiny than you'll find it here: you could go to a concert for music; a TedTalk for words; a museum, library, book club or school for learning and art; a restaurant for dinner; a social service agency or a political party where you could serve the world and maybe change the world; you can find go to the woods or the garden to pray, or lay a blanket under the stars for all the wonderment you need; there are support groups for grief and Twelve Step groups for recovery; the Universal Life online church will credential your uncle for weddings; and you could look to social media to find connection and community.

But these are the particulars, and what matters is their interrelation, the myriad ways that each intersects and interacts with all the others to make any meaning at all. These things all together express not only whim or desire but a deep and holy longing in us, ancient longing, to connect the light within to the sacred, and thereby connect to each other.

There are coffee shops all over, with great bagels and great wifi. What would be the point of drinking coffee here on Sundays if we weren't also (for example) teaching one another ethics, children and adults together? And what would be the point of *that* deep, inward growth if we weren't also out there in the public square, loud and proud and fired up, placing our bodies right there side by side with others in the struggle? And what would anchor *that* exhausting work of shaking the foundations, if we couldn't land here to recover and to rest once a week, to restore our souls, to hear a volunteer choir singing in the morning, *O Vos omnes, all ye who walk this road, pay attention and see if there is sorrow like my sorrow*, that music washing over us, bathing us in mystery and beauty? (That music, and sometimes other music that's more cheerful – all of it beautiful.) And how could we justify a gift like that if we weren't also all about the non-stop work of discerning how to dwell in peace together (our church a microcosm of the whole wide broken world) and seeking for truth and helping one another? It all goes round and round, no single thing without any of the others, for these are not commodities, not consumables, but sacraments; they're sacred gifts we receive and return. It's a circuit.

Because of this it matters that the congregation, and it matters that we covenant together to have a hand in its thriving, that we show up as we're able, and that we fund it, as we're able, all together. No one else is going to.

This year it's a million dollar congregation. That's the pledge goal, more or less, which makes it pretty lean, for the size of the place, the scope of the work, for all the things you do here, all the things it is; it's lean, to keep the lights on, the snow plowed, the people working here paid fairly and with proper benefits. It's lean and practical and vibrant now. If every household pledged twenty-five hundred dollars, we'd reach the goal this afternoon. But it never works like that, nor can it, nor should it, because some households here can give exponentially more than that, *and consistently they do*, while others can only give a fraction; *for some, twenty-five dollars a year is a stretch*. And in this house everyone has equal voice; we hold all the things all together, and every gift of every size is a testament to generosity and trust and visionary love. I mean that. And the Pledge Committee means it when they tell you, even if your gift is less than you wish it could be, even if this year you can't contribute much at all, just put that on your card, put zero if you have to, seal it in an envelope and send it in, and because you are needed in the circle; everybody is, and that has nothing to do with monetary wealth. This is a common wealth. Every year this all works out, because the whole is larger and stronger and more beautiful than any single one of its particular parts. We run here on a practical and magical arithmetic – practical in responsible stewardship of resources; magical in generosity, gratitude, and trust.

Something about the whole of it together being larger and well, holier, than any single part, is related to what the writer Ross Gay tells us in the reading about grocery bags and laundry sacks. He saw a mother and a child on the sidewalk, struggling merrily together to carry a grocery bag home.

I adore it when I see two people sharing the burden of a shopping bag or sack of laundry by each gripping one of the handles. This sharing seems at first to encourage a kind of staggering, as each person will try to walk at their own pace, the bag twisting this way and that, whacking shins or skidding along the ground. But the sack becomes a kind of tether between us, and we learn to modulate our pace, even our sway and saunter — the rhythms we might swear we live by — to the one on the other side of the sack. I suppose part of why I so adore the sack-sharing is because most often this is a burden one or the other could manage just fine. Everything that needs doing—getting the groceries or laundry home—would get done just fine without this meager collaboration.

It might be easier, faster, more efficient, for one person to carry the load on their own. *Everything that needs doing would get done just fine without this meager collaboration*, he says. *But the only thing that needs doing, without this meager collaboration, would not.* Meaning: cooperation itself is the thing that needs doing. Noticing each other, the pace and power and strength of each other, needs doing. Paying attention to one another, to how another person travels, to how other people carry their burdens, this matters. Adjusting your velocity, your certainty, your primacy and point of view, to travel side by side with someone else, matters. Moving together, rather than separately, matters. *Two are better than one*, says the ancient text, *for if either of them falls down, one can help the other up. If two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can protect themselves, and a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.* A congregation is a braid of many interwoven strands. You may come here only for the music, while someone else comes only for the children’s program; this one just for social action; that one simply for the snacks. But we are holding this together, holding one another and all our vulnerabilities and strengths, our loves and hopes, and this whole world, together. Clumsy as that sometimes is, swinging the bag and banging our shins, we hold the intention, the vision, the larger love, together.

We are living, here in 2020, in a dark time, perhaps the most uncertain time that any of us has ever known, including those here old enough to have come through the Vietnam War, or the Second World War, or the Jim Crow time, or the Great Depression. When I speak about this with people in those age groups, they sometimes get quiet and look down at their hands in their laps; they shake their heads. One person not too long ago did exactly this, and then looked up at me and said, “This is different, what’s happening right now. This is different. pay attention.” We are in a dark time here in 2020, dangerous, uncertain, and it’s hard to know what could come next, no matter what happens in November, or in Tuesday’s primary. This is deeper than that. Incredible damage has been done, is being done, some of it irrevocable and some of it invisible, including soul damage, psychic damage. You feel it in the center of your spirit.

One alone can stumble, even fall. Two can keep each other warm. Three can be a braided cord not easily broken.

Congregations matter. Communities of faith, meaning hope, meaning hope anchored in history and strong dreams for the future, matter. Communities where compassion is expected, and humanity, in all its lovely incarnations, and all the other living things, the living earth, are celebrated, honored, cherished – this all matters now, maybe more than ever.

I want to invite you to take just a moment, to turn to someone next to you, on either side, and ask them, what they cherish here, one thing they come for on a Sunday. What's one thing in the congregation that they want to support? We're looking for words here in these answers, single words, not sentences or paragraphs. And your role here is to listen, to receive as a sacred offering the words of someone else, entrusted to you to hold with utmost care. Ask someone sitting near you, what's one thing that they cherish, one thing they support - and listen deeply, as if it were an honor, a privilege, when they speak, before you switch and they ask you.

*Listen as your partner tells you
one thing that matters here for them.*

This church, and this campaign, are not about what of us likes best.
This is about making possible what someone else needs to survive.

These words in closing are adapted from a poem by John Fuller:

*There, don't you hear it too?
Something is calling, although the day is blank and gray...*

...still that sense of calling, of something seeking attention beyond our consciousness.

*Whose is this voice? A god's?
Surely not. It seems to speak of origins and of relationships
Between things grown apart.*

*And I remember the muezzin [in the mosque]
Singing every morning raptly, as if for himself.
Singing in the dark hour at a distance, over all, and yet outside our door,
As though the morning light had still to be charmed into being and each day a reward.*

*This voice is much like his, a commanding meditation rising from the blankness,
stirring us to beauty. It links us for a while in its reiterations, calls us to each other.*

*There, don't you hear it too?
Something is calling, and seeking our attention.*

Pay attention.