

2006-5-21 Freedom is not a Present
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
to welcome, to bless, to praise
which is our free worship
and also the power of our day-to-day life.
Song, silence, solidarity and spirit
gather us now into fresh community
and invite us to say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Naming Ceremony / Welcome of New Members

Sequence

Rain falls. I breathe.
Sun shines. I breathe.
News arrives. I breathe.
Roses open. I breathe.
Songs thrill. I breathe.
Loss hurts. I breathe.
Love surprises. I breathe.
Thoughts spin. I breathe.
Change bewilders. I breathe.
Fear strains. I breathe.
Joy knocks. I breathe.
Quiet comes. I breathe.

silence

Lives matter. I breathe. Names proclaim. I breathe. All together. We breathe. The circle of our larger breathes in the circle of this gathering.
Remembering breathes. Breathing strengthens.
We name aloud, or in silence,
the people who hold the circle of
this place in the hand of their lives,
their memories,
their joys and their sorrows.

naming

Memory matters. Hope matters. Love matters. Poetry matters. Being here matters. Singing matters a lot.

Choir Anthem

Readings

The First Reading comes from Walter Wink's amazing book, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*. He is dealing with a controversial New Testament text that you often either find criticized, ridiculed or ignored in both modern conservative pop religious life, and also by many liberal folks like Unitarian Universalists. Wink is trying to put the brief passage he quotes from Jesus into a social light. I have culled this from a much longer reading.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:39: "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." You are probably imagining a blow with the right hand. But such a blow would fall on the left cheek. To hit the right cheek would require the left hand. But the left hand in those days could be used only for unclean tasks. No, the only feasible blow would be a backhand.

The backhand was not a blow to injure, but to insult, humiliate, degrade. It was not administered to an equal, but to an inferior. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; Romans, Jews. The whole point of the blow was to force someone who was out of line back into place.

When you turn the left cheek, it now offers a perfect target for a blow with the right hand; but only *equals* fought with such blows, as we know from Jewish sources; and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality. So this act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. He can have the slave beaten, but he can no longer cow him.

By turning the cheek, then, the "inferior" is saying: "I'm a human being, just like you. I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal. I won't take it anymore."

In that world of honor and shaming, the "superior" has been rendered impotent to install shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. As Gandhi taught, "The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating."

How different this is from the usual view, that this passage teaches us to turn the other cheek so our batterer can simply clobber us again! How often that interpretation has been fed to battered wives and children. And it was never what Jesus intended in the least. No, he only advises, "Defy your masters, assert your humanity; but don't answer the oppressor in kind. Find a new, third way that is neither cowardly submission nor violent reprisal."

The Second Reading comes from the great writer, novelist and woman of letters from the South, Toni Cade Bambara. This is from her own essay in a book she edited, called *Black Women, an Anthology*.

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the

constrictive norms of “mainstream” cultures, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (which is reaction) rather than from within (which is creation).

Sermon

When I was in seminary, I took some time to acquaint myself with modern Italian culture. Not Italian American culture, mind you; being Italian American, I know about that. But I am talking about purer European Italian culture. So, without any overarching plan or discipline, I began to dip into the culture. I read novelists like Moravia and Eco. I watched Italian films by Luchino Visconti and Pasolini. I savored all their Nobel Laureate poets, like Eugenio Montale and Quasimodo. One day, despite my haphazard approach, I stumbled upon the truly great novel by Ignazio Silone, one of the most popular of Italian novelists, even in translation. The novel was *Pane e Vino*, (*Bread and Wine*). I opened it up at the used book store, just to get a sense of the story. The first words, by chance, I fell upon were these: “Freedom is not something you get as a present,” said Pietro. “You can live in a dictatorship and be free – on one condition: that you fight the dictatorship. If you think with your own mind, and keep it uncorrupted, you are free. But you can live in the most democratic country on earth, and if you’re lazy, obtuse or servile within yourself, you’re not free. Even without any violent coercion, you’re a slave. You can’t beg your freedom from someone. You have to grab it – everyone as much as he or she can.”

I have meditated on that brilliant soliloquy every day since. Not by sitting still. Not that kind of meditation. I meditate on that passage by letting the discordant events of my life teach me something about being free in an un-free situation, reluctant as I often am to learn.

One of the events that really helped me with this passage occurred two years ago, and some of you at least have heard me tell a version of this story one on one, but for different reasons.

Here it is.

When I was in Hawaii, a couple of years ago, to officiate at the wedding of the son of a former parishioner, I had the chance to taste real chocolate. I mean, chocolate that had been made from a pod that grew on a tree about twenty steps away from where I actually bought the chocolate. Local, handmade chocolate. It was expensive, but I had to try some. As soon as I tasted it, I realized that I had probably rarely ever had real chocolate before. I realized that the great companies and chocolate industries had added so many extra ingredients, had adulterated it’s purity so many times, that most of what I had been savoring all my life was probably more sweetened shoe wax than the real thing. I was simply amazed that anything could taste that good, that dazzling.

On the day I was to leave the Kona Coast for Ohio, I chanced to find a farmer’s market in Kailua. I found they actually were selling cacao pods from the local chocolate orchards. I asked myself, “How cool would it be if I brought these home with me, and actually made chocolate myself... from scratch?” I thought this, of course, not having a clue as to what “making chocolate from scratch” meant. So I purchased two pods of differing varieties. For the record, if you have not seen one, they look like late summer squash, quite large, except with a lot more festive coloring.

When I got to the airport, however, there were signs everywhere saying, “Don’t even think of bringing any fruits or vegetables from the Island to the Mainland. Especially cacao pods.”

Seeing that sign really bummed me out, but I have to admit I gave serious thought to sneaking them on board. Except, I noticed that the warning sign clearly promised prosecution and huge fines if you did that. And worse, I noticed that all of us had to pass our carry-on’s through one extra super machine, a green behemoth which apparently could detect fruits and pods through solid lead.

So I gave in and told the woman running the machine I had some pods. She immediately grabbed my cacao pods and put them in some sort of contraband bin. Oh, I tried to argue with her, of course. I told her that a cacao pod could not possibly be classified as either a fruit or a vegetable, but that didn’t matter. They were forbidden, whatever they were. Had to do with possible pests that might burrow into the skin of the pod and get loose here in Ohio.

I was very sad. Yes, and mad. And immediately I found my petty side. I don’t trot it out very often, but believe me, it’s there, just under the surface. Especially when I get tired, and I was tired that evening. I went to wait for the plane with my now empty sack, and made sure I was in the line of sight of this woman at the green machine. Then, I just glared at her. I pouted, groused, and made Picasso faces. I slouched, folding my arms with menace. I skewed up my face. I frowned the most guilt-provoking frown I could frown.

To my complete surprise, about ten minutes into my infantile display, the woman came over to me. I hadn’t even noticed her looking at me that much, but she marched up to me and said, “You really wanted to make chocolate from scratch, didn’t you.” “Why yes,” I said. “That’s the only thing you can do with those pods, right?”

That was a terrible sarcastic thing to say. I was mean. She didn’t make the rule after all, and it was a perfectly rational rule anyways.

But she said, “Well, to make chocolate you don’t need the pod. You just need what’s inside the pod. How about if I go get a knife, cut these things open, and then give you their contents inside a plastic bag? That way you can make the chocolate you want to make.”

Well, first I was dumbfounded. Then I felt ashamed of my behavior, though she in no manner shamed me. But I was even more surprised at how this woman did not let my misbehavior keep her from doing something gracious for me. She did not let my pettiness manipulate her into expressing pettiness herself. She did not allow herself to be shamed by my petulance into vengeful feelings. She was free from responding to me reactively, which would have been to treat me just as I had treated her.

Instead, she created a new way, a third way. The rule was kept, yes, and strictly; and my desire to make chocolate, which was not irrational or foolish, was also met. In the words of Toni Bombara, she participated in creation; she didn’t merely react. I, however, to use a modern colloquialism, was behaving like a jerk. She didn’t see the jerk, however. She saw a human being.

I say this woman was far more free than I was at the time. Free from coercion by my mood.

Free from manipulation by my bad behavior.
Free from thinking she had to balance
things out by returning my petulance.

This is exactly what the ancient teacher Jesus was talking about when he uttered his famous suggestion of turning the other cheek. “When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn your other cheek.” As Walter Wink so brilliantly points out, the whole purpose of this saying has been wildly misunderstood by modern folks who have suggested that it should be applied to battered women and children. Of course this is not true. Wink gets it right when he quotes Gandhi to succinctly interpret what the teacher said: “The first principle of nonviolent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating.”

Now we who live here in the United States don't live in culture where brute chattel slavery is accepted anymore. We're post Lincoln, we tell ourselves. We don't live in a culture overrun by an occupying army from a foreign land. The British left centuries ago. Jesus may have lived in such a land; but we do not.

Instead, we live in a free country. We live in a culture, we tell ourselves, upheld by the noble language of the Declaration of Independence, telling us we are each free to pursue happiness, as we will. We live in a land where the words “with liberty and justice for all” ring in our ears, liberty being a fine, elegant synonym for “freedom.”

But Toni Bombara joins Ignazio Silone, and Jesus, in cautioning us not to imagine that these noble phrases echoing in our hearts are somehow the guarantee that we have been given the gift of freedom, once and for all. Bombara seems to think there are different kinds of slavery besides the chattel kind. She speaks of racialization first, which I've addressed many times this year from this pulpit. She says we are still not free from that approach. I agree. And certainly, when I saw at least a dozen raggy men, homeless and reeking with alcohol, dressed in tattered, tarry layers, hovering about while I was buying gas at a BP on Broad yesterday, I had a hard time imagining what they could possibly understand by the idea of “liberty and justice for all” we claim to hold so dear. Clearly, we are not a culture liberated from unaddressed addiction, systemic poverty, or the systemic results of poverty and addiction, like the street drug industry, organized crime etc.

But Toni Bombara goes further. She tells us that we still need to claim our liberation from “the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of ‘mainstream’ cultures, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly.”

These are powerful words. What do they mean?

First, “the manipulative control of a corporate society” What's that about? Let me quote an essay by Chicago cultural critic Stephen Lendman, written just this last April; he answers that question with considerable force.

“Large transnational corporations are clearly the dominant institution of our time. They're preeminent throughout the world, but especially in the Global North and its epicenter in the US. They control or greatly influence what we eat and drink, where we live, what we wear, how we

get most of our essential services, like health care and even what we're taught in schools up to the highest levels. They create and control our sources of information and greatly influence how we think, and our view of the world, and them. They now even own patents on our genetic code, the most basic elements of human life, and are likely planning to manipulate and control them as just another commodity to exploit for profit in their brave new world. That should concern everyone. They also carefully craft their image, and use catchy slogans to convince us of their benefit to society and the world, like: "better things for better living through chemistry" (if you don't mind toxic air, water and soil), "we bring good things to life" (for them, not us), and "all the news that's fit to print" (only if you love state and corporate- friendly disinformation and propaganda). The slogans are clever, but the truth is ugly.

Does that sound a little paranoid to you? Exaggerated? Scary? Maybe to some. But this is not some conspiracy theory baloney, like grand theories about who really shot John Kennedy or who St. Mary the Magdalene really was. My friend M.H. in Massachusetts is married to a man who has been dealing with this business of the corporate patenting of the genetic code for over ten years. The documents, articles and testimonies I've seen through his agency have been chilling...and this is a cool, rational and moral Unitarian Universalist man, not some crackpot. And like Stephen Lendmen, he can support his claims soundly.

Second, Bambara says that we, in this "free country," still have to claim liberation from the "constrictive norms of mainstream cultures." In Susan B. Anthony's day, the "constrictive norm" of mainstream male culture was that women could have no vote in matters that concerned them. As both a Quaker from birth and a Unitarian by choice, Anthony was raised with a great respect for freedom. But the male-centered culture didn't offer her freedom as a present. Still, she was, I have to affirm, a free woman. Why? Because in Silone's words, she was free because she fought for her freedom. Or in Jesus' understanding, she simply refused to be humiliated by the constrictive culture, and lived in clear resistance, her whole life through.

What people, in our own day, come to mind who have to struggle to be free since they've never received it as a present? Who do you think is "constricted" by mainstream culture today?

Third and last, Bombara proclaims we are still not free from the "synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly." The synthetic myths...stories...are ones that claim that good and evil are as clear as black and white, as distinct as blue and orange. Whether it's the whacky us/them interpretation of the Book of Revelation, or a simplistic understanding of the Star Wars myth, we see today people "fashioning themselves rashly" based on the myth, the story, that whoever "we" are, "we" are good, and evil is whatever is done to us by others. Evil *is* otherness. This is the source of the culture of entitlement. This is the source of Muslim bashing, gay bashing, and the demonization of both the scientific method and the virtue of tolerance. Last Sunday, the media darling Rev. Jerry Falwell preached his Sunday sermon against tolerance in any form. Again, you don't have to take my word for it. You can order the tape from Liberty Baptist Church, and watch it yourselves.

No, after reviewing Toni Bombara's great words, and the teaching of Jesus understood rationally and spiritually by Wink, and after returning to my life-long meditation text of Ignazio Silone, I have to conclude that struggling for freedom is the best, and maybe the only, freedom there is. It's not a gift. It's not a guarantee or a grace. It's a struggle. A resistance to being humiliated. It's keeping oneself uncorrupted by the seductions of the modern age, proclaiming that freedom is a

gift already won, and that all we need to do now is to pat ourselves on the back, and buy the first thing the commercial jingle suggests we buy.

By the way, making chocolate is tough. It requires long fermenting of the beans, a lot of heat, cold, and endless grinding and processing. I have no idea how anyone every came up with the idea, back in Aztec days. It's a messy process, it requires surprising patience and even a level of commitment. But, in the end, you get to taste something so sweet and perfect that you almost float into the air with joy.

Funny. Making chocolate sounds a lot like grabbing for freedom. Ferment. Heat. Coolness. Processing. Patience. Commitment. But how much sweeter is a single taste of freedom than all the chocolate in the world?

Offering

Freedom may not be a gift, but gifts support this house of life that supports, encourages and challenges us to be free. Pledges and gifts are welcome now, as a sign of our free covenant with each other to dwell together in peace.

Prayer

East. South. West. North.

Let this be a circle for the encouragement of freedom-personal, psychological, spiritual, social.

Sun. Moon. Planets. Stars.

Let this be a circle for deep gratitude
that we live at all in this marvelous universe.

Earth. Air. Fire. Water.

Let this be a house of basic elements:
safety and devotion, patience and courtesy.

O Love, be with us in our meeting and in our
leaving, and dare us to be more free tomorrow
than we are today. Encircle us with your peace. Amen.