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Pure Religion Easter

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Opening Words

We are here

to celebrate life together

in the spring of the year.

How fly the years! Another Easter is upon us.

Once again the glad dances of affirmation.

Once again the waltz of flowers and children.

Once again, the proclamation of our liberty

to live lives of honesty, power, humility and joy.

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,

moved by the beauty of the world

and claiming justice for all who live upon it,

we open our hearts to greater loving,

healthier knowledge, deeper compassion

and hope of peace.

Sequence

There are those

who sing without words.

There are those who bless

without hands.

There are those who preach

of life and death without

a pulpit.

There are those who dance

without feet.

There are those who sweeten

the world without expecting return.

There are those who stop us

in our tracks without a roadside sign.

There are those who bend in the wind
without fear of being uprooted.
There are those for whom color is
simply beautiful, not a category.
There are those for whom
life is not isolation, but a community of roots
which nourishes and refreshes.
There are those who do not compare themselves
to others.
Here they are, sweet summons to sweet silence.
silence

There are those who remember and embrace.
There are those who struggle and surrender.
There are those who engage and restore.
Here they are, sweet summons to celebrations
of life and love.
Naming our loved ones in our silent heart,
or praying their names aloud in our common house, we summon the fullness of
our lives into this house of spring, Easter and life.

naming

There are those who make music with throat and breath. There are those who
make music with fingers and bows. There are those who make music for others
as well as themselves. There are those who know music
bears the imprint of life itself. Here they are.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from the writing of Walter Wink, one of the great Protestant Christian teachers of the last 25 years. His book series on a New Testament take on systemic evils in our society is nothing less than brilliant. This quotation comes from one of those books. I want you to remember that this is a deeply Christian man who is writing this passage.*

The God whom Jesus revealed as no longer vengeful, but unconditionally loving, the God who needed no satisfaction by blood—this God of mercy was changed by the church into a wrathful God who requires of his own son a death on behalf of us all. The nonviolent God of Jesus came to be depicted as a God of unequaled violence, since he not only allegedly demands the blood of the one who is most precious to him, but also holds the whole of humanity *accountable* for this death, a death both anticipated and required by God. Against such an image of God, the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion.

The Second Reading *is attributed to the pen of Jesus of Galilee's brother Yakov, called in Greek Iakopos, and in English James. This letter, found in the New Testament, has given scholars problems as to dating, but I am convinced by arguments for the early dating of 50, that is, exactly 20 years after the death of Jesus.*

Now pure religion, clear and unclouded, is this: to visit widows and orphans in the midst of all their oppressions, and to turn away from the alluring structures of the world.

The Third Reading *comes from the pen of Rita Nakashima Brock, although she also quotes Rosemary Radford Reuther. These two are among the finest Christian theologians of our era. Again, I want you to remember that as you read these words.*

The erotic underlines all levels of experience, with intense joy. By it, we are empowered to refuse the convenient, shoddy, conventional and safe. The erotic compels us to be hungry for justice at our very depths...because we are responsible. We are able to reject what makes us numb to the suffering and self-hate of others. Acts against oppression become essential to ourselves. Through the erotic as power we are less willing to accept powerlessness, despair, depression and self-denial.

We can see in Jesus' cleansing of the temple an example of such erotic power. Nevertheless, his death remains tragic. Worse, to make claims that any person's tragic death is divinely willed, so that others might be saved, *mutes* our ability to be angry about unnecessary suffering. Such claims dull the acuteness of our caring. We lose heart. "Too often," Rosemary Reuther writes, "we Christians have treated the suffering Christ as some sort of legal transaction with God to

pay for the sins of humanity, as if anyone's sufferings could 'pay for' anyone *else's* suffering. (But I say) that solidarity with the poor, and with those who suffer, does not mean *justifying* those evils, *but struggling to overcome them*. As *one struggles against evil, we also awaken new hope*.

Sermon

That hymn we just sang was written by the Czech minister, Norbert Capek. It was Capek who, eighty years ago, created the Flower Ceremony we celebrate today. As is true of some of us gathered here this morning, Capek's theological positions changed over his lifetime. Catholic first, then Baptist, then Unitarian. But when he finally found the Unitarian approach, he felt he had come home.

Capek used to celebrate this ceremony in early June, close to his birthday, when the church in Prague went on summer hiatus. Here in the States, though, many American Unitarian Universalist congregations, including our own, celebrate the Flower Ceremony earlier in the spring, at Easter time. Personally, I like it. It perfectly illustrates the significance of Easter day for a religious liberal like me.

You see, like Capek I see in these flowers a mirror of our own humanity. Like the flowers, we humans are all different: in shape, in size and in color. But, we each blossom in our own way, worthy and lovely. And because Capek saw human beings as all *equally worthy*, despite their differences, he felt that justice was something that should apply equally to all people. He felt that no one group of people had the right to dominate or hurt any other group of people. I heartily agree.

And so when some people, both in his own country and in several other nations around Europe, started to hurt the Jews and the Roma people, the so-called gypsies, Capek was deeply upset. These fellow human beings were having their rights stripped, legally, one by one. The Jews, especially, were dismissed as "mere bugs..." or "vermin," in the pamphlets published by the Czech Anti-Semite Society, and later, by the Nazi Party. Capek immediately experienced this whole system of oppression as wrong. Totally wrong. After all, there were Jews in his Unitarian church. And former Catholics with Roma ethnicity. He *knew* these people. He visited them in their homes. And thus he knew that everything being said about them was wrong. And so Capek, in his pulpit, boldly stood up against the systemic cruelty infecting his nation.

And though he was warned to stop such preaching many times by the Gestapo, he persisted. So, of course, the Gestapo came and knocked at his door, and dragged him off to the death camp at Dachau, where, in time, they killed him.

Capek was an inveterate hymn-writer. He even wrote hymns while in Dachau, to comfort fellow prisoners. If someone can write poetry while in a death camp, we can be sure that all of his hymns deal with reality, not just poetically, but honestly. In the hymn we sang this morning, Capek struggles with various ideas about God, about ultimacy. Not surprisingly for someone so acquainted with the bigotry that led to death-camps, it is a hymn full of questions.

“What to call you?” asks Capek. “Fears infernal haunt my heart...what to give you? What to call you?” He wants to use the tender language of family, Mother/Father, but he wonders, should those familial words, mother or father, be associated with terror?

Capek, it seems, was wrestling with fearful, violent images of God, images revealed by “fears eternal” or the reality of a death camp. The God he once worshipped when he was younger, all-powerful and beyond question, was associated with hell, both below and here. But once he began to question such doctrines, he slowly embraced Unitarianism. He began to wonder why anyone would even imagine that violence and bigotry were ultimate in this universe, that is, expressions of some all-powerful God.

During his life, however, Capek the Unitarian seems to have come to the same conclusion as all of the terrific Christian authors I selected for you this morning. If you associate ultimacy with words like compassion, unconditional love, caring community, courage, challenge, and truth, that’s one thing. No problem. But if you associate ultimacy with violence, hurt, oppression, cruelty and bigotry, that is entirely something else. Against such an image of God, Walter Wink reminds us, quite forcefully, “the revolt of atheism is an act of pure religion.”

“Pure religion.” Those are the words describing the religion of Jesus written by his brother in a letter written some twenty years after that death. He goes on to say that “pure religion...clear and unclouded... is to visit widows and orphans in

the midst of all their oppressions, and to turn away from the alluring structures of the world.”

The Greek word I translated as oppression literally means “pressure.” And believe me, widows and orphans in ancient times were under far more severe pressures in those days than many in modern times. *One*, there was no form of social security, banking or CD’s at all back then. *Two*. Women didn’t even count as people in the first place...a child was considered an orphan, legally, when his or her father died, not when his or her mother died. You had to be lucky enough to have a larger clan wealthy enough to take you in, or you would simply become a beggar on the street; not just poor, but utterly destitute. And *three*, due to the political cruelty of the era, most widows and orphans without wealthy families either ended up as debt slaves, or dead on the street in a short time.

Pure religion, says Jesus’ brother, is to *visit* widows and orphans as they experience the horrific pressure-cooker of an uncaring society.

Visit them. That is, get to know them. Know them as people. Human beings. When you visit them you will begin to understand what they are going through. Then they will not be statistics, but persons. They will not be charity cases, but brothers and sisters. When you get to know them, you will *stand up* with them and be counted. You will stand and struggle by their side. You will gladly stand against any systemic degradation of women and children. And here’s where Easter fits in to all of this: for the Greek word translated as *resurrection*, *anastasis*, means just that...to stand, as in, to stand up and be counted, or to stand against. Stand against what? The “structures of evil,” I called them last week in my sermon on that topic. Evil, I said, is not, at least for me, best described as the violent work of a single emotionally disturbed individual. But rather, I find it makes more sense to use the word *evil* as a symbol for the systemic structures maintained by good, but rather unconscious people, in order to shore up a social order that keeps everyone stratified. You know, poor women and children on the bottom, men of power and prestige on top. Euro-Americans with expected access to power, blacks and Latinos with strongly limited access. Etc.

But how do you tear down such structures? Organization, ultimately. Sure. But Rita Nakashima Brock suggests that healthy erotic power is the necessary first step before you discuss organization. The word *erotic* may be surprising to

some, but really, *erotic* is just a form of the Greek word “eros” which means, “to feel deeply, especially love.” Sure it sometimes can mean sexuality in modern usage, but I assure you, both anger and compassion can be forms of “eros” too, for they are deep passions. After all, you have to come to love people before you can care enough to *get* angry about their condition, or feel compassion for their suffering. You have to *feel* first. It’s never an intellectual exercise, or worse, shoulds or guilt, which get things done. In short, in order to confront systemic oppression, *you cannot remain unconscious about your surroundings...* real human beings whose humanity is as important to them as yours is to you. Capek knew this. He paid attention to what was going on and named it. Yes, he suffered for what he said. But note, he did not *choose* to suffer. He *chose* to tell the truth. There is a big difference between the two. To choose suffering is merely masochistic. To choose to tell the truth can only be the result of actually feeling what you feel deep enough to say it. This is erotic power, says Brock. It transforms.

And, she makes clear that this erotic power is the source of any real joy in our lives. It actually empowers us. It helps us “to refuse the convenient, shoddy, conventional and safe. The erotic compels us to be hungry for justice at our very depths because we are responsible. We are able to reject what makes us numb to the suffering and self-hate of others. Acts against oppression become *essential* to ourselves. Through the erotic as power we are less willing to accept powerlessness, despair, depression and self-denial.”

Frankly, these strong words sound exactly like Easter language to me. They are words of real honest-to-God resurrection. Not the “safe, conventional” resurrection of popular piety, which reduces Easter to the magic trick which resuscitates a corpse. No, not that. For to be truly alive, to feel erotic power coursing in our veins, is this too: to not treat scripture as literal, or even as ultimate authority; rather, it’s to accept the power of *eros* as our authority. “Truth for authority,” the old saying goes, “not authority for truth.”

And so, although people sometimes tell me that it’s not proper for a minister in one religion to criticize other theologies, I have to politely disagree. Being critical of violence in the name of religion seems basic to me, not something requiring tiptoe diplomacy. I will never make comments about Christians, Buddhists, atheists, or any other group. Speaking in such generalities is simply baloney. And I will tell anyone who speaks that way the same thing to their face.

But I will gladly, without shame, speak out against violent doctrines supported by any religion, a-religion or philosophy. Because, being a minister as long as I have, I have heard the stories of children of all ages, young and grown, who have suffered violence in family, church, school or street. I have heard a thousand such stories. They have filled my heart to the brim with deep feelings, or *erotic power*, in Brock's language. And so I say this with on my own authority: No parent can claim the right to demand the brutal death of his or her own child, even if that parent claims to be God. And, for that matter, no adult, parent or otherwise, has the right to harm one hair on any child's head. Ever. To the end of time. Thus, any theology which proclaims that violence...especially the violence of adults toward children... is ultimate in this universe, and that someone called a Father can demand the death of his own son and then blame everyone else for the murder is simply despicable. Walter Wink, as a practicing Christian committed to the non-violent teachings of Jesus as revelations of ultimacy, or divinity in this world, was right to say what he said about atheism as an act of pure religion.

And the Christian theologian Rosemary Reuther too, is right in asserting that this kind of pro-violence theology *mutes* our ability to be angry about unnecessary suffering and dulls the acuteness of our caring, causing us to lose heart. She joins the brother of Jesus in declaring that solidarity with the poor, and with those who suffer, does not mean *justifying* those evils, *but struggling to overcome them. As one struggles against evil, we also awaken new hope.*

And that new hope is what Easter is about to me as a religious liberal. It's resurrection itself. In our own real bodies, which have been here all along but which maybe we didn't notice until *eros* itself opened our eyes. Eros, an old Greek word, not just for feeling and love, but for G-d. Not a violent god worthy of our atheism, but the presence of an ultimate Compassion in our lives worthy of our daily practice, worthy of our struggles to bring joy to a world dominated by systems of prejudice, distortion, injustice and division.

Capek himself summed up my point this morning in a hymn of his which they used to sing in Prague on Flower Sunday. I cannot say it any better than this.

*Enough tears are running down faces.
Enough hearts are being wounded.
Now, let eyes shine with joy instead.*

*For someone is calling to us in love.
Join your heart of solace with the hearts of
those who suffer. Take in the perfume of
the flowers our faith. And breathe the air
as if it was love itself.*

Offertory

The privilege to be generous in a world that, without our asking, generates the seasons, the flowers, children, sunlight, dark clouds, chocolate, songs, and music, is a great privilege indeed. May this time of offering be our honor, and be a time for our strengthening.

Flower Ceremony