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Rosa Parks

Opening Words

We are here

on a cold winter's morning

to worship, to celebrate that we are alive,

and that we can work together for freedom,

freedom for each and all, as those before us did,

and as our children will do in days to come.

Come, let us begin:

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.

Sequence:

See that man named Ivan Gyorgovich Yevelenchuk in Kiev, watching the Ukrainian hockey team in Torino with a beer in his hand? He's my long lost brother. See that woman named Ming Ue, going over names for her coming baby while walking along that snowy stone path along the large lake close to Xining? She's my long lost sister.

See that boy standing there outside his house in the cold, preparing for tomorrow's fearful coming of age ritual? He's Christian Ngame, a Maasai from Kenya and he's my long lost son.

See that girl named Chantal, in Bezier in the south of France, who's reading a book about why some of her Muslim schoolmates cover their heads? She's my long lost daughter.

See that older man, Alfonso Saavedra, riding his horse across the grasslands in Patagonia, sipping maté from a gourd? He is my long lost grand father. See that older woman, Myint-San, chopping peanuts and

ginger for a supper salad in her house along the south Irawaddy River in Myanmar? She's my long lost grandmother.

O Love, how great is my family! How lucky I am to be part of this communion called Humanity. From the ancient savannah of Africa to the far corners of the present earth, my family roams, and my heart is struck silent in reverential wonder. This silence, like nourishing bread I share with you. This silence, like joyful wine, I share with you.

silence

O Love, how often have I been nourished
by you, how often have you resembled the
faces of those who have brought me to this day
by their nurture, challenge, devotion, care,
stories and strength. I celebrate my participation
in all human life by naming those I especially
revere in my own life, either aloud or in my silent heart.

naming

O Love, as I leave this table of silence and remembrance, I long to travel
on courageously from this place... on bright wings of song...

Readings

The First Reading comes from the fine biography of Rosa Parks written by Douglas Brinkley just six years ago. The acronym AME means African Methodist Episcopal. This church, together and the African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion, have always counted among their ranks the most influential people: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and here in Ohio, over in Dayton, Paul Laurence Dunbar, the poet.

In the little free time left between her job and her work for the NAACP, Rosa made herself a regular presence at St. Paul AME Church. The wood-framed Hardaway Street sanctuary had burned down in 1933, and

Rosa helped spearhead an effort to erect a new one. The congregation temporarily rented space at Tullibody Hall on the campus of Alabama State University. A year later, thanks to an overwhelmingly successful fund-raising drive, a new redbrick edifice was opened on Hall Street, just across the street from the university. Due to its central location, St. Paul AME became a spiritual way station for out-of-town preachers.

In later years Parks would remember how inspired she was to hear civil rights sermons from the pulpit of her own church. A stalwart member, Rosa taught Sunday School at 9:30 a.m. and served as stewardess for the 10:30 a.m. service, preparing the elements for the Lord's Supper—bread and wine—and making sure there was a white linen cloth to place them on. She considered St. Paul AME her “special living room,” and she became even more involved in 1953 under the pastorate of the Reverend Henry Duncombe—a master spinner of parables and riddles—when the church underwent a renovation program, expanding its space by two thousand square feet.

The Second Reading *comes from the
Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Rita Dove,
this from her book On the Bus With Rosa Park,
published seven years ago.*

How she sat there,
The time right, inside a place
So wrong it was ready.

That trim name with
Its dream on a bench
To rest on. Her sensible coat.

Doing nothing was the doing:
The clean flame of her gaze
Carved by a camera flash.

How she stood up

When they bent down to retrieve
Her purse. That courtesy.

Sermon

Thirty years ago, in seminary, I took a course with the jaw-breaking title “The Materialist Basis of Black Women’s Spirituality.” The professor who taught the class, like me, was raised in Detroit. And so she and I enjoyed sharing memories, both of having worked in auto plants, and of witnessing the great uprising of 1967, (or “riot”) when jeeps and tanks rolled down our wide streets. We both were born in a rambling, terribly racialized industrial Great Lake city. And because we connected so, I really got a lot out of her class.

The class was a revelation to me. I read Nora Zeale Hurston for the first time, and many other African American women. I remember we spent a whole class on the symbolic significance of certain foods in many Southern African American families. And, as part of our coursework, we were to attend the services held in one of the historic “black churches,” such as a National Baptist Church, an AME church, an AME Zion Church, or a COGIC, the pentecostal Church of God in Christ.

I attended a good example of the last of the four. It was Ephesians Church of God in Christ in Berkeley CA. The famous gospel choir there, under the direction of Edwin Hawkins, has been the source of many great voices in the national gospel music scene. It was an interesting place.

I noticed many differences between the worship style of Ephesians, and the worship patterns of any Unitarian Universalist congregation you might care to compare it with. There is a difference between an hour and fifteen minute service and a four and a half hour service. There is a difference between a 23 minute crafted written sermon and an hour long improvised sermon that is chanted more than spoken. There is a difference between holding a hymnbook and not holding one, because every one has memorized all the verses of all the songs, hundreds of

them. There is a difference between a full ensemble, with massive drum set in a band pit, and a single piano.

But most important of all, the dress was different. Every single human being in that church, except for me, was dressed to the nines. I mean, dressed in clothing of such clearly superlative quality that you wanted to just run up and touch the perfect material. The kind of clothes you might wear to a wedding, maybe, if the king and queen sent you an invitation. Formal, tailored, expensive and beautiful.

At the next class period, we talked about this obvious visible difference between a Unitarian Universalist Congregation in a prosperous part of town, and a COGIC congregation in a really poor area of town.

And we found out that the reason for this difference in dress had to do with theology. Or, more properly, eschatology. Now don't run off scared by this word. The question this magnificent theological word asks is simply this: "what will our future be?"

If you are of a supernatural cast of mind, you might think of eschatology as having to do with life after death. But the word doesn't necessarily imply that at all...*eschaton* in Greek simply means: "those things which come round at last." And throughout religious history, the eschaton, "the things which come round at last," have often been more of the character of "liberty and justice for all," in the immortal phrasing of our founding national documents. "Having a place at the table" is another fine eschatological phrase. "Freedom for all" is also eschatological.

So, in short, to live an eschatological life is "to live your life based on your best hopes for justice, freedom and abundance for all."

In the COGIC, the superbly dressed men and women were living out their own best hopes for a life of freedom, joy and abundance for all. To put off the slave's chain of history and don clothes good enough for, in the language used in the COGIC, the "wedding feast of the lamb" is *to live, in the present*, your hopes for the future.

This eschatological element is also found in the communion ceremonies, as celebrated in many of the historic African American churches. Charles Wesley, the Methodist preacher who, with his brother John, crafted the theology which underscores the AME and AME Zion churches especially, referred to the communion ceremony, the ritual sharing of bread and wine, as “the antipast of heaven.” Antipast is an old English word, clearly related to the Italian “antipasto” and it means: “the first course in a great feast.”

In other words, when Rosa Parks was active in St. Paul’s AME Church in Birmingham Alabama, she was among folks who, beside dressing for the future, ritually enacted the future. The simple egalitarian communion rite served as but the first course in the great eschatological feast of the coming age. It was, in fact, a prefigurement of the time when all human beings will share resources, live into justice by their hope, and thus will be free. Call it heaven on earth, call it the fabled future, call it the New Jerusalem, call it what you want. But, please, be aware that they were talking about hope *in this world*, at least as much as they were talking about any life after death. After all, many of the most well-beloved African American spirituals rising out of the slavery era used traditional religious language to *represent* actual, and very concrete *geographical* instructions enabling escaped slaves to cross to “the other side.” Not to the other side of death, mind you, but to the other side of a river, a boundary, a fence that separated slave South from free North. Yet on the surface, the language would have appeared innocuously theological.

The first reading this morning informed us that Rosa Parks loved to prepare the communion elements every Sunday at her church. I’m saying that she was, therefore, deeply informed by the eschatological religious culture permeating the so-called historic black churches. I’m saying that this constant vision of a hopeful future, clearly embodied in her worship life, helped her to interpret her church in the warm and sacred language of home and hearth. The church was her “special living room,” as she put it.

And so there she is, Rosa Parks, the quiet seamstress of Birmingham, Alabama, steeped in dreams of a coming era of freedom when she can sit on any seat in the bus, drink from any water fountain, and befriend anyone she so chooses.

And because she is so saturated by her church's hope and dream of freedom, equality and equity for all, she dares to do two things. One: she attends the Highland Citizenship School in Tennessee, where she learns about the power of organizing and working together to bring about just ends. And two, she spends a great deal of time contributing to the strength of her supportive church, by being a religious education teacher, and by being a fund-raiser.

First. The Highlander School. This remarkable institution preached both "Racial Democracy" and "An Economically Just Society." It trained many people who left their impact on our lives, Martin Luther King Jr. himself, Julian Bond, and the mostly unsung civil rights genius, Diane Nash, whose life I invite you study. The song "We Shall Overcome" first came to life at this remarkable institution in Tennessee. The KKK and even local authorities did everything they could to destroy the school, ranging from smear campaigns by calling it a communist outpost (in the McCarthy era!) to actually padlocking all the entrances to the buildings. Myles Horton, the founder and soul of the school, retorted when he heard this, "You can't padlock an idea!"

Rosa Park's part-time employer, Virginia Durr, a white woman, paid her way to the school, a difficult thing to do since Rosa Parks was what people used to call a "proud woman," someone not likely to admit she had neither money nor luggage for such a trip.

Myles Horton wanted to use education to create, in his words "a new social order." When Rosa Parks arrived at the school, and found *for the first time in her whole life* a community which prefigured a free and equal world just like the communion ceremony did...where everyone, regardless of color, had equal place at the table of that school...she knew

she had found another “special living room,” another home for hope and heart.

What did she learn at that school, Rosa Parks? Why, she learned something I say in this school of life almost every Sunday, namely, “that we are all in this together.” As Camus reminded us in the affirmation words this morning, any freedom, if it is to be won, it must be won by the “union of all.” Civil rights work, Rosa Parks learned, was not the work of heroic individuals blest with super powers, but of many ordinary, but indignant, people, *working together*. And not just working together, mind you, but organizing, planning and studying together. Of course, as I read about Highland School, the first thing I thought of was our own local interfaith organization, called BREAD. Here is another example of a group which understands that social justice isn’t a miracle, but grows from the slow, deliberate work of many indignant people joined at the heart, and calling for justice *en masse*. When the BREAD organizers recently proposed getting every member congregation to commit to bringing their regular Sunday attendance to the next BREAD meeting, I balked at first, thinking that was a pipe dream. Then, I as I thought of Rosa Parks and her times, I began to realize that *not* trying to gather such numbers *would be a far more foolish pipe dream*.

For you see, Rosa Parks didn’t sit down alone on that bus on that famous day in December 1st 1955. Many had sat down on that seat before her, and were thrown off the bus. She herself had been thrown off the bus once before for sitting in a section denied her by state law. On March 2nd of that year a fifteen-year-old young woman had refused to get up when asked. A few months later, an 18-year-old young woman was also arrested for the same reason. And, Alabama wasn’t the only place where things were fermenting...there had been a brief bus boycott over in Baton Rouge, because a black man refused to give up his seat. Around this time, Rosa Parks remembers an upswing of civil rights preaching in her own church. Consciousness was rising everywhere. There were conversations, planning meetings, coordination and research. Even on that very day she refused to move from her seat, she had lunched with a powerful local lawyer fighting for desegregation.

And so finally, her arms full of Christmas presents she had just bought, and various drugstore sundries, but figuratively also holding the hand of every one of these other women and men, in Alabama and beyond, inside and outside of pulpits, Rosa Parks sat down. She remembered the point I just made perfectly clearly later on: “When I made that decision, I had the strength of all my ancestors with me.”

But you may ask, aren’t you making more out of this than needs to be made of it? Didn’t she simply say, years later, when asked if she had planned to defy the law that day, that hour, deliberately and with a stopwatch in her hand: “My only concern was to get home after a hard day’s work.” Did she say that? Yes. Was she tired that day? Sure. She had worked hard. And she wanted to get home, and get on to her evening activities with the NAACP Youth Council. She had an arm full of Christmas presents. And she wanted to go home, to her familiar living room and rest a bit.

But for years she had been educated to justice, and taught all the way to equality. She had tasted the antipast of heaven a thousand times at her church, eating and drinking a dream of a future that made sense, with no one turned away from the table. She had been schooled for a good long time in indignity, community and power.

And so, I am convinced that, just as the spirituals had both a spiritual *and* map-maker’s meaning at *the same time, without contradiction*, so did Rosa Parks, in saying what she said, offer us two meanings without contradiction. Yes, one, she was just plain bone-tired, and wanted to sit down on the bus without having to move, and just get home. But two, she was tired in the sense of “sick and tired” ...of segregation and oppression, and she just wanted to get to that holy Home prefigured by her church life and her Highland School Life, the Home where Hope lives, the Future where Justice cries out as it’s born.

Now the place where she was sitting was, in the awesome words of our poet, Rita Dove, “so wrong it was ready.”

Ready for what? *Ready for a person who was ready.* Ready for a person who had opened herself to training, teaching, education, and yes, to her own real feelings. A person who had once been not ready at all, shy and timid, but who grew into her readiness, wearing “her sensible coat.” And that sensible, clean-lined and well-tailored coat was of the kind of clothing worn, as I learned at that class in Seminary, in the Black Churches, as a prefigurement of the day of freedom to come. This garment signifies the kind of courage that only cooperates with the future, and never the past. Her biographer tells us that when the officer told her “Well, I am going to have you arrested,” that Rosa Parks said “You may do that.” Brinkley interprets this beautifully: “Her majestic use of ‘may’ rather than ‘can’ put Parks on the high ground, establishing her as a protestor, not a victim.

Rosa Parks did more than sit down. She stood up again, and hardly, like Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony et al, ever to sit down again. But it’s a shame that such a remarkable person is almost always reduced to that one act of sitting down. Her later life and notable projects in Detroit are usually mentioned only in passing. Her child-hood rarely makes the essays.

But because today is also the beginning of our annual congregational budgetary and pledging process for the coming fiscal year, called the canvass, I wanted to point out the *second* thing that Rosa Parks did, while dreaming of freedom for all, besides attending the Highland School. She also participated actively in what we are doing today. She was a church fund-raiser. She got buildings built, bills paid, roofs repaired and rooms painted, as well as the bread cut and the wine poured. She was not a romantic, reducing spirituality to wonderful feelings. She was a committed institutionalist. Oh, a visionary, yes, but with her hands on the pulse of the real world, a practical person who realized that it was her joy to actively and richly support one of the chief institutions that had prepared her for justice, and got her ready and able to sit down when the time came.

So I say this: Rosa Parks was a person of many years, not just a singular moment. But this is no different from any of us this morning. And that's true whether you are dressed to the nines or dressed casually, whether we break bread in this place, or simply welcome silence.

I wonder, what singular moment have you getting ready for all of your life?

Offering

For the health of this institution,
for its shelter and spirit and solace,
we give and receive our gifts of
pledge and purpose...

Circle Prayer (*congregation makes circle around minister, and responds to litany with a simple chant:*)

Neither day all the time nor night all the time.

Circle round, circle round.

Neither up only or down only.

Circle round, circle round.

Neither the individual nor the community only.

Circle round, circle round.

Neither one kind of person only,
nor another kind only.

Circle round, circle round.

Neither the secular alone, or the religious alone.

Circle round, circle round.

Neither the beginning without an end,
nor an end without a beginning.

Circle round, circle round.

O Love, wholeness that radiates deep Life
within our daily lives, and rounds our days
with a healthy hope, be clear in our singing.

Be kindled. Shine. Amen.

Song: Circle Round For Freedom

Blessing: We Shall Overcome