

### **Opening Words**

We are here,  
*the winter cold breaking at last,*  
to worship, to celebrate the fullness of our lives,  
*to weigh our lives in the same scales*  
as music, stars, robins and whales,  
*and to give thanks for our human heart,*  
and our capacity to reason together.

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

### **Sequence**

The sun shines,  
the rain falls,  
the stars reel.  
It must be me.  
It must be you and me together  
who notice, who praise, who thank.  
The world hurts,  
and love hurts sometimes.  
It must be me.  
It must be you and me together  
who feel, embrace, heal, hold and speak out.  
Music nourishes,  
the very food of love,  
and it is me, it is you, it is you and me together  
who produce it with joy  
and are fed by it.  
But the world nourishes too  
with its own music  
of late winter robins and distant whalesongs,  
and Venus brightly piercing the night;  
and we are fed by that music,  
and so we thank,  
and praise,  
and then set down our praise  
for the safe heaven of this silence.

*silence*

Hearts rejoice, hearts hurt:  
the songs of grandchildren,  
the lament of loss...  
and so we write ourselves  
into the music of love  
by naming aloud,  
or inside, the loves of our lives,  
the losses,  
the uncertainties.  
It must be you and me together  
who do this,  
who compose such music

### ***naming***

Music nourishes,  
the very food of love, and it is me,  
it is you,  
who now are wondrously fed.

### **The Readings**

**The First Reading** comes from Obery Hendricks brilliant book, *the Politics of Jesus*, published in 2006. I personally think it's the finest religious book to have come out in this century.

In 1990, House Whip Newt Gingrich hired professional pollsters to produce what commentator Bruce Miller calls "a lexicon of demonization." Gingrich circulated the results of the poll in a memo entitled "Language: the Key Mechanism of Control." The memo instructed conservative politicians to describe liberals as often as possible by using pejorative words and phrases, including "sick, pathetic, traitors, anti-flag, anti-jobs, anti-family, corrupt, selfish, cheat, steal, criminal rights, permissive attitudes, pessimistic and radical."

Ann Coulter, a darling of the right, has made a cottage industry of demonizing liberalism. She writes "Even terrorists don't hate America the way liberals do." Sean Hannity equates liberalism with wickedness without you even having to open his 2004 book *Deliver Us From Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism and Liberalism*. Journalist Michael Savage shows eagerness for his own ideas to be similar by the title of his book "*Liberalism is a Mental Disorder*."

Not only do conservatives paint the political philosophy of liberalism as the product of insanity, they actually characterize it as the creation of the devil. Rev. Jerry Falwell declared, "Our battle is with Satan himself."

Today's conservatives (*most of whom claim to be Christian of some sort*) seem to ignore some of Jesus' most important pronouncements, such as "Love your enemies." By this Jesus did not mean to give enemies free reign to wreak harm and havoc. He was referring to the disposition of one's heart, to the importance of "keeping track of one's own humanity," as Cornel West puts it.

**The Second Reading** *is a wonderfully clear and spiritual poem by the late and great Polish poet Anna Swir. It's called "I Do Not Accept."*

I Do Not Accept

I renounce this fingernail already worn  
by my grandfather.  
This head occupied for two thousand years  
by the bloody body of Julius Caesar.

The dead sit on me like a mountain.  
The carrion of barbaric epochs,  
of bodies and thoughts decays in me.  
Cruel corpses of centuries  
ask that I be as cruel as they.

But I am not going to repeat  
their dead words.  
I have to give myself  
a new birth. I have to  
give birth to a new time.

### **Sermon**

*Cruel corpses of centuries*, writes Anna Swir,  
*ask that I be as cruel as they.*

*But I am not going to repeat  
their dead words.*

*I have to give myself  
a new birth. I have to  
give birth to a new time.*

Those are beautiful lines to me. Clear and concise as good poetry often is.

Anna Swir uses a phrase often associated with evangelical Christianity. A "new birth." I have to give myself a "new birth," she says. It sounds a lot like "born again," to me.

But Swir is not writing as an evangelical, or even a Christian. She is using the metaphor of new birth in a very different way. She is not turning from her own personal sins, but from the cruelties of the culture in which she has been raised. She speaks of Caesar's

assassinated corpse, inside her head, bloody and dead, the carrion of the centuries, the decay of the ages. The human violence of ten thousand years. Anna Swir wants to be born again, thrust out of that history, that culture, that system, in which *she* was born, into a whole new world. And I think she would like us to join her.

Anyone who has learned history from grade-school on up is filled to overflow with horrific images: with the trenches and stench of mustard gas, the billowing smoke rising above Auschwitz, the blazing desert oil wells, the rubble of cities, the wail of sirens, the verbal violence of propaganda and innuendo.

Anna Swir wants to be born into a new life where violent actions and language are not the norm, where she can be free to be kind, loving, caring, supportive, cooperative and tender.

Guess what? I want to be born again too, into that same world.

But before I am born again into a world where violent action and language is not the norm, I have to be born again in myself. I have to renounce the world of violent language and action in *me*. After all, like most of us in this room, I have been soaking it up like a sponge all my life...from hearing the show *Gunsmoke* on the radio when I was a kid, (bang, bang) to seeing very well-intentioned but still chilling films about violence like *Schindler's List*. And, I have also seen what I would call more porno-graphic films about violence, like almost everything Governor Schwarzenegger ever did in his movie star days, and most late-show horror movies involving the slashing of teenagers in some haunted house. The news-papers, the websites, the cable news shows: reports of violence and innuendos are simply everywhere. Like air.

Obery Hendricks, in his magnificent book, *The Politics of Jesus*, points out that some of the violent and distorting language of our *present* era was actually planned and created by real human persons. He names Newt Gingrich for example. Although this idea of orchestrating nasty language seems like a cynical thing to do, it was also, perhaps, strangely insightful about a great deal of human responsiveness. Because God knows the response from many liberals has been tit for tat, name for name, demonization for demonization. Sean Hannity, named by Rev. Hendricks as one of the blossoms grown from the seeds sewn by Gingrich, now even has a section on his popular TV show where political liberals get to call in, and then rant and rave and shout at him, denouncing him personally, which they do with explosive invective that probably has Mr. Gingrich rocking with glee. Mr. Hannity just smiles, and gives you that look: "See? Told you all the liberals were crazy!"

As a Christian professor at Union, Obery Hendricks distances himself from the equally Christian (Roman Catholic) Hannity's theological pronouncements about liberals by reminding us that Jesus' central teachings were entirely liberal. Yes, *that* Jesus, the son of Mary, who was born in the Galilee two millennia ago, and who died during the rule of the Roman prefect Pilatus in the year 30 or thereabouts. *That* liberal Jesus. Now, of course, not liberal or progressive in the modern *American* political sense; I am not telling you

that Jesus has breakfast with President Obama every morning...that would be taking him out of time and place. But liberal in the basic meaning of the word: generous to one and all, egalitarian, compassionately just, and radically welcoming.

Now as you know, over the centuries since his death, people have made a big deal about Jesus. They turned him into a God. They converted him into a philosophical abstraction, or a frightening judge to scare children at summer camp. They painted him as a blond in a bathrobe and hung the picture in church parlors. Or, more recently, among a small circle of skeptics, they have denied he ever lived, assuming he was simply the god of wheat dressed up by cunning storytellers, or even a fairy tale invented by *way* too clever profiteers.

As I have made clear over and over, none of these options are supported by the peer-reviewed critical methods I have always found most trustworthy in uncovering historical reality as best we can. And today I uplift the general consensus of modern critical historians that although we can't say much about Jesus for sure, (where he was born, what he looked like etc), and although more than half of the words attributed to him come from later minds, later generations, there *is* little question that the historical person at the core of the reports actually said (albeit in his own tongue): "Love your enemies."

Sadly, Christian commentary on that ancient proclamation is the history of avoidance and squirming, with very few exceptions. Part of the squirming, of course, has to do with the word "enemy" itself, which is hardly a soft and easy word. But "love" is the word that really gets in the way. "How could anyone find any love in their heart for a brutal family member, a monstrous political tyrant (fill in the blank) or an oppressive religious leader?"

But this word "love" doesn't say anything about love in the sense of feeling, love of the romantic or appreciative or even worshipful kind. It simply uses the Greek verb "agapao" which means to love with the mind rather than with the heart or body. It means to *decide* to love, not to *fall* in love, or *warm up* to someone.

Furthermore, to love one's enemy does not refer to isolated family brutes in the first place...no, the whole context of those words is set in a discussion of how to respond to the occupying army of Rome. And it doesn't involve feeling cuddly toward a centurion (or your abusive father), it involves *refusing to forget* the essential, if damaged, humanity of the centurion... or your father.

What does that mean? To love one's enemies means to remember that those who oppress are also caught up in their own web of oppression, and that they *can be reminded* of that. When you love your enemy you never forget or deny the violence of your oppressor...on the contrary, you name their oppressions loud enough for them to hear. But, you invite them, by your actions...*not* your feelings...to understand what they are doing to you in a new way. Jesus gave many examples of what this means - both hair-raising and humorous - but let's use a modern example instead. Let's cross the ocean...after all, far away examples always seem to be easier to take than things too close to home. This story comes from Walter Wink, a brilliant liberal Christian theologian. And it takes place in

South Africa during the days of Apartheid, when whites ruled and blacks suffered. Picture a city street if you will. A sidewalk. A black woman, about 35, is walking down the street with her three children, ranging in age from, say, five to ten. An older white man, his face distorted with his own inner bile, walks past the woman and spits in her face. She looks at him with a smile and says “Why, thank you! And now, for the children...”

Suddenly made conscious of what he has done, his conscience suddenly alive, the white man’s face falls, droops. He darts across the street, and tries to get away from the painful self-reflection on his experience with the woman and her children. But I assure you, he will not be able to run away from it...it will shadow him all the rest of his days...and sleepless nights.

By saying what she said, she loved her enemy. She did not imagine him to be beyond hope, or worthy of crucifixion, but rather, she invited his heart to open to what he was actually doing. His act was totally despicable, but she still regarded him as human as herself. And her act serves to clarify the meaning of loving one’s enemy. To love one’s enemy is to affirm that the human race is not divided into two, and only two, categories...the indescribably good, and the monstrously evil. To love one’s enemy is to affirm that we either all work together (despite the suffering visited upon some humans by other humans), or we don’t have even a small chance to survive until the end of the century. It’s to realize with Anna Swir that, in order to survive, we have to be deliberately born again as human beings who refuse to continue to do what our ancestors did before us:

*Cruel corpses of centuries, she writes,  
ask that I be as cruel as they.  
But I am not going to repeat  
their dead words.*

You see, loving enemies is a decision, not a romance.

“*I am not going to repeat...*” she insists...even if she *feels* like she wants to.

Now the story of the woman in South Africa is a very dramatic example. And the children’s story we heard this morning was a very playful reminder that many people who irritate us are not really our bitter enemies...we may just misunderstand their motivations, context or approach, and over time, we will come to love them, with warm feelings and everything.

So I want to offer you an example somewhere between these two poles. I hope this will illuminate the phrase “love of enemies” clearly.

Before the recent Presidential inauguration, I read and heard all of the complaints that Pastor Warren was going to offer the invocation at that amazing event. Most of the upset came from a community that I suppose I am part of, the so-called “gay community.” But, unlike many vocal protestors, and even though I am in no way an evangelical Christian

(or a Christian at all, in any ordinary meanings of that term), I was actually moved by Senator Obama's leadership in asking Warren to pray.

The issue as to whether there should be prayers at all at such a function is not on my mind today (although I think if you're waiting around for that to change before another century passes, you may have to live with disappointment).

President-elect Obama knew that this country is made up of people of all kinds, including people, like Warren, with distorted and disastrous understandings of people like me. But this guy is not going to just wake up one morning and suddenly be a pro-gay/lesbian marriage champion. Picketing his church, writing him excoriating letters, chiding him for his prejudicial and unkind biblical interpretations may make *me* feel good, but it's hardly appealing to this man's humanity. Or my own, for that matter.

And Pastor Warren is human. To categorize him or his compatriots as devils, as monsters, is to merely take a page from his theology book and fling it back at him. It's to divide the world up between the saved and the damned, the right and the wrong, the righteous and the evil, the "us" and the "them," the "either" and the "or."

Did he say cruel things during the Prop 8 campaign in California? Yes. I can't interpret them any other way. Does he proclaim things I find baffling and outside the realm of what I would ordinarily call moral, i.e. the blood atonement of Christ, the reality of hell etc.? Yes, indeed. Do I think he has spoken from both sides of his mouth at times? Yes. There is enough evidence of that. And is he a human being, a citizen of the nation I claim as my own, I who also am a human being? Yes. Vilifying him will not change him. But, inviting him to pray in front of the world, in front of literally billions of people, as Senator Obama did, appealed to his very real humanity. And Pastor Warren, wouldn't you know it, rose to the occasion. In a country where many televised conservative evangelical mouths (Robertson, Hagee, etc.) excoriate Islam on a daily basis, Warren quoted from the Qu'ran several times, beautifully. In a world where the president of the Southern Baptist Convention once famously said, "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew," Warren quoted the *Sh'ma*, the foundational Jewish devotional text. And in the middle of his prayer, he said, "When we focus on ourselves, when we fight each other, forgive us. We are united *not by religion*... (i.e. this is NOT a *Christian* nation MLB)... but by our commitment to freedom and justice *for all*. Help us to share, to serve and seek the common good for all." And at the end, he didn't pray in the name of Jesus Christ *Our* Lord, co-opting all listeners as if they were part of some Christian Nation. No, he spoke only of his own personal experience, which he did not foist off onto anyone else.

Pastor Warren spoke the downright liberal words I just quoted. They are everywhere on the internet. He cannot take them back. "Freedom and justice for all." "Seek the common good for all." These are progressive words. Inclusive words. Expressions of what Obery Hendricks would call, with acclaim, "liberalism."

Admittedly, I would have prayed a much different kind of prayer had I been asked. I do not share theology with Pastor Warren at most counts. But, so what? He rose to the occasion from within his tradition, stretching it to be as inclusive as possible.

As I say, this is as the President-Elect suspected he would. President Obama, you see, is a sort of liberal Christian. He disagrees with Warren on many things, including, quite pointedly, Roe Vs. Wade, which he has said to his face. But he knows that he has to be president of a nation that includes folks like Warren by the tens of millions. And millions more even more conservative in theology and politics.

And that, if the conservatives were to kill off all the liberals they excoriate, and the liberals were to kill off all the conservatives that make them blow steam out of their ears, we'd end up with a whole nation of righteous, but very dead corpses. Dead as Caesar with knife wounds, dead as Jesus with nail wounds, dead as healing women and heretics burned to piles of white ash, dead as a thousand million slaves.

Warren is not Obama's enemy at the level of that South African woman's white oppressor. But their disagreements are real and powerful, and there is no question that Pastor Warren used oppressive language in California. I think President-elect Obama was completely aware of that. But Mr. Obama chose to decide to act in a loving way even to a man who, although good in many ways, has really hurt my brothers and sisters. By doing so, Senator, now President, Obama, I think, demonstrated a far greater respect for the teachings of Jesus than Pastor Warren did in California.

But in asking him to pray, he appealed to a humanity deeper than his religion, and Warren rose to the occasion. I am not so cynical as to think it was calculated, by the way, politics as usual, a just-for-show-choice. I think it was a principled decision, based on the teachings of Jesus, the wise Galilean Jew. And for that matter, the gay Quaker Bayard Rustin, the Baptist Martin Luther King Jr., the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi, the Catholic humanist Danilo Dolci, the Muslim Badshah Khan, the Maori Te Whiti, the mothers circling the Plaza in Argentina and the Unitarians and Universalists Noah Worcester, Lydia Maria Child, Mary Ovington, John Haynes Holmes, and Adin Ballou.

That's real leadership, by the way. Taking such risks. And I applaud the president for it. Anna Swir is right. To continue to use the violent language of our dead ancestors is to perpetuate their bloodshed all over again. To call those who despise us as devils by the same names they call us is only to mirror and slavishly imitate their tragic games. To name their cruelty plainly, to resist it, to find ways to call them to account, but to refuse to demean them or use violence against them, is to be born anew, and to recognize that all of us, all of us are human, and that we're all equal in the eyes of Love.

### **Offering**

We offer an opportunity for folks who are members and friends of this congregation to express their love for this house of challenge and care by bringing something of their substance to the common purse. Some send their gifts by mail, others by computer, and



some bring them forth in this time when we speak of our deepest values. Thank you for your kind gifts, however you give them.

**Bartokian Prayer** (to a tune in the Concerto for Orchestra by Bela Bartok)

And when the winter clouds fade away,  
and the ground below our feet warms,  
we'll know that soon the shoots  
of a scented spring  
will be blossoming by the May.

And when the human heart human stays,  
and when frozen hate also warms  
we'll know that soon a peace  
better than any spring  
has a chance to hallow our days.