

**Restoration**  
Rev. Mark Belletini & Rev. Eric Meter  
April 5, 2009

**Opening Words**

We are here  
*to celebrate life as the spring blossoms,*  
and to imagine the dawn of a greater age,  
*a time of justice and peace for all,*  
so that such a great vision might inspire  
*how we choose to act in the world, day by day.*

**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**

Tulips, not talibans.  
Crocuses, not cronyism.  
Hyacinths, not hoodwinking.  
Daffodils, not damnation.  
Paperwhites, not puritanism.  
Forsythia, not forcefulness.  
Magnolia, not moguls.  
Leaves, not lying.  
Buds, not bullying.  
Blossoms, not blame.  
Oh Spirit of Slow but Spellbinding Spring  
would that all who live  
might know deep within  
that they too can bloom  
as the spring flowers do,  
that they too  
can choose to dazzle, not hide,  
give, not keep,  
open, not conform.  
And as the flowers unfold in silence,  
so may we too now unfold in silence....*silence*

Love, not indifference.  
Honesty, not pretense.  
Grief, not gloom.  
May we now bring forth our

honest love and grief in private silence,  
or, if desired, by naming aloud  
with tenderness those whom we miss,  
those whom we deeply love, and  
those whom we are learning to love.

*naming*

The flowers are blooming. We are blossoming.  
And “Let me thrill,” says the poet, “with spring’s first flutes and drums...”

## **Readings**

**The First Reading** *is the famous story often associated with this day in Christian congregations, taken from the Gospel of Mark, which we think was composed around 71 CE.*

So they bring the colt to Jesus, and they throw their cloaks over it as a saddle, and then he gets on and rides. And many others cut leafy branches from the nearby landscape, and spread them on the road. Those leading the procession keep shouting “Hosanna!” (which means Save us!).

And he goes into Jerusalem and climbs up into the temple courts, and takes stock of everything; but since it was already late afternoon, he returned to Bethany where he was staying.

Next day, he comes into Jerusalem again. And he climbs into the temple courts again, and begins to chase out the vendors, and turns over the tables of the cashiers who make change, along with the chairs of the pigeon merchants. He would not let anyone use the temple courtyard as a short cut to carry containers from one part of the city to the other. Then he started teaching them, quoting the prophets: “My house is to be seen as a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have turned it into a hangout for crooks.”

**Our second reading** *today comes from an essay titled Education as Liberation by Rev. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, California. Here Parker speaks of education in the broadest possible sense, one that encompasses classrooms full of young children as well as the ways all of us incorporate the lessons life bestows.*

The core of our evolving faith is a humanistic concern that every being have its chance. Thus, the goal of liberal religious education is liberation. Its purpose is *humanization*. To humanize is to release the full powers of human life. Its opposite is dehumanization. Dehumanizing forces and realities oppress, deny or constrain the fullness of human life. They kill the soul.

Expressed in traditional religious language, the purpose of education is to save souls. The

soul dies when a person loses any capacity to make a response to the world, or surrenders to passivity. A soul is saved when the flood of feeling is restored. Sensitivity comes back into the eyes and the ears, life's touch and feel is renewed.

To be an educator is to cooperate with grace. To speak of grace is to say that even when dehumanizing forces hold sway there is something in life that will not allow life to be suppressed. It *does* happen that injustices are protested and repaired, that broken hearts are mended, and broken relationships healed. It does happen that fresh creativity and commitment bring an end to destructive activities and replace them with new forms of beauty. Swords *are* beaten into plowshares; children play in fields that were once the site of war; the hungry are fed and the grieving comforted. These things happen. It is not guaranteed, by any means, but the force of grace - regardless of how its source is understood - does operate in our world.

## **Sermon**

*I. Mark:* It's funny how it always happens. I choose a topic for a sermon, in this case, the word "Restoration." I thought I knew what this meant when I chose the word in August, but everything I thought seems to have slipped through the sieve of my mind into oblivion. I start to fear I have made a big mistake. I am afraid those handy around the household will think I am going to talk about hinges and hammers out at Restoration hardware store at Easton, or that history professors at any one of our local bastions of higher education will think I am going to address some spiritual aspect of the English royal line after its Restoration in 1660; or even something about our own Universalist religious heritage, since some of us, at least, used to call ourselves Restorationists back during the Revolutionary War era.

But then it happens. The explosion. The word *restoration* pops up just about everywhere the week before the sermon. I am up in Chicago last Sunday evening, walking to the place where I am going to conduct the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony for my dear friends Ann and Barbara, and lo and behold, a local Methodist Church is offering a Lenten sermon series on the idea. The sign outside says: "Restoration: Reconstructing the Spirit and Finding Yourself Again."

I like it.

Then I listen to the radio as President Obama travels through Europe, and I hear all the commentators use the word "restoration" to describe the renewal, the repair, the renovation, the revitalization of the relationship between the European nations and the United States, a relationship which had fallen into painful ruin during the last administration.

And then there is the whole initiative of our BREAD organization this year, which intends to find ways of restoring blighted Columbus neighborhoods to their original beauty and pride.

So now I know how I want to begin this sermon.

Rebecca Parker reminds us that our lives get dehumanized after a while. Economic pressure, sudden loss, broken or tense family relationships, disappointments, bureaucratic frustration, healthcare nightmares, the plight of the homeless destitute on our streets knocking at our sensitive consciences, the war, the trivializations, the innuendo, deceptions and hurt, even just the ordinary wear and tear of life...all of these leave us feeling dehumanized, which is the same as NOT feeling very human. Our ideals and visions get frayed. Our hopes wobble. Our expectations waver.

Humanization is the solution, she says. The whole educational fabric of the liberal church, writes Parker, is at the service of re-humanizing ourselves, that is, finding again what we have lost, restoring ourselves, our souls. Worship, classes, groups, cooking, singing, organizing, teaching...all of it is *for our restoration*.

*II. Eric:* And oh, the times when we need it. To feel we have options again. To be shown how much we matter to someone we care about. To feel that there is something in our being as colorful as Spring flowers. To know that we are part of something good and useful, beautiful even. When I think of restoration I also think of less lofty achievements, those that are no less crucial. Along the Red River in the upper Midwest, crews and families are working hard to restore power, roads, bridges, businesses and homes. If you want to experience some of the hardest work imaginable, lend a hand cleaning up after a flood. I was in New Orleans and Plaquemines Parish along the Delta a year and a half after Hurricane Katrina. We had taken youth from my former congregation on the church's first service trip in years. While over 2,000 miles away, we had a connection to the place. One of our families had lived there for over 20 years. So we boarded a plane on Easter afternoon and went to lend a hand. Among the most arresting images were the surprising locations of two school buses. The first, was nestled 20 feet off the ground on one of the seemingly endless hills of debris that had been cleared from Jefferson Parish. The second school bus sat all by itself by the tree line in a Plaquemines Parish town. That's where the bus had ended up. Before the storm, it had been begun its day at the side of the road by the school, several hundred feet away. That said, restoring school buses was out of our league. What we spent the week doing was cleaning out houses and preparing dry wall for painting. We placed family artifacts that could be salvaged like trophies out on the front steps of the homes we worked in. Other items that could not be salvaged, like a water-soaked high school year book, were piled up with the rest of the rubble along the Mississippi River levee. Those homes were not restored by the time we had to leave. Far from it. The restoration we did see signs of was found in the eyes of those whose homes we were helping to clean out. And there was also something equally impressive, if not exactly restoration, in the eyes of our youth. Seeing first hand how much remained to be done, they saw, in many ways for the first time, their own mark on history. One of the young women on the trip didn't quite understand all our talk about service when we talked about this as a service project. What she heard was *trip*, as in *vacation*. Over the previous months she hadn't heard much about the aftermath of the hurricanes and assumed things had been taken care of. The degree to which that was not the case was eye opening to her. And to her great credit, when she saw that she was really

going to be working, and working hard and dirty, she dived right in and only complained when I, aware of the moment but oblivious to her presence, just about knocked her over with a board I was carrying. Oh, and the name of the town where we worked that week after Easter? Phoenix, Louisiana. I kid you not. Yet unlike that mythical bird that lives, dies in a burst of flame and then is miraculously reborn out of its own ashes, ours was not the work of resurrection there along the Mississippi. But we *could* help in the restoration. We *could* help provide a new foundation. The resurrection of the villages of Plaquemines Parish would take place over time and would only be made possible by families finding work, returning home, getting on with the business of living. Most of what we saw we could not hope to restore. We couldn't snap our fingers and make things right, rebuild the schools and restart the buses to get the children there. We left grateful and weary, wondering what the future would hold.

*III. Mark:* You can't paste the leaves back on the trees in the autumn when they fall off. Restoration is not scotch taping something that appears broken, says our story this morning. No, the leaves will unfold in the spring, the sun will light the dawn, the vision of justice will take root...if we do but two things: one, speak honestly and openly about our pain and brokenness, and two, do what little we can without thinking we have to do it all by ourselves. Restoration asks for our confidence, our faithfulness...it asks us to cast ourselves on the flow, that is, the grace, the *renewal* that can move through the world if we get out of our own impatient way. Speaking out about what needs to be done, making clear what *will* humanize us comes first. But what follows requires both patience, attentiveness and faithfulness rather than violence and quick-fix theories. The story of this so-called Palm Sunday is a case in point. Here's the whole story.

Long ago the Hebrew prophets had spoken out for justice, that is, for creating a society where everyone a chance. But they looked out and saw dehumanization everywhere. And they named it.

The prophet Micah observed: *There are those who plan injustice while they are still in bed. When they get up, they do it, because they claim the power. They desire land, and seize it. They covet houses, and take them away. They defraud the people of their homes, and the natives of their land.*

The prophet Amos wrote: *I hate, I spurn your temple festivals, and I refuse to accept your sacrifices. Spare me. No, let justice swell up like well-water, and compassion flow like a flood.*

And Yisayahu, or Isaiah wrote: *It's time to fast in the temple, and what do you do? You see to your business. You cheat all of your workers. No, this is the kind of temple work I want: Help the oppressed to be liberated, share your bread with the hungry, house the wretched poor yourselves. Then shall the dawn come at last. For my house is to be seen as a house of prayer for all the nations.*

Knowing what the prophets before him said, Jesus does two major things: First, he, a mere peasant, rides into Jerusalem on a colt, his followers processing around him holding fresh cut branches in their hands. This was first and foremost an act of political satire, for

at the same moment, on the other side of town, the Roman governor was entering the city with his legions, who bore frightening metal standards, not beautiful palm branches, in their hands.

Next, having made clear by his act that Roman rule held no promise for the city, he enters the temple the next day, and does a strange thing. He overturns tables. Sets animals free.

Had he popped his cork, turned purple and lost his cool? No, *obviously* not, since the soldiers watching him on the rooftops didn't interfere, and if what he had done was violent, they surely would have. No, he was simply acting like the prophets before him ... Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and doing a symbolic act. He was breaking open a tall stone fence which surrounded the temple itself. The fence went three quarters of the way around the building, and then was completed by the thicket of money-changers (who were NOT dishonest and cheating people...that's just classic anti-Jewish bigotry...) and the stacked cages of animal vendors. On the fence it clearly said: *If you do not belong to our people, and are found on the other side of this fence, you alone are responsible for your death, which will follow right away.* Jesus felt that Isaiah was right, that instead of the Romans and Jews being at odds, instead of the capitulation of the conquered people to their overlords, what would happen if they could all pray in the temple together instead? Eat meals together? What would happen if people were not *robbed*, in the prophet Jeremiah's words, of the opportunity to restore the temple to what it once was, namely, an institution that *favored* justice and held out against injustice? Wouldn't it be better, he was asking, if we opened things instead of shutting each other out? Wouldn't it be better if this temple was torn down, like the ancient Shiloh temple was torn down when it supported injustice, and instead, built a new temple where the nation's leaders could organize to house the poor, feed the hungry, and create opportunities for enemies to sit down and meet instead of hate?

Jesus was preaching a restoration of justice, a renewal of vision and purpose that had gotten lost over the years. He preached a humanization to replace the dehumanization of an institution that had lost its way, and its spirit. And to use the phrase of Adrienne Rich, he was not at all exceptional. He simply refused to be faint-hearted in reconstituting the world.

*IV Eric:* When our institutions are reconstituted, when they are restored, then something is *restored in us* as well...our humanity. In Rebecca Parker's imagery, "we see and hear and feel again." Restoration gives us fertile ground to work again, where we can lay fresh foundations for future building. When the framework of society is sound, then we can be daring and creative in our humane justice work.

From Plaquemines Parish to old Jerusalem we can stand with those who work to recast the institutions of our society to serve human need.

Jesus tried to restore the institutions of his day to their former prophetic purpose. His personal story ended tragically, since courageous action can never offer us guarantees; but the story of his vision of a more humane world lives on.

Restoration is not about a hardware store, an historic period or any particular religious movement. Restoration is about humanizing the ways we relate to one another. Restoration is about knowing that injustice won't necessarily last when brave women and men provide a compassionate alternative. Restoration is not about the past. It's about what possibilities the future may hold. Restoration is about the light that goes on in the eyes of youth when they see themselves as citizens for the first time.

What needs restoring in your life? In your home? In your neighborhood? Maybe it's time once again to bring the grace of life to bear and see what can be restored, recast, returned to beauty. You never know until you try.

### **Offering**

Only the free gifts of the members and friends of this congregation keep it strong. There are no outside sources, no hidden resources, no denominational assets to draw on. To be an independent congregation, as all Unitarian Universalist congregations are, means to bear the full responsibility for everything ourselves, the cost and privilege of our freedom to decide for ourselves. The morning offering of gifts is now given and received.

### **Aubade for Two Voices**

The dawn is coming. I see its light  
reaching over the horizon.

*The dawn is coming. The daylight  
is being restored before our eyes.*

Justice for all is not an illusion, but light.  
Peace is not a clouded over, but already glows on the horizon of our hope.

*Walls that separate us can be torn down.  
Walls that shelter people can be built up.*

Love is not a weakness but a great strength.

*Organization is not folly, but faithfulness.*

Hope is sign of health of spirit.

*Being true to each other is perfect kindness.*

Look! The dawn is upon us.