Summer Kitchen: On Transformation

August 22, 2010
Rev. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
on a warm summer's day
to worship, to celebrate the Gift of life itself
with the practices of our beautiful heritage:
spirited words, silence, story and music;
reason, passion, proportion, kindness & love.

And so, we pledge to journey together along the ways of truth and affection, as best as we can name them now or may learn them in days to come; that we and our children may be fulfilled, and that we may speak to our world in words and lives of peace, justice and goodwill."

The Sweetest Sound….A Ramadan Story

This story comes from Afghanistan and is very old.

Once there was a old King who liked to ask riddles. He particularly liked to ask riddles of his four grown children. Sometimes the King knew the answer. Other times he didn't. But he asked those riddles just to hear what his grown-up daughters and sons would say.

One day, just before the beginning of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar when everyone stops eating during the sunlight hours, the King asked his four children, "What is the sweetest sound you have ever heard?"

The first child, a son, immediately said, "Oh, daddy, that is such a simple riddle. The sweetest sound is the sound of a flute."

The second child, a daughter, disagreed. "Yes, the sound of a flute is sweet. But I think the sweetest sound is the sound of a harp."

The third child, another son, declared, "The flute and the harp do make sweet sounds. However, I have heard a violin. And that is, by far, the sweetest sound."

The King looked at his fourth child, a daughter, who merely smiled. The King noticed the smile and said "Hmm, it looks as if my fourth child is not yet ready to give an answer. I will wait."

Days passed. The month of Ramadan started. The King stopped asking riddles and spent more time thinking about things, as is the custom during Ramadan. You see, during the month of Ramadan, all Muslim adults refrained from eating and drinking between daybreak and sunset.

This is called “a fast” and it’s a basic teaching of Islam. The fast serves many purposes. First, the time and energy normally spent preparing food and eating can be spent thinking about things deeply, which is called prayer. Second, the fast reminds those who have plenty to eat of how it feels to be hungry; you want to make sure that no one else is hungry when you yourself know what hunger is. Charity is another central teaching of Islam. Third, the fast helps teach people about what it is they really want, once they get past the habit of eating three or more times a day without thinking about it.

After sunset each day, the fast is broken by a meal, called Iftar. Often people invite friends over to eat.

So it was not unusual when the daughter who had not answered his question invited the King, their mother the Queen, and her two brothers and her sister over for the Iftar one evening. When everyone arrived, they were quite surprised. They were brought into the dining room, but there were no platters of food on the table, just empty plates and silverware. Nor could they smell any cooking smells from the kitchen. They didn’t know what to think.

Just then, a man came in playing the flute. It was a sweet sound. He was followed by a woman playing the harp, then by another man playing the violin. Finally, the three musicians played together, some very beautiful music. The music was loud, which covered the sounds of their growling, hungry bellies.

Finally, his smiling daughter came in, carrying a simple covered pot and a ladle. She uncovered the pot, dipped the ladle into the pot and filled a bowl with a delicious spicy soup called Harira. The ladle hit the edge of the soup bowl, and King smiled broadly and said, "Yes, yes, my smiling daughter. I get it now. The sweetest sound is the sound of a spoon ringing on a bowl of soup when your stomach is growling. The most delicious meal you will ever eat is the meal that you eat when you are hungry."

Sequence
Here we are. Here *we* are. Here we *are.* Here we are. Not in Shanghai’s best late night eatery. Not in Paris, the blue light of evening cooling the cobblestones. Not in New York, with the Times on our lap in the park. Not in Akron at the Universalist church there. But here. This very place. This room. No other.

Now we are. Now *we* are. Now we *are.* Now we are, not when the famous teacher saw his own reflection in the Lake of Galilee. Not when Susan B. Anthony set the world of the mind on fire. Not when Rumi spoke the light of his verse to illumine love as if for the first time. But now. Right now. No other time.

That we are. That *we* are. That we *are.* That we are is the beginning and end of our religious life, the wellspring of all of our questions, the stone on which our answers are shipwrecked, the match that kindles the light of our compassion, and the ever authoritative summons to a silence that restores us to our strength, our sighs, our submission to reality, and our soulfulness.

silence

Here we are, carrying with us all that we were, all the hearts we have touched and who have touched us over the years. We remember those among them whom we especially remember today, now, in this place, whispered allowed if that pleases you, or imagined silently within, if that is your pleasure.

naming

Here we are, bathed in a filtered late August summer light. Here and now. And rising within us, a deeper light, the light of our hopes, our intentions, our dreams, our pledges and promises. And that light is going to shine….

The First Reading *is a poem by Sandra Mortola Gilbert called The Summer Kitchen. In Italian, Sicilian, Greek and many other Mediterranean families, as well as in a few other cultures, a summer kitchen is a second kitchen in the basement or cellar of a house where all the incredible bounty of the garden can be processed and canned and turned into sauces in a cooler environment than the upstairs kitchen.*

In June when the Brooklyn garden boiled with blossom, when leaflets of basil lined the paths and new green fruitless fingers of vine climbed the airy arbor roof, my Sicilian aunts withdrew to the summer kitchen, the white bare secret room at the bottom of the house.

Outside in the upper world, sun blistered the bricks of the tiny terrace where fierce *socialist* uncles chain-smoked Camels and plotted politics; nieces and nephews tussled among thorny blood-colored American roses; a pimply concrete birdbath-fountain dribbled ineffectual water warm as olive oil.

Cool and below it all, my aunts labored among great cauldrons in the spicy air of the summer kitchen: in one kettle tomatoes bloomed into sauce; in another ivory *pasta* leaped and swam; on the clean white table at the center of the room heads of lettuce flung themselves open, and black-green poles of zucchini fell into slices of yellow like fairy tale money. Skidding around the white sink in one corner the trout that Uncle Christopher brought back from the Adirondacks gave up the glitter of its fins to the glitter of *Zia* Francesca's powerful knife.

Every August day *Zia* Petrina rose at four and stood at the sink. Her quick shears flashed in the silence, separating day from night, trunk from branch, leaf from shadow. As the damp New World sunrays struggled to rise past sooty housetops, she'd look suddenly up with eyes black as the grapes that fattened in the arbor: through one dirt-streaked window high above her she could see the ledge of soil where her pansies and geraniums anchored. Higher still, in tangles of heat, my uncles' simmering garden grew, like green steam swelling from the cool root of her kitchen.

The Second Reading *is a brief except from a story sent to me by the author, Abdellah Taia. He gave me permission to quote it in this morning's service.*

We had broken our fast about two hours earlier. Night had fallen. And Hay Salam was abnormally quiet.

My mother, M'Barka was sleeping soundly.

Ramadan was an exhausting month for her. But in spite of the exhaustion of fasting, she insisted on preparing sweetmeats every day, crêpes, *harira* of course, a soup she liked very acidic, made with lots of tomatoes and lemon juice. Once, my sisters would willingly have helped her to make every day of the sacred month a spiritual and gastronomic feast, an endless ceremony. Now, the house was empty. Three floors utterly devoid of people. Everyone had left to go somewhere, to some other town, some other country, another world, with strangers, people I would never know and would never really accept. At home now, there was only my mother, my little brother Mustapha, whom we saw very little, and me.

Sermon

My friend John came by this week with the bounty of his large garden. A plastic bag swollen with tomatoes colored like a perfect sunset; an even huger plastic bag stuffed with six kinds of aromatic basil, and a smaller sack with sleek cayenne peppers, all red-orange and shiny.

When my mother used to take in the bounty of my grandparents' gardens during the summer, she always brought it all downstairs to the "summer kitchen," the stove found in the cool basement where huge vats of *sugo*, or sauce, and broth, could simmer for hours without steaming up the already humid house. Sandra Gilbert's echoes my memory in her poem: **in one kettle, tomatoes bloomed into sauce; in another ivory *pasta* leaped and swam;**

My grandparents' gardens are long gone. But I am lucky enough to have friends like John who supply me with comparable amounts of produce all summer long; so I too now stir sauces in large pots, like Gilbert's Sicilian aunts. But now, with the advent of air-conditioning, my summer kitchen is the same as my rest-of-the-year kitchen. I don't need a cool basement any more.

So yesterday I spent hours picking the stems off tomatoes, and throwing them into a pot so I could slowly transform them into three-months' worth of *sugo* as I simmered them for hours with garlic and wine. It took hours to take the leaves off the woody stems of the basil by hand. Despite the ease of modern food processors, there ultimately is no "easy way out." Transforming raw, perishable food into lasting, rich nourishment just takes time.

M'Barka, in Abdellah Taia's story, also used to spend a lot of time transforming raw ingredients into delicious food. Despite the fact she was fasting all day for Ramadan, she cooked the chickpeas, lentils and caraway all day, adding, he tells us, the souring agents of lemon juice and tomatoes to really finish the *harira* soup up nicely. No rush there.

Gilbert's aunts cooked all day. M'Barka in Morocco cooked all day. The aunts did not fast. M'Barka did. But both finally brought their families to the table for a delicious feast where community could be deepened and memories were made holy. The Sicilian aunts didn't celebrate Ramadan, and M/Barka didn't celebrate the feasts of Italian saints, but both parties

knew a lot about patiently transforming raw ingredients into nourishment for body, soul and spirit. M'Barka's family was a lot smaller now too, Abdellah says. Many rooms were empty. But she still made sweetmeats for Ramadan.

The children's story this morning, about Ramadan, gives reasons for fasting, a practice that baffles many non-Muslims. Remember? "The fast serves many purposes. First, the time and energy, normally spent preparing food and eating, can be spent thinking about things deeply, which is called prayer. Second, the fast reminds those who have plenty to eat of how it feels to be hungry; third, the fast helps teach people about what it is they really want, once they get past the habit of eating three or more times a day without thinking about it."

Now this idea of fasting all day to gain consciousness of poverty and hunger may seem to be a very different from those Sicilian aunts in their summer kitchen, cooking…and nibbling…all day long. But the fact is, almost all Italian immigrants who came to this country, during the great days of immigration in the first three decades of the last century, came here because they knew hunger in Italy. Their bellies growled there because they were born in poverty. To this day, the great chef Mario Batali describes many of the classic dishes he cooks as "cucina povera"…which means not the *summer* kitchen, but the *poverty* kitchen. My grandmother, for example, grew up so poor that her family couldn't even afford wheat flour to make pasta, so they knocked chestnuts down off the trees in the hills, roasted them, cracked them open laboriously, and then ground the chestnuts into flour to make *tagliatelle,* or noodles. They were not vegetarians but they ate a vegetarian diet…they could not *afford* meat, using it only on Christmas or Easter.

In my household, shaped by this *poverty culture*, you never threw anything away. You made broth with the carrot tops you cut off, the leaves of the celery, the leftover bones. The poor learn how to transform ordinary, unglamorous things into dishes that not only nourish, but astonish.

And not just the Italian immigrants, but many immigrants have learned this art, the art of transforming fragility into strength, and leftovers into feasts.

Transformation is a word found in a variant form in our church Vision statement. It goes like this: "We envision together a world *transformed* by justice." There is also a form of the same word in our Mission statement: "We are here to relinquish the safety of our unexamined privilege for the freedom to engage in *transforming* justice."

Let me unpack those two uses. They are not saying the same thing. The first says that, together, we can see a world transformed, that is improved, made nourishing, made whole…*by* justice, which we promise to help to nurture.

But the Mission statement is deliberately more ambiguous. The phrase "the freedom to engage in transforming justice" can be interpreted fairly in several different ways. But the way that speaks to me this morning is this: I think it's saying that any justice work we do helps to transform *us*. It changes and deepens *us*. Sometimes I worry that religious progressives like us, like some

political progressives I know, think, way in the back of their heads, that they can bring justice to the world because they are *already* just. They've been privileged with education, they say, and that's a GOOD privilege. Sometimes around Unitarian Universalist churches I hear things that make it sound as if some of us think that theologically we are way ahead of the game. We've conquered our fears, prejudices, bad habits, and live conscious, beautiful rich and fair lives which we are now glad to help others to achieve.

I am not so sure that is the case, at least with me. I had a difficult summer, for all sorts of reasons, as I wrote about plainly in the newsletter last week. I hardly think I have conquered my fears, have transcended anger and prejudice, or have arrived at the doorstep of perfect justice. I don't think I live far out on the theological edge, way ahead of all those benighted folks who still use "out-dated" language, nor do I think that rituals like "fasting" or practices like prayer, or sacraments, or sacred storytelling, are best left in the past for everyone.

I think our Mission statement asks us to relinquish, that is, "fast" from, any self-congratulation, any feeling that don't have to struggle ourselves, day by day, hour by hour, with our own transformation, our own, if you will permit me the metaphor, "cooking."

The Zen Buddhist teacher Dogen, all the way back in the year 1273, understood this when he wrote a book called *How to Cook Your Life*. He was not giving recipes for *harira* soup, or basil *pesto*, neither of which dishes he had ever heard of. But rather, he was writing a book about *human* transformation, in the pursuit of justice. He was using "cooking" as a metaphor, just as I have this morning. He wrote (and this is my own summation, using actual phrases from his book), "It's best to think about how to serve the community first, and stop worrying about comparing yourself to others, or living so as to amass the most toys, fame or privilege. These only lead to a false sense of self. It is vital to take care of the world in which we live out our lives. In doing so, we ourselves are transformed. It is the monastery cook who teaches us about what transformation is like. The community cook treats all food with equal respect, counting no food as more glamorous or more valuable than any other. In the same way, we would treat all experiences with equal respect, as equal parts of our lives. In the same way, we would treat all parts of ourselves with equal respect, recognizing that our real lives consist of every single part of our experience, the so-called good and the so-called bad, and that no wise person can claim to separate them out."

M'Barka and the Sicilian aunts had undoubtedly never heard of Dogen either, or Zen Buddhism. But I think their cooking stories ring with the same possibilities for personal transformation.

Transformation, you see, is something that is going to happen anyway. Produce will change whether you cook it or not. It will rot. Metamorphosis is endless already. And not just with food. You still living in the place in which you lived as a baby? No? Your great grandparents still living? No? Change. Transformation. Do you look like you did when you were 14? No? How about when you were 20? Or for some of us, 50?

The religious issue for me here is not transformation in an of itself, but being deliberate about *what kinds of transformation* **we** want to cultivate. Choosing which way the transformation will

occur. Our published church vision tells us that our intention around transformation has to do with co-creating a world of "racial and ecological justice" where we "confront inequity and the effects of oppression." And our Mission statement suggests we ourselves *might be transformed* by working, day after day, year after year, slowly and carefully and patiently, on such a vision. In the words of Dogen, we might cook our own lives by allowing ourselves to be transformed. In the image of Ramadan, we might "fast" from the habit of our own easy privileges, so that we might actually really notice those who are routinely denied privilege; some of them may have been in this room all the time and no one ever noticed. Or in the poem about the summer kitchen the poet concludes, "Higher still, in tangles of heat, my uncles' simmering garden grew, like green steam swelling from the cool root of her kitchen." In other words, the cooking in the basement kitchen, the tedious but delicious work of transformation, actually ultimately *co-creates* the green, yellow and red abundance blossoming in the garden upstairs there in the sunlight. Our justice work and creation itself are of a piece, a circle if you will.

I wanted to talk about an Islamic practices a bit this morning because, as you know, there are many people upset about a Muslim religious center being built two full blocks away from what is called Ground Zero in New York. I can't find any evidence that it's a mosque, despite what Sarah Palin and Newt Gingrich say; it's a community center. And there *is* a mosque even closer already. And anyway, does anyone imagine that Muslims are not at the actual site of Ground Zero praying for the people they lost that dread day?

So much of what I hear being spoken on the air-waves just strikes me as a sad and painful commitment to injustice and to dishonesty. I want no part of such a religious or political vision of the world. In the midst of this painful clamor and noise, I claim the more moving and reliable religious struggle our church Mission and Vision lifts up…a "transforming justice" that, in transforming me, also begins to revision the world and reverences both truthfulness and fairness. I want to join with you to see the deeper unwritten vision behind our own written statement: the one where we might all be invited to sit down at last around a common table. The one where we can each choose to fast… fast from our anger, and our prejudices, and our distorted characterizations all day long, and then share a transforming feast that nourishes us body, soul and spirit, all genders, all colors, all sexualities, all cultures, all ages.

Me, I'll be cooking sauces and pestos for days, as I said at the beginning. For that I am thankful …to John's generosity, to the earth which lifts up our food, and to my grandmothers who taught me how to transform raw perishable food into lasting nourishment. But beyond that, I am thankful for a church vision and mission which asks me to allow *myself* to be transformed, and trusts me to use that transforming experience for the common good.

No matter the season, no matter the time, Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring…let's cook together, shall we?

Offering

Aestival Ghazal: The Table

You stretch out before me, you endless blest table.
I never built you; I found you while on a quest, table.

Nothing on you, not a simple cloth, barren table.
No plate, no glass, no rose of Sharon, table.

Oh how ready I am to taste of your feast, table.
I hunger for the perfect nurture on your board released, table.

Sweet summer fruits still fall on brown earth's table.
But I long for more: a welcome and birth table.

O summer sun, shine on my dream of hunger ended at that universal table.
And you, keep me famished till that great reversal, table.