

Roots Hold Me Close

November 7, 2010

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here,
as a community seventy years in the making,
to worship, to tend the roots that nourish us,
that we might blossom in due season,
with greater love, justice and faithfulness.

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.

Sequence

And so, if you look with your mind's eye, you can see my friend and colleague Manish at his family home in Pittsburgh, kindling candles all around the house for the celebration of the Indian New Year, Divali.

And if you look with your mind's eye, you can see my goddaughter Andrea working on a paper on the religion of the Mapuche people for her classes in anthropology at the University of Santiago, in Chile.

And if you look with your mind's eye, you can see my friend Vince revving up to preach the afternoon sermon at the church he founded three months ago, in Columbus, New Beginnings and Restoration Ministries, meeting in a hotel on Morse Road.

If you look with your mind's eye, and open your heart, you can see the faces of nameless strangers in devastated Haiti and Indonesia, mourning exactly as we would do in the same sad situation.

And if you look within your mind's eye, you might be able to see that the silence that links you and me, Manish, Andrea, Vince and every stranger, is itself a sacred icon in time, gold with the faces of the days gone before us, blank with the faces of strangers, shining, bright even now when the days are shorter, reflecting back to us the light of our astonishment.

silence

And if you look with your mind's eye, you may pause for a moment to honor our communion with those whose lives have met our own. We take a breath and remember.

We take a breath and name them inside our hearts, or spoken into the air. We take a breath, and give thanks that we are part of such a circle of love that transcends the passing years.

naming

And if you look with your mind's deepest eye, you may actually see the swaying deep colors of the music itself embracing and transforming your own heart.

The First Reading *is taken from a recent email I received from Rev. Joel Miller. Joel grew up in this church, and is now the minister at our Buffalo congregation. He was also one of my best interns at my former congregation in Hayward California. So I have known Joel a long time. He was here for Eric's installation, and we talked about this history, so I asked him to write it out for me.*

I can't remember who we had make that first chalice. It was thrown of clay, glazed to look bronze to coordinate with the other decorations in the Sanctuary at the time. What I do recall is the meeting that previous winter when I first asked to light the chalice.

We had lit a chalice in the children's worship when I was in Religious Education classes, but this had not happened ever in the Sunday morning adult worship. I had asked a Sunday School teacher about it once, and he explained that the adults didn't light a chalice because Unitarians didn't have "dogmas".... I was 10 years old, and I wondered what dogs had to do with lighting anything on fire. Twelve years later, after I had become the Chair of the Worship Committee, I proposed to the Worship Committee that we light a chalice at the beginning of worship. I remember one man telling me that he thought that lighting a chalice was "popery." I remember looking at him in utter confusion. I had no clue what that little bag of perfumed flowers my mother had in her guest bathroom had to do with lighting a chalice. As I asked what a "potpourri" had to do with lighting a chalice, the man began explaining "popery" as something Catholics would do. I was confused since I thought he was telling me that Catholics also lit a Flaming Chalice, while the rest of the committee was having a great laugh. By the end of all that confusion, the committee voted to try the chalice lighting for a while.

There were some strong comments that Sunday morning, and I had several intense conversations in which I explained that lighting a chalice was something I wanted to do and that I had sought the approval of the Worship Committee. I can't remember the name of the one guy who seemed most upset by it, but since no one could give me a rational reason --or really, even an irrational reason -- why having symbol was a bad thing, I kept on lobbying for what I wanted. I lit the chalice on a few following Sundays, and so did Nancy Lee. After that, I don't recall hearing much more about it.

I also bought the bell rung at the beginning of the service. The Worship Committee asked me to during my first year at Starr King School. I went to San Francisco and found it in a Buddhist bookstore and mailed it back to Columbus. I heard that the letter I wrote that accompanied it was read aloud at its first ringing.

The Second Reading consists of a few lines from *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, a much longer poem, by the great American poet, Adrienne Rich.

Here is a map of our country:
This is the desert where missiles are planted
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
This is the cemetery of the poor
who died for democracy
This is a battlefield
from a nineteenth-century war
the shrine is famous
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing fleet went bankrupt
here is where the jobs were on the pier processing frozen fish-sticks
hourly wages and no shares
These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit
here are the forests primeval
the copper the silver lodes
These are suburbs of acquiescence
silence rising fume-like from the streets
This is the capital of money...whose spires flare up through air inversions
whose bridges are crumbling
I promised to show you a map
you say but this is a mural
then yes let it be
these are small distinctions
where do we see it from is the question

Sermon

When I first moved here to Columbus, it was a different city. There are many new highway inter-changes now, more lanes down 315, fresh crystal buildings like the Courthouse; and my loft building is now just one of many such buildings downtown. Our own Jeni's Ice-cream is famous around the country; our zoo and our libraries and our science museum have won accolades; and where once White Castle and Wendy's ruled, you can now find restaurants serving the foods of Zanzibar, Senegal, Ghana, Bali, Vietnam, Ecuador, Somalia and Thailand; and at least ten new Asian Markets, and shops that sell Halal meats. The Short North, once a neighborhood of terror and toughness, is now a destination.

On the other hand, the city remains now as it was when I first moved here...an easy place to get around, charming with brick streets and domestic neighborhoods shaded with trees; a safer center for diverse sexualities, an urban haven for artists and dancers, a culture anchored by the many universities, colleges and even seminaries that thicken on the landscape. There are still no trains connecting us to other great Ohio cities. There is no

light-rail and no signs of any light-rail coming. But, fool that I am, I have hopes that some day even *that* will change.

Things in Columbus have changed drastically. Faster, or slower. But clearly. However, other factors cannot so much be said to have changed drastically, as deepened, or become more layered, and nuanced.

Columbus has changed over the last seventy years a lot more than in the last decade. The famous arches of Arch City came down...and then were put up in new form. The last street car tracks were taken up and replaced by busses. The city has weathered loss of industry, the economic effect of horrific and often controversial wars in Europe and Asia and the Middle East. City and state government centers have sponsored hundreds of elections in the last seventy years too, with contrasting results, welcomed by either despondency or smugness. The single skyscraper in 1940, the LeVeque tower, is now just a gnarled old tree in a forest of sleeker young growth.

Somehow, despite all of these changes, it's been Columbus Ohio and its surrounding suburbs the whole time.

And remember, Columbus and its suburbs has been a city *in America* for 70 years. Adrienne Rich tells us something about that larger context too: *Here is a map of our country*, she writes:

*This is the desert where missiles are planted
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
This is the cemetery of the poor
who died for democracy
here is where the jobs were...
hourly wages and no shares
There are other battlefields Centralia Detroit
here are the forests primeval
the copper the silver lodes
This is the capital of money...*

She wrote these words 16 years ago, but I've read some of them in recent newspapers, haven't you? *foreclosure, missiles, the poor, hourly wages and no shares*. What I am trying to say is that this congregation exists in time as well as in space. Space is signed by differing buildings. But our church exists also in time; and not just in time, but in *the times*; in other words, it is set in the various larger cultural movements weaving through its own seven decades.

Meeting in a house on Indianola, meeting in a smallish rectangular room made of gray cinder blocks (a photo of which you can see on the fronts of your orders of celebration), meeting in a stucco-walled room with windows looking out onto a garden, meeting in this large square room of windows and warmth, color and comfort...

this congregation has changed. From the 30 or so who gathered in the house to the 400 or so who gather here on Sundays...well, it's a very different ball game.

But it's not different just because of bricks and mortar. We live now in a different era than Rod Serling for example, even though he was just as much a member here as many of you. Rod Serling was a member of this congregation in the days when Jack Hayward was minister. Back then, there was no flaming chalice lit at the beginning of the service. No children's story. Neither the grey hymnbook nor the blue hymnbook had been created yet. Ministers wore dark suits or black gowns. Colorful stoles had yet to be incorporated into our style. And though the sermons in those days dealt with love and justice just as our present ones do, the sermons intersected with the culture of *those* days, not ours. For example, in the words of Rod Serling we read this morning at the time of the Affirmation, he writes of *young and old* joining hands to *build bridges*. *Why?* Because of the college student protests and their disgusted, disgruntled parents, a event that dominated the sixties when he wrote. He also wrote the following amazing words: "*If we want to prove that God is not dead, we must first prove that we are alive.*" Those words directly refer to a theological movement in the sixties, touted by Gabriel Vahanian, William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer. Time Magazine ran a very famous cover story titled *Is God Dead?* addressing this theological movement just a short time before Serling wrote those words. So Serling was, in short, a man of his time. He was pre-kindle, pre-computer, pre-cell phone, pre-Fox News and MSNBC. And yet, he was part of this church, and after this church, a member of three other Unitarian Universalist congregations on the coasts where he filmed his TV shows or wrote his famous teleplays.

Yet just ten years before he joined this particular congregation, the whole idea of a teleplay or a television show was unheard of. No one thought there would vast networks, or imagined weekly animation like Flintstones. Yet they came, those networks; we saw, and they conquered. And in 1940, when our church was first gathered, when Woody Guthrie wrote *This Land is Your Land*, and Dr. Seuss wrote *Horton Hatches an Egg*, no one was thinking about atomic bombs, either, or moon landings, or same-gender marriage. And no one back then thought that the word *man* meant anything less than all humankind, no matter what gender. And our hymnbooks were packed to the edge with male pronouns only.

When Joel Miller was growing up in this church, he grew up in the older part of the building. This new Center was not built when he was a child. And when he was very little, they didn't even light a flaming chalice anywhere, including in the classrooms. The symbol really wasn't used until the late sixties, early seventies, and not until the mid-eighties in many places. There was resistance to it. After all, it was new. I understand that.

The symbol had a remarkable history, but no one knew it, and no one taught it.

Still, the kids thought that worship always began with such an act; and Joel, when he grew up, wanted to introduce this simple ritual to the adults.

His story, as you heard it in the first reading is a little masterpiece of misunderstandings, a series of innocent confusions. He thinks that dogma has to do with dogs and is confused. He thinks that Catholics have a ritual of lighting a chalice and is confused by that. He thinks that when one man thinks of the ritual as “popery,” he is actually saying *potpourri*, and Joel expresses honest bewilderment that a bowl of dried flower petals has anything to do with any of this. All of these misunderstandings served the cause of laughter, and laughter often lightens the load, so the Worship Committee gave Joel their blessing to light the chalice, and so it has been ever since.

Now I would hope that at least some of you may be surprised that someone who was a member of this congregation used the undeniably derogatory word “popery”...a word first coined in the violent days of Elizabeth I of England, and which gained popularity during the age of James I and the Guy Fawkes rebellion. But remember, a congregation is not an island separated out from the world, but a place where the members have to deliberately work hard *not* to be tainted and distorted by the biases of the larger society. Arthur Schlesinger Sr. who taught at OSU (and whose son Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. was not only a Unitarian, but the great historian of Liberalism in the 1960s), once famously wrote “the deepest bias in the history of the American people is anti-Catholic prejudice,” and much of that is actually rooted in the upbringing of English colonists raised in Jacobean times.

So I was not surprised when I heard Joel’s story. But I was not discouraged either. After all, signing the membership book at a Unitarian Universalist congregation is not a magic trick that turns us, presto-change-o, into perfected saints. No, claiming to be Unitarian Universalist means you are committing yourself to walking a path toward deeper awareness of self and world. You are promising to struggle to be faithful to our ideals proclaiming the inherent worth of every single person. To be a Unitarian Universalist is to struggle to make sure those ideals are not inadvertently tainted with the cruelties and corruptions of a world where unconscious bias, systems of oppression, entitled greed and free ridicule have risen to high honor in many places, as many of the recent election ads made clear to me at least. As Adrienne Rich warns us in her poem: I’ve painted a whole great mural of American life for you...all of it...the bread baskets, the forest primeval, the copper and riches, as well as the joblessness, the wars, Centralia, where a burning mine scorched the earth around it, Detroit, where a city burned (and I was a witness to that with my own eyes, thank you...), the mural of America I have offered you, she says, is complex and rich...with all the good, and not so good, images of our nation and its eras. But, she adds, the real question is: *where do we see it from?*

Are we seeing it from the vantage of pessimism and hopelessness? Do we see through rose colored glasses... “Oh, everything will turn out all right!” Do we see through eyes of patriotic love? Are we cynical or even bitter? Critical of people who are cynical and bitter? Are our eyes veined with fear? How do we see the present era? And do we think we are seeing these things entirely differently from Americans alive during the 40s? The 70s? The 90s?

Same thing holds true for our seven decades of congregational history. As I see it, things have changed a lot in buildings, in size, in music, in rituals, in metaphors, language, and in organization. Those things, however, are incidentals compared to our faithfulness to core principles. When I look at our history, I think we have remained pretty steady in our faithfulness to principle. As faithful as Horton in our story this morning. I think that when the man on the Worship Committee was saying what he did, however reactionary, he was trying, clumsily, to make sure we were not just toying around with religion by borrowing without thinking, or doing rituals by habit, instead of with thoughtfulness. He wanted to “say what he meant and mean what he said” in Seuss’s great words. Ralph Waldo Emerson left the Unitarian ministry for that principle; so although I admit that the word “popery” is unfortunate and even vile, the idea of asking the question “are we being faithful to our stated ideals” is not bad.

In fact, asking that question is central to our practice. It’s one of our main taproots. But it’s not more central to our chosen way of life than *questioning ourselves, questioning ourselves* about how much we are just echoing, mindlessly, the culture around us, for good or ill. Faithfulness to ideals is not the only taproot. Without this second practice of working to *undo* the negative effects of bad culture on our spirits over the last seventy years, we would have degenerated into a cozy club, that, in Serling’s words, was *only sitting in the rubble of our own making*.

I’d like to think instead that, by our faithfulness, and by our self-questioning, we might, like Horton in the story this morning, hatch something new that the world has never seen before. By being 100% faithful both to self-questioning, *and* to our great ideals of reason, inclusiveness, liberty and love, I’d like to think that from our amazing roots might spring a tree of life the world has never seen before. A tree offering shelter in storms, beauty to the eye, the fruit of many cultures and classes for the nourishment of our spirits and for the healing of self and the world.

So, here’s to the next seventy years of this congregation. And its central Ohio city, Columbus. And its nation and its world. Roots, hold me close. May all that grows out of you, and up from you, serve to make us deeper and wiser and more whole through the years to come.

Offering

No community exists without gifts. What gift can we bring? Our presence. Our humility. Our teachableness. Our self-questioning. Our risking. Our hope. Our ideals. Our conversations. Our faithfulness. Our financial support, either given in more modern ways behind the scenes, or offered in this more ancient way as an integral part of our celebration. The ushers are invited forward.

Meditation *adapted from the Jain tradition of Chitrabhanu*

Let there be deep wisdom
Let there be deep patience

May we learn from the trees,
which shed their leaves each fall,
a catharsis, a fasting, a cleansing,
making room for the inevitable new life.
the new life that radiates up from the roots,
alive with life and heat,
even when the ground is cold.
Let there be a fall in every season of our lives.
Let thoughts that no longer serve life
drop away like dry leaves.
May we be open, receptive, expectant.
Let there be deep wisdom.
Let there be deep patience.