

Authority and Democracy

January 23, 2011

Rev. Eric Meter

Opening

We are here

despite the cold at this, the heart of winter

to worship as we come together once more,

to bring our doubts and challenges, our dreams and hopes

into the care of this community of faith and commitment

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.

Praising #298 *Wake, Now, My Senses* v. 1-3

Ingathering *Ron's Big Mission*

Greeting

Affirming #648 *Beginners* by Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.

How could we tire of hope? – so much is in bud.

How can desire fail? – we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy, *Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast can flower, not as oppressors.*

Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?

Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?

Not yet, not yet – there is too much broken that must be mended,

Too much hurt that we have done to each other that cannot yet be forgiven.

We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.

So much is unfolding, that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

When the cold descends and cuts to the bone, what else can we do save stand stupidly shivering, but to bundle up and huddle together for warmth?

Cold, such as we have known this week, arrives on quiet wings and demands a degree of stillness not possible at other times of year.

The cold asks: Who are we? What is it that animates our hearts? From what do we draw our warmth? With whom do we choose to share the warmth we've found?

To take up these questions is to embrace the heart of winter, so it is with these questions that we enter together a time of stillness, and in the embrace of these warm walls, respond to what the season asks of us.

bell

In the continuing stillness, we pause to remember our larger lives. We recall those who helped make us the people we are. Now, either silently or softly aloud, let us lift up the names of those in our lives whom we miss, whom we love or struggle to love, those who we hold with tenderness and sympathy, those we long to see again soon.

naming

From stillness to the names of those in our lives, now to the celebration that is music, the celebration that is the gift of song.

Readings

Our first reading is from Aftershock, Robert Reich's book which was published last year. Reich, you may recall, was Labor Secretary under President Clinton. A prolific author and commentator, Reich now is on the faculty of the Goldman School of Policy at the University of California, Berkeley.

A virtual pendulum underlies the American political economy. We swing from eras in which the benefits of economic growth are concentrated in fewer hands to those in which the gains are more broadly shared, and then back again. We are approaching the end of one such cycle and the start of the next. The Great Prosperity of 1947 to 1975 was followed by three decades of retrenchment, ending in the Great Recession.

The question is not whether the pendulum will swing back. It surely will. The question is *how* it will swing – whether with reforms that widen the circle of prosperity, or with demagoguery that turns America away from the rest of the world, shrinks the economy, and sets Americans against one another.

Our second reading today is from Sue Halpern's collection of essays from 1993 titled Migrations to Solitude. While short, her piece speaks well for itself.

Trusting each other is the beginning of a certain secular faith, a faith that allows us to live in families and communities and nations. Democracy, above all other forms of government, requires this faith.

Sermon

In a suburb of Johannesburg I met with three women who had all been active in the liberation struggle there: a black African, a woman who had been born in England and a woman of Indian descent.

While we were introducing ourselves, the Indian woman changed gears by asking me, “What’s the population of the United States?”

Puzzled, I replied, “Just under 300 million.” This was in 2003. We’ve passed that milestone now.

“That’s the size of our middle class in India,” she said, looking rather satisfied.

Okay, this might be interesting, I thought to myself. She wants a pissing contest, one about national economies. What fun. I was going to reply in kind, saying something

about how our middle class is 70% of our population while theirs was a third at best. But then I realized that I didn't know what our percentage really was, and, even so, I was pretty sure that in India their middle class was growing while I knew ours was getting smaller every day.

I don't think I was aware of it then, but something about being so far from home and hearing the U.S. criticized put me on the defensive. I wasn't used to defending America. I was used to being the one criticizing how we had let our promise slip away. Thankfully one of the others at the table steered us gracefully back to the safer topic of South African liberation. Even so, the memory of that brief exchange has stayed with me.

When I was growing up we learned the evils of the Gilded Age, the age of Robber Barons and ugly smoke billowing from endless industrial smoke stacks. Of fat cat bankers and all those who fled to the cities looking for work, giving up everything in the process only to find they had accepted a devil's bargain.

We were told such profiteering was un-American and certainly undemocratic. We had righted those wrongs and things were back on track, and were going to stay that way. History never repeats itself, we were told.

And those of us whose parents were able to put food on the table believed it.

Now we have those who have speculated recklessly held up as Too Big to Fail, Wall Street bailouts and taxpayer funded "temporarily decreased" bonuses. Of course what led to all that was the eradication of protections put in place in the aftermath of the Depression. The jobs that have been lost will not come again. And salaries that had been effectively flat for decades are now but a dream away, as those who have been out of work can almost be certain that if they do find new work, it will not be at the rate they were paid before. Our beloved middle class has taken more than a body blow this time around.

History may never repeat itself, but it sure can rhyme, Mark Twain reminds us.

And still, the American dream persists.

E pluribus unum. Out of many, one.

These were the words with which Daniel Hernandez, the brave volunteer in Rep. Gabrielle Giffords office, began his remarks at the memorial service in Tucson a week ago Wednesday.

Hernandez called on our nation to unite, and in the aftermath of the senseless violence there two weeks ago yesterday, we have, to a degree. He may not wish to consider himself a hero, but he ran forward toward the sound of gunfire of his own volition. Instinct, even. He stayed with Giffords, tending to her wound, and holding her hand until the ambulance drove her away. What is not heroic about that?

We know that there are moments in our nation when citizens simply shine. Hernandez shone that day and did so again during the memorial.

We learned of another such shining American moment in the story of Ron McNair which Ruby told earlier. A precocious young man who jumped up on a counter of the library when the librarian wouldn't let him check out books on his own. Blacks didn't get library cards back then in Lake City, South Carolina. Well, until Ron's act of civil disobedience, that is.

And in another case of reality being harder to believe than fiction, those books he checked out on airplanes inspired him more than anyone could have imagined back then. Ron grew up to become a real live astronaut. But then an accident took his life and everyone else aboard the Space Shuttle Challenger, twenty five years ago this coming week.

The brother of a friend of mine knew Ron McNair. African Americans were not exactly common at NASA then, and those who were there made sure to connect.

The library in Lake City is now dedicated to McNair, and libraries everywhere in our nation check out books to future astronauts, teachers, nurses and even circus performers.

While this may have seemed like a diversion from my topic earlier, my hope is to remind us that there is something in the American dream that is still alive, there are chords of it we still respond to.

Remember Sue Halpern's words earlier, "Trusting each other is the beginning of a certain secular faith, a faith that allows us to live in families and communities and nations. Democracy, above all other forms of government, requires this faith."

It is that faith, secular or not, that I want most to talk with you about today. It begins with finding and building upon the ways we can trust one another.

Yet it can be hard to feel trusting, united in common cause, when the deck seems stacked against you.

The promise of our nation is, in the immortal words of Abraham Lincoln, “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

These days a government of the people for the people feels like a distant dream to me, let alone how long one might last.

I was crying tears of joy along with Jesse Jackson in Grant Park the night Barack Obama was elected President. And while I know that politics is the art of the possible, I was hoping, like so many others, for more backbone from him, especially in economic matters.

And here I have to pause to offer a caveat. What I’m saying is based on how I see things. I neither expect, or even necessarily want, any of you to agree with me. What I hope for is that these reflections will foster a respectful and honest conversation. We are all citizens of this republic with equal right to our opinions.

Robert Reich again: “A virtual pendulum underlies the American political economy. We swing from eras in which the benefits of economic growth are concentrated in fewer hands to those in which the gains are more broadly shared, and then back again. We are approaching the end of one such cycle and the start of the next.”

Really? I hope so, but I’m not sure I see it, or signs leading that way.

In their book, *Winner-Take-All Politics*, authors Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson take a painfully clear-eyed look at the state of our economy over the last several decades.

They show that, from shortly after the Second World War to the early 1970s, incomes grew across the board for all wage groups, and wages grew at a slightly faster rate at the bottom and middle of the scale than at the top. That started changing, however, before the end of the decade.

According to the Congressional Budget Office, from 1979 to 2006 average after-tax inflation-adjusted incomes rose 11% for those families in the lowest of the five income groups, 18% for the next fifth, 21% for the middle group, 55% for the next group, and – get this – 256% for those in the top.

And that is during a time when many more families had more than one wage earner. Without those extra hours worked per household, middle incomes would have barely budged and “incomes of households at the bottom would have fallen.”

Additionally, the period from 2001 through 2007 “was the first economic expansion on record in which the typical non-elderly household lost economic ground.”

As they put it, “Recessions, it turned out, were for suckers, not bankers.”

And “Where the conventional wisdom confidently declares, ‘It’s the economy,’ we find, again and again, ‘It’s the politics.’”

Elsewhere in his book *Aftershock* Reich speaks to this when he writes, “Perhaps the most convincing evidence that the game is rigged is the deafening silence about all of this.”

In a helpful image of the scale of the problem he adds, “America’s rich did take a hit in the Crash of 2008. According to *Forbes* magazine, the nation’s four hundred wealthiest people lost about \$300 billion that year. That still left those four hundred enough to live on – a total of \$1.27 trillion (more than the estimated cost of achieving universal health care for the entire nation for the next decade).”

Any system that would allow such a thing is one that, as far as I’m concerned, is practicing slash and burn economics.

And in case you think that I’m making a partisan claim in all this, I want to be clear that I understand that the changes to our regulatory practices actually began under President Carter. The responsibility for all this rests with Republicans and Democrats alike.

Reich states at one point that, “Losers of rigged games can become very angry.”

And yet the only angry voices I hear these days are those from the Tea Party.

Where is the wider outcry? Where are the angry moderates? Where is the angry left?

Or have we given up on crying out?

I can only imagine that many of us are too scared to rock the boat that has served us well enough before. We can't help but think that things will turn around and we'll be able to get back on that boat again.

To those whom our economy has not served as well, well I hear them saying, "Welcome to the party. We're so glad you've chosen to join us. Now do you understand what we've been trying to say to you for so long?"

This is a time to listen. This is a time for coming together in common cause, of sharing our stories despite our fear of shame. This is a time for humility and honesty. This is a time for either building or retreating, and I am not advocating retreat.

I was disheartened in all the reading I've done on this subject in recent weeks to find so many authors talking about a way forward as simply muddling through. While that may be an honest fall back position, I hope we can strive for more. I'm not sure I'm ready to let go of the hope that more is possible for us.

We're the land of Ron McNair and Daniel Hernandez and Christina Taylor Green, after all.

As President Obama said in Tucson a week ago Wednesday,

"I believe we can be better. Those who died here, those who saved lives here – they help me believe. We may not be able to stop all evil in the world, but I know that how we treat one another is entirely up to us. I believe that for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.

"That's what I believe, in part because that's what a child like Christina Taylor Green believed. Imagine: here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that someday she too might play a part in shaping her nation's future. She had been elected to her student council; she saw public service as something exciting, something hopeful. She was off to meet her congresswoman, someone she was sure was good and important and might be a role model. She saw all this through the

eyes of a child, undimmed by the cynicism or vitriol that we adults all too often just take for granted.”

May Christina Taylor Green and Daniel Hernandez and Ron McNair help us believe as well.

India having a middle class larger than ours is not my primary concern.

My concern is that we be the best United States we can be. And in that, we have our work cut out for us.

We need to see things clearly as they are.

We need to find and be reliable allies in the work of making justice more the norm.

May our efforts in the days to come inspire others of the same accord.

Remember Daniel.

Remember Ron.

Remember Christina.

They and our children deserve no less.

Thank you.

Offertory

We sit together in a space built by those willing to stand up for their beliefs. We gather in a hall made for celebration and wonderment, for giving care, for speaking, for singing and listening for themes not yet imagined and yet, somehow still familiar.

We give and receive the morning offering now in support for the work of this house of care and vision and learning.

Returning

Only brief words before we sing again:

Together may we find our hope rekindled and may the hope in our hearts become the hope of our hands, and may we discover that out of many we may still be one.

Singing #318 *We Would Be One*

Blessing