

Fear and Difference

March 27, 2011
Rev. Mark Belletini

Kindling, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling,

Opening Words:

We are here
after days of thunder and daffodils
to worship, to celebrate the gift of life,
to claim our power, to face our limits,
and to learn to neither feed our fears
nor deny the realities of joy or courage.

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.

Singing

Story *Big Al*

Announcements, Affirmation, Breathsong

Sequence (*have people make a tea bowl of their hands*)

The spring world begins to blossom.
Look! Every crocus is a freshly written haiku.
Every forsythia, every cherry branch
paints a poem on a scroll
to hang in the shrine of my heart.
It's spring in Japan now too.
Petals float down from trees surrounded by water
clogged with the heartbreaking evidence
of real human lives little different
from yours or mine, save that they are no more.
Before the loss of ten thousand lives,
the Buddha still refuses to speak,
the mirror on the altar of the Shinto temple cracks,
the priests weep, and grief grasps at thin air.
Closer to home, no earthquakes, just television stars ranting, worries about new wars and lost
work, and the death of colorful movie stars. Behind it all, the usual talking heads who jabber,

jabber, jabber about everything, even though they know nothing, not least their own heart.
Would that they too might be as silent as the Buddha.

Before the silent witness of the ten thousand, I note all the radiation and death tolls floating on the airwaves, and yet I note this too: the cherry petals also float in Japan, landing on the wet and broken shoji screens on the muddy ground, filling even the tea-bowl of our open hands, here so far away from Japan, with their soft, silent witness. *silence*

Our hearts having gone out to the ten thousand and all who loved them, they go out now to our closer lives, to those we miss, to those we love, to those with whom we struggle, to those who love us even when we have a hard time loving ourselves. These we name aloud in quiet voice, or keep sheltered within the shrine of our silent hearts. But now we turn to them...that we might worship with our whole lives. *naming*

9:15 AM It's all part of the world. It's all part of our lives. News of the great earthquake, the chirp of the most minor bird. It's all part of the song.

11:AM The witness of music has the power to transmute the jabber jabber of frightening things into something playful and not scary at all. Blest is the witness of music.

Anthems: 9:15 A Minor Bird (Robert Frost)
11:00 Jabberwocky

The First Reading *comes from Jacob's Circular Letter, otherwise known as the Epistle or Letter of James. It's found in the New Testament. Martin Luther hated this book and wanted to rip it out of the scripture, if for no other reason than it refuted his central message. We are not sure when it was written within 30 or so years. It claims to have been written by someone named Jacob (James in English, for some unknown reason), traditionally identified as Jesus' brother, although scholars debate that, because the Greek is so polished. We think it wasn't written to any group in any particular city, but that it circulated around to urban Jewish communities. Remember, the people we often call the Early Christians thought of themselves as Jews, since the word Christian was not invented until much later. In support of this, note the word "synagogue" used in the letter. This is my own translation from the Greek.*

My dear family, take note. All of you. Please. Listen to others first; speak to others second; express your anger to others, last. For your anger, of itself, does not bring about God's justice.

So dig out the stuff that's spoiling inside you, and toss out the compost seething there, and instead, spread it in the garden inside you where reason has been planted, the reason which can make you whole.

It makes no sense to listen to reason, however, if you don't put it into practice. Anyone who listens to reason, but doesn't practice it, reminds me of when I look into a mirror, recognize myself, and then walk away and forget what I look like. But if you pay attention to the Torah, the

law that liberates us, and then put that liberation into practice, you will not forget what it says. And, you will find happiness in the practice.

If you claim the word “spiritual” for yourself, but just keep blathering all the time, you’re fooling yourself, and your so-called “spirituality” doesn’t mean anything. Spirituality that originates with God our true parent is more like this: to take care of the needs of destitute widows and orphans, and to keep *yourself* unsnared by the dominant system.

O my family! Don’t play favorites. Let’s imagine someone coming into your synagogue dressed to the nines...jewelry, fashionable apparel. And at the same time, someone comes into the meeting wearing worn, even tattered, clothes. If you pay special attention to the first, saying, “Here’s a good seat for you, right up front,” but say to the second, “Hey you, go stand over there,” or even, “Sit down on the floor near me so I can keep an eye on you,” have you not clearly made a judgment as to who belongs and who doesn’t? Listen, you seem to be confused. The poor are rich in faithfulness, and even exemplify God-given citizenship in the Realm of Justice and Honesty we are trying to establish. But isn’t it often the folks who “have it all,” who are the people slandering your noble name, exploiting you, and dragging you into court all the time? If you really were paying attention to our excellent Torah, where it is written “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself,” *that’s* when you’re really “well off.” But when you show favoritism, you err, and trample on the Torah, which then will trample on your conscience. Make sure you act as if you really believe that the Torah sets you free, for when you don’t show compassion to others, you can’t expect any yourself. Isn’t compassion for all always better than dividing us all into the “haves” and the “have-nots”?

The Second Reading *is from the poet Marge Piercy, who, like me, and several others in this congregation, grew up in the City of Detroit, once called Detroit the Beautiful, now, one of the saddest cities in the United States of America. It’s called Motown, Arsenal of Democracy and it dates to 2006.*

Fog used to bloom off the distant river
turning our streets strange, elongating
sounds and muffling others. The crack
of a gunshot softened.

The sky at night was a dull red:
a bonfire build of old creosote soaked
logs by the railroad tracks. A red
almost pink painted by factories—

That never stopped their roar
like traffic in canyons of New York.
But stop they did and fell down
ending dangerous jobs that paid.

We believed in our unions like some

trust in their priests. We believed in Friday
paychecks sure as winter's ice curb-to-curb

Where older boys could play
hockey dodging cars—wooden
pucks, sticks cracking wood
on wood. A man came home

With a new car and other men
would collect around it like ants
in sugar. Women clumped for showers —
Wedding and baby—wakes, funerals
care for the man brought home
with a hole ripped in him, children
coughing. We all coughed in Detroit.
We woke at dawn to my father's hack.

That world is gone, as a tableau
of wagon trains. Expressways carved
neighborhoods to shreds. Rich men
moved jobs south, then overseas.
Only the old anger lives there
bubbling up like chemicals dumped
seething now into the water
building now into the bones.

Sermon

The unbelievable event in Japan more than two weeks ago has captured the imagination, and kindled the horror, and grief, of the entire world. Kozma Albert, the Unitarian minister at our own congregation's partner-church in Bölön, Rumania, actually sent me a letter about how it affected the hearts of that congregation over there...this, from our partner church, which itself has suffered flooding in their area, a truly terrible winter, and which has struggled for months with bureaucratic nightmares out of Bucharest concerning the use of one of their buildings, which would have tempted me to throw in the towel months ago.

Yet, as we all know, other events are also claiming our hearts and mind. They have been briefly eclipsed by this disaster, but they are still vibrant. In several states in our union, including our own state of Ohio, as well as Wisconsin and Michigan, we read of unprecedented demonstrations. In Wisconsin, these are especially big, with upwards of 75,000 gathered to confront and rail against the power-plays disguised as policy. I was at our own statehouse one day when the paper estimated the crowd to be over 5000...nothing to sneeze at on a Tuesday afternoon at 1 PM; a work-day for those who have daytime jobs. People are demonstrating about many things, to be sure, but the right to negotiate via unions, the right to have a voice in one's own livelihood, is certainly central.

“We believed in our unions like some trust in their priests. We believed in Friday paychecks sure as winter’s ice curb-to-curb.”

Of all the lines, in Marge Piercy’s poem about Detroit, my birth-town, that’s the one that stands out for me. The gunshots, the pollution reddened sunsets, playing in the streets, the baby showers...all that too. But the lines about the unions really stood out for me. After all, I didn’t grow up surrounded by golf-green lawns and white picket fences. I grew up with crab-grass lawns and stories of picket lines. I grew up with the sure knowledge that paychecks were reliable on Friday...*because* of the voice of the unions.

My father grew up working in auto factories. I worked one too, making leaf-springs for Dodge, to help put myself through school, but my father worked in them before the unions. My grandfather was actually one of the folks that worked to get the union into Ford, and from him I heard tell of strikes and pickets. I learned new vocabulary words: a “scab” was not just a booboo on my knee-cap.

My father remembered the twelve-hour days, and what Piercy justly calls the “dangerous” working conditions at the great Ford Rouge Plant, but he also told us about what kind of nonsense he experienced before the unions came to the factory. His immediate boss had no use for Catholics... or the children of immigrants with lots of vowels in their last names. Seeing in the opening of my father’s shirt that my father wore a scapular around his neck (scapular, that is, a little cloth talisman dedicated to a saint), his supervisor routinely mocked him. “Stupid Mackerel Snapper dago,” he would say. My father had no one to go to...this WAS his boss... and put up with it, no easy deal for him, I assure you, since anger was swift and hot for him. Until one day, the bossman actually reached *into* his collar and lifted out the scapular, and then ridiculed my father while holding it in his hand. My father was terrified. This was his boss. But he was being ridiculed, and the gift his mother had given him was being ridiculed. So my father got out of the way of his own anger, made a fist, cursed the fool out... and was fired. He fumed about this event for many years. We heard the replay over and over again as he held forth at the supper table. “This wouldn’t have been allowed had the union been there,” he said one day.

Yet, when he was older, and a supervisor himself at the power company, he changed his mind about unions. He insisted that they had lost their focus. He insisted they had over-stepped their original vision. But even so, he never stopped telling the story of how terrified he was of his bigot boss, and how there was nothing he could do about it, and still keep his job.

This month, I have been reflecting on the words “diversity” and “difference.” Listen, when I lift up the word “diversity,” as I have all this month, I am clearly lifting up a vision of all different kinds of people, different in culture, religion, way of life, sexuality, and so forth, learning to work and live and worship together side-by-side in a pluralistic and cooperative community.

But, sadly, there are diversities that exist, differences between us, which can actually paralyze us with fear. Make us feel threatened. We may get so scared we can’t even imagine trying to live

side by side with those whose difference from us is not one of gender, color or culture... but one of brutal power.

I know a woman up in Detroit who voted for the governor there, the governor who, like so many these days, has abolished collective bargaining rights. This woman has been told that she can just expect to get a 15 percent cut in her pay, and that she will have to pay a large share of her health insurance from now on, and that if she is going to complain about it, she can just go find another job, which, in Michigan, I assure you, is a laughable idea. This is brutal power. This is a threat, plain and simple. "Do what we say, or you're toast."

This is a terrible situation. It prompts my fear for the nation, fear for the state, fear especially for the future I share with you all. This is not a live-and-let-live situation diversity. This is not, "you marry whom you want to marry, and I'll marry whom I want to marry." This is not "I'll eat vanilla at Jeni's, you eat chocolate." No, this is something else. This is: "I am different from you. You are different from me. Our diversity boils down to this. I have power. You have none. I will run you over if you don't go along with what I propose. So, start shaking in your boots, curtsy nicely and kowtow."

This is diversity that is not our strength (in the words of our mission statement), not our joy, not the path to excellence and gratitude. This is a difference of power that simply paralyzes with fear. It involves the threat of, and actual, loss of jobs and livelihood, the diminishment of aid for those who cannot survive without it (they exist! they exist! they're people!), and a trivialization of educational opportunities for our children. This is a diversity that threatens to make much of what I value disappear, like one of those old tableaux of "wagon trains," to quote Marge Piercy.

Now when I talk about being afraid of differences, I want to be clear that I am not talking about what happened in our story this morning. There, a truly homely large fish is isolated because smaller, sleeker fish are afraid of him. His size and his shape are *perceived* as frightening. He is not using his size to bully or brutalize. There is no policy here, no philosophy, no agenda; just a big homely, lonely fish, rudely isolated by those who want others in their life *to look comfortably like them*. The story is saying: I might be put off at first by a different way of dressing; I might be put off by a different look, some ethnic head-scarf, or some Technicolor tattoo; I may be put off at first by either a cultural shyness or flamboyance...or some unusual piercing...but none of these differences display an absolute disparity of power. They may briefly surprise or shock, but they do not frighten me at a visceral level. And I can learn to live with them.

But the demonstrations in and around several Midwest Statehouses tell me that we're talking about much deeper fears, not a surprise uniqueness I'll simply outgrow. Like the demonstrations blossoming all over North Africa and Middle-East, these demonstrations not only express fear, but real and indeed, growing, anger.

Which brings me to the insightful letter of James. Whoever he was, the author is *very* clear about the basics of good religion... care for widows and orphans, love your neighbor as you love yourself. Your gathering, he says, can be as diverse as possible: women and men, the sick and the healthy, the marginalized and the successful-- every nationality and color and economic

status, every personality type, differing ability, and look. Good! But remember, the poor, the widows and orphans always come first. The love of neighbor always comes first. That's basic, James says.

I agree.

The author also comments on anger as a response to life's issues. His clear advice? Show your anger *last*. Listen first, the author says, speak second... *then, when you have all the facts, if need be*, show your anger. After all, anger, without all the facts, without thoughtfulness in its expression, doesn't actually accomplish anything, and we're here for accomplishment, right?... accomplished loving, accomplished caring for those pushed over the edge of care by the "dominant system." The Greek there is usually translated as the "world..." but that makes it sound as if the material world is somehow bad, which it most certainly is not. Most knowledgeable translators outside traditional theological models no longer translate it as "world," but more as I have. So the author tells us that our best spiritual practice, *after* providing for the widows and orphans, is to keep *ourselves* unsnared by "the dominant system"...those unfeeling systems that put profit before people, greed before grace, privilege before purpose. The dominant systems, in fact, can be recognized easily because they *completely turn James' advice upsidedown*... they *begin* with anger...anger that people express needs, anger that people want equality and access, anger that anyone would disagree with them, anger that sharing is required by justice...and *then*, they proceed to speak, but only to tell us to lose our voice or else. Finally, they get to the listening stage...but since the powers that be tell us they are revving up their "bus to run us over," it will be hard to hear us anyway, won't it? Those busses are noisy!

But look, James is not letting anyone off the hook, or allowing anyone to feel righteous. Even though we may be fearful at times, and angry, he asks us to examine *our own* attitudes toward diversity, using class as an example...do *you yourselves* divide people into the haves and have-nots by how you welcome people into your life? Best to work on that issue yourself, James says, while you prepare to engage with those who frighten *you*.

And the engagement has to be there...real engagement, not staged debates between parties, or between religions...those are rarely helpful in my experience...just the converted shouting at the converted. A waste....

No, engagement has to be personal, varied and passionately rational. The demonstrations, yes; but also phone calls to those leaders who will take the time to listen (they actually pay attention to those things!) It means taking time, as rare a commodity as that is, to write real letters, to bring up real questions crafted with our best reason, and supported by our research. The BREAD organization we are part of has this down well, I think. It's one reason why I favor it so much. The questions we raise up in this fearful time, both as individuals, and as people joining together in a larger voice, always need to be forged from the ancient principle James lifts up from the Torah..."*loving our neighbors as we love ourselves*." That remains basic, no matter how angry or afraid we may feel.

It's possible, I say, for us to get back to a diversity that strengthens us, not weakens us, one that energizes us rather than makes us afraid or angry. To do that means we will have to not let the anger and fear live in our bones, as Marge Piercy says it does in the despairing citizens of Detroit, now stripped of both their unions *and* their formerly thriving industries. It *does* mean transforming our fears into anger. But not *leading* with that anger, as the self-anointed do. It means transforming that anger into well-thought out reason, carefully wrought plans, creative responses, self-awareness, mindfulness, organization, *anything*, in short, that is *not* some new form of hand-wringing despair. Many unions may indeed need reform...few deny that, since every human institution needs that now and then. Some of them may indeed need fierce reform, and a return to their original vision. But these collectives to voice common concerns were not founded on despair, but on faith...faith that it might actually be possible, in James' words...to live in the realm of justice and honesty...together.

We may have no power to stop earthquakes in Japan, or flooding in Rumania. But we do have the power to work together to transform the differences in our modern world so that they are not a source of fear any longer, but our clearest invitation to optimistic, patient, uncomplaining, and effective justice work.

Offering

We set aside this time for members and friends to offer gifts in support of the work of this community. Thank you, whether you give today in the basket, or whether you give by mail, or by computer. We thank you. We cannot do this work without your support. And by the way, in a congregation like this, *we* and *you* mean the same thing. We support ourselves. We make it happen. The ushers will now come forward.

Ceremony of Installation

Mark introduces New Pastoral Team Members

Eric

In the life of a liberal religious congregation, we put people before beliefs, and persons before forms. Being present to each other in both joy and sorrow, rejoicing and suffering, is a mark of our religious practice.

The ordained ministers of this church including the minister emerita, as well as soon-to-be affiliated ministers Suzan McCrystal and Kathleen Fowler, plus, our Chaplain, Dick Dawson, embrace among their ministries the pastoral or caring services. In this we are supported and helped by the Caring Committee and the Neighborhood Network, which help people in time of trouble with meals and rides to and from medical appointments, among many other things.

Mark To these ministries, the congregation has added the Pastoral Team. The first team was installed eight years ago. Today, we hereby install the new members of our team.

Pastoral Team members extend the care of this congregation to those going through a time of prolonged hardship, grief, hospitalization or loss of work. Know that they each understand

confidentiality, promising to keep the sacred stories of every human life safe. They have been trained to do this work, and Eric, Dick and I hereby acknowledge them as persons of character, compassion and commitment, worthy of trust.

Dick

With Eric and Mark, and on behalf of the members of this congregation and its leaders, I hereby install you as members of the Pastoral Team of First Unitarian Universalist Church. Working with the ministers and the Caring Committee and Neighborhood Network to live out our values of compassion and service one-on-one, I commend you to the congregation as servants of the heart.

#1012 in New Teal Book