

Invincible Summer

August 21, 2011
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Welcome, Centering
Kindling
Opening Words

We are here
after a week of bright, tender days
and brief flashes of storm,
to worship, to dream big and breathe deep ,
to open like a rose in summer light,
and to rekindle the fire of our love.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and everyone with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Story

Sequence

That the dark abyss of the cosmos *is* bright with ferris wheels of stars;
That the sunlight from our own local star *does* splash so beautifully across a brick wall;
That summer clouds *can* shed both silver rain and lavender shade;
That ocean fish near Darwin Australia *do* still dart through the damaged coral;
That roses in the garden down the street have thorns and *still* are beautiful;
That those who yet weep in Oslo, Norway, are *not* ashamed of their grief;
That the jobless man named William who sells the Street Sheet news for the homeless on the corner of High and Chestnut *does* so;
That those who live in Ohio *are* aware of the difficulties far beyond our borders, say, in Syria, or Phoenix, Arizona;
That *we* gather here, together, the whole history of the universe crowding behind us, all of the future ahead of us, to fill this very moment.

bellsound

That our lives at this moment are not our whole lives *is* a reality;
That the circles of our lives overlap with other lives, other times, other geographies *is also* a reality. Bringing those realities to bear on our worship time, we are here free to name in our hearts or whisper aloud the names of those whom we miss, those whom we love, those whom we

find difficult to love, those we remember with tenderness. We enlarge this moment by opening our hearts to our greater lives.

naming

That we *are* with the earth, each one of us on its surface taking the same journey around the sun and through the field of stars. Oh how wondrous that everything is!

The Summer Choir will now sing a text by Amy Lowell. Amy Lowell, by the way, was Unitarian in her outlook, and even back in the teens of the last century bitterly wrote in one of her poems after her experience in one church: "I know a creed is a shell around a lie." She was lovers with actress Ada Russell for many years back when such relationships were quite invisible. The poem also speaks of riding a horse through summer heather and winter snow, making me think of Camus's full quote: In the midst of winter, I found inside me an invincible summer."

Choir Anthem

The First Reading is titled *This is the Dream*, by the great Norwegian poet of the last century, Olav H. Hauge.

This is the dream we carry through the world
that something fantastic will happen
that it has to happen
that time will open by itself
that doors shall open by themselves
that the heart will find itself open
that mountain springs will jump up
that the dream will open by itself
that we one early morning
will slip into a harbor
that we have never known.

Translated from Norwegian by Robert Hedin and Robert Bly

The Second Reading is a magnificent poem of Linda McCarriston, published in 1989, a story poem called "Riding Out At Evening," The word "gravid" by the way, means "pregnant."

At dusk, everything blurs and softens.
From here out over the long valley,
the fields and hills pull up the first slight sheets
of evening, as, over the next hour,
heavier, darker ones will follow.

Quieted roads, predictable deer
browsing in a neighbor's field, another's

herd of heifers, the kitchen lights
starting in many windows. On horseback
I take it in, neither visitor
nor intruder, but kin passing, closer
and closer to night, its cold streams
rising in the sugarbush and hollow.

Half-aloud, I say to the horse,
or myself, or whoever: let fire not come
to this house, nor that barn,
nor lightning strike the cattle.
Let dogs not gain the gravid doe,
let the lights of the rooms
convey what they seem to.

And who is to say it is useless
or foolish to ride out in the falling light
alone, wishing, or praying,
for particular good to particular beings
on one small road in a huge world?
The horse bears me along, like grace,
making me better than what I am,
and what I think or say or see
is whole in these moments, is neither
small nor broken. For up, out of
the inscrutable earth, have come my body
and the separate body of the mare:
flawed and aching and wronged. Who then
is better made to say be well, be glad,

or who to long that we, as one,
might course over the entire valley,
over all valleys, as a bird in a great embrace
of flight, who presses against her breast,
in grief and tenderness,
the whole weeping body of the world?

Sermon

I remember the first vacation I took the summer after my first year of ministry. I wasn't prepared for what happened.

My three years in seminary had taught me much...theology, techniques, theory. But they didn't tell me about my own heart, and how I might be affected by a year of hearing people's stories of hurt or loss, burying people I had come to care about, struggling to find something relevant to

say week after week, and knowing it would only be relevant to just a percentage anyway, no matter what I said, since we each hear things in different ways.

Starting in May that year, a sense of weariness hit me. It took me by complete surprise, too, because, after all, I *loved* my work, so why would I grow weary of something that I loved so much? I asked myself that question, but no answers were forthcoming. I was too tired even to care.

At night, I began to dream about the summer. I would wake up in the morning with my head full of sunlight and the sound of waves shushing on the shore. I could smell coconut oil. I could catch the scent of barbeque smoke in the air, hear the distant clack of baseball bats at nearby fields.

When summer finally came, I took some time off. I decided to take my dreams seriously. I went down to Lake Temescal in the center of Oakland, and lay on the beach in the sun. I did this every day for weeks. Beach sounds. Rest. Sun. Peace. That's what summer looks like, doesn't it? The summers I remembered from childhood when I was still innocent? Peace. Peace. Peace. Softness. Powder blue skies. Pollen and roses. Natural joy.

At the end of a few weeks, I was refreshed, and started to gain my inner peace and my energy back again, energy to work together with real people for a better world amidst all the universal grief and gladness that comes our way. I took the peace of the summer inside me, and brought it forward into my church work; and whenever I started to lose resilience or patience or was overcome by sorrow, I imagined myself back on the beach, listening to the water slap the shore, feeling the soothing heat and breeze, and remembering the most basic things, like that I was part of species that had come up out of the earth like every other kind of life on earth, and that we were all in this together or not at all. My night dreams had led me to the beach, and the beach had led me back to myself, and who I really was.

Of course, I was dreaming of an idyllic summer. Or better, an ideal summer. Real summers don't always resemble dream summers.

I am thinking, for example, of the citizens of Norway, who suffered the worst violence in their peaceful nation's history, 77 dead, some of them children. In the summer. Sun shining. Roses blooming. I am thinking about the single most peaceful and peace-supporting country in the world, Norway, suffering such an outrage because a man wanted to punish Europe for allowing Muslims to immigrate, and for its politicians speaking of multi-culturalism. The outrage was a summer event. Beaches packed. Ocean waves shushing on the shore. Picnics packed.

And I am thinking of the halls of our own US congress this summer, corridors echoing with accusations, blame and language that in other eras might have aroused some blushing, but which failed to do so in our era. Predicted economic disaster looming, the poor getting poorer, the superwealthy reaching heights not reached even before the recession, yet everyone pointing fingers elsewhere, and no one bothering to ask the really core questions like, "What do we owe each other as fellow citizens?" These were *summer* sessions for this congress and their mudslinging. Summer. Humid heat in the beltway, the crack of baseballs being hit out of the

park, mowers rumbling across the lawns, gardeners staking up their warm tomatoes glowing in the sun. Summer. With a nightmare, not a dream, in the middle of it.

I think of my friend Warren, who ended up this summer living at Faith Mission, a shelter, once again. Fifty years old, strong, a good worker, smart, college-educated, but with two felonies on his record from decades ago. Does he understand his mistakes and regret them? Yes. Does anyone in Ohio have the power to expunge those scars off his record? No. No one in Ohio will hire anyone with two felonies, except for precarious part time jobs that barely pay rent, let alone food. If that. In the spring, Warren lived in an apartment and had a job. Now he doesn't. It's summer. The warm sun shines on Warren's head, the corn-tassels brush the air in Ohio fields not far away, summer partygoers gather on patios along High Street in the Short North drinking gimlets, but Warren sleeps in a shelter, having been laid off...not fired...from two part time jobs that at least had paid his rent for a time and offered him a modicum of dignity and self-care.

And I think of this guy named William I met the other day when I stopped to buy a copy of the Street Sheet, a newspaper with information about the homeless, jobless men and women who sell them. I stopped to talk to this guy for a bit. There in the summer sun, there on the warm sidewalk, there under the same blue sky arching over bathers at beaches up on Lake Eire, or over on the Atlantic at Rehobeth. You know. Summer.

Am I saying that the world is unfair? Sure. Am I saying that the dreams I had of summer rest and summer peace were foolish?

No, not at all. Without the template of such redemptive, summery dreams in our hearts, without the vision of what bright fairness and peace and comfort looks like, we won't have much. All we'll have is a world of haves and have-nots forever. All we have is a world of the merely lucky and unlucky forever. All we have is a world where the individualistic philosophy of Ayn Rand rules the planet, a world where the only purpose of people like non-violent Norwegian children, Muslim immigrants, multicultural thinkers, middle class stiffs trying to make a living in a world with less and less work, and people like Warren and William is simply this: to let them drop off the face of the earth, so the survivors can say with satisfaction: "They brought it on themselves. They were lazy."

"This is the dream we carry through the world," our Norwegian poet writes, "that something fantastic will happen, that it *has* to happen..." Olav Hauge is not calling for a miracle from heaven. He is speaking of the necessity of maintaining what Camus calls "the invincible summer" in the midst of the winter of injustice. Hauge speaks with authority. After all, he is a poet in a nation that has taken the dream of that invincible summer, that template of justice, seriously; a nation that has indeed done something fantastic...a nation that has done more than most other nations on earth to make that dream a reality.

The poet says it *has* to happen. And largely, it has. Yes, I understand that the cost of living in Norway is 90% higher than it is here. I get that. I understand they have a lot fewer people. But I also get that they have no debts as a nation...no debts at all...and have *saved* more money than any other nation on earth. Their pension fund will soon be the greatest on earth, and their

investment strategies are based on fair trade and honesty. Norway has only 3.1 percent unemployment...and the unemployed are not on the streets selling Street Sheet to earn a meal or two. Convicted criminals in that almost crime-free nation are often sent to an island where they can work and create a life off the land, not locked away in drug-filled crime schools, which is our prison practice.

Universal health care for everyone, immigrants included, 46 weeks off for new parents...and for years now they have had the highest human development rating the world. They live longer than we do, are wealthier than we are, and their wealth is more fairly distributed...you won't see any Donald Trumps high in a shiny skyscraper, with people in blue rags curled in the doorways below. Yes, their winters are worse, but the Norwegians have succeeded in bringing an "invincible summer" into their winter. They have taken seriously the human dream that, in order to make something good happen in a world of injustice, we have to take the bull by the horns ourselves. Doors have to open by themselves, the Norwegian poet Hauge puts it. Doors for everyone. No one should have to get a battering ram to open any door, while others are hiding the key in their own pockets.

Linda McCarriston gets it too. She talks about riding out on her horse at evening, and while riding through the fields, catches brief images of the ancient dream of peace.

*Quieted roads, predictable deer
browsing in a neighbor's field, another's
herd of heifers, the kitchen lights
starting in many windows. On horseback
I take it in, neither visitor
nor intruder, but kin passing, closer
and closer to night, its cold streams
rising in the sugarbush and hollow.*

She gets it. Linda McCarriston gets it. She writes that she is "Kin passing" on her horse. Kindred to the people lighting their kitchen windows. Kindred to the sugarbush in the landscape, kindred to the heifers in the field. Related to everything alive. *Mitakuye Oyansin* the Lakota people used to say. *All things are related.* We are all kin passing.

That central idea...that we are all kindred...all connected...all cut from the same cloth of human existence... is why it's simply wrong that Warren can't get lasting work because of his long past mistakes, or that many modern workers are denied a voice, or that a person thinks that insane violence against innocents is the way to engage in a conversation about an idea or a fear.

McCarriston continues:

*Half-aloud, I say to the horse,
or myself, or whoever: let fire not come
to this house, nor that barn,
nor lightning strike the cattle....*

*let the lights of the rooms
convey what they seem to.*

She is not asking for help from God...she speaks to the horse after all, or “whoever”...hardly the vocabulary of traditional theologies. But she *recognizes* that the world is full of randomness and accident, and so she prays that fire not destroy the local house or barn she sees. She wants the image of peace conveyed by lights, coming on in the dark of evening, mean what she thinks it means. Peace and good comfort. She wants *to pray for particular good to particular beings*, in her words.

I do too. I want particular good for particular beings...my friend Warren, the stranger I just met, William, the relatives of the Norwegian victims whom I don't know at all...I want to pray for particular good for all of them.

I don't see this as wishful thinking, sorry. I see our poet stating with poetic clarity that injustice is easy to spot. You don't need a degree, or a license, to notice the unfairness in this world of ours. After all, I find it hard to believe that anyone *wants* or *prays* for barns to burn down, or kitchen lights to shine down on fistfights. Nobody wants that. Nobody wishes for that or prays for that. Yet it happens. Whole human lives have burned down like barns. But the unconsciousness, the numbing of modern life can keep us from paying too much attention. After all, as I said, no one I know actually wishes, or prays for others to suffer and be left out. It just happens.

“So why is the world like this?” the poet wonders. She says it's because we only see the parts, and refuse to see the whole. She thinks we need to see the whole, the ideal, the dream. Her words:

*The horse bears me along, like grace,
making me better than what I am,
and what I think or say or see
is whole in these moments, is neither
small nor broken. For up, out of
the inscrutable earth, have come my body
and the separate body of the mare:
flawed and aching and wronged. Who then
is better made to say be well, be glad?
or who to long that we, as one,
might course over the entire valley...*

As one, she writes. We have to work together *as one*. We have to say *Be glad, be well* together! We have to do this because we have come out of the same earth together, the same source. No one deserves anything more than anyone else. No one is essentially more worthy than anyone else from birth. Thus, we are called together to bless, not ignore; dream big, not sleep through it all without dreams. We are called to wish each other well, to pray even for our enemies...and not ignore it all by staying unconscious and numb. We have to do what the flying bird does at the

end of the poem, that is, we have to press against *our* breast, in grief and tenderness, the whole weeping body of the world.

This is the dream: that because we have all come up out of the inscrutable earth together, we have to dream a dream of justice for that earth...and thus for ourselves...together.

I sometimes hear people say that idealism is dead, that you have to be realistic, not given to unlikely outcomes. I sometimes hear people say that the vile discourse in the halls of Congress or in all the media, the violence that permeates our imagined solutions for just about everything, and the huge chasm separating the haves from the have-nots means that the era of dreams and idealism is dead.

That simply makes no sense to me. You cannot down-shift dreams and expect any justice for yourself or others.

My dreams at the beach that first summer of my ministry...the dream that I was part of a species that had come up out of the earth like every other kind of life on earth, and that we were all in this together or not at all, has never left me. I didn't go to the beach this summer...I spent it in urban areas... but no matter. Although I know that real seasonal summers are vulnerable to violence and injustice, I have to think that Camus was completely right: the dream of summer is invincible, and as long as I let it warm inside me, I can go forward with sufficient strength and inner peace.

Offering

Returning Prayer T. S. Elliot #685

What we call a beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and to know the place for the first time.