

Beyond Goodwill

Rev. Eric Meter
December 4, 2011

Welcome

Centering

Kindling

Opening Words

We are here

after the arrival of frost covered mornings

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, 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.

Praising #1059 May Your Life Be as a Song

Ingathering Sélavi as told by Jolinda Stephens

Gathering

Affirming #437 Let Us Worship by Kenneth Patton

Let us worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips;

Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes upon the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

We seek to know the wistfulness of the very young and the very old, the wistfulness of people in all times of life.

We seek to understand the shyness behind arrogance, the fear behind pride, the tenderness behind clumsy strength, the anguish behind cruelty.

All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

Let us worship, not in bowing down, not with closed eyes and stopped ears.

Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings, with the full outstretching of our spirits.

Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding, with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body, to those who have fallen in love with life.

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

Sequence

Let us move into the center of our time together, a time for stillness and reflection, with these words adapted from the Rev. Barbara Cheatham:

Let us be gentle with ourselves just now.
For a few moments, let us release ourselves
from a world that is “too much with us” —
too noisy, too frantic, too demanding, too judging.

Let us be gentle with ourselves just now.
For a few moments, let us release ourselves
into the calm, still world that waits to receive us —
where the quiet is broken only by sounds of our own making,
by those of our children near-at-hand,
by a bird, an airplane high overhead....

Within this welcoming quiet, let us befriend ourselves.
Where we would unfairly and endlessly
berate ourselves for our imperfections,
let the tongue of harsh judgment be silent.

We will do better tomorrow. We will “rise to the occasion.”
We will surprise the world with our goodness and achievements.
For now, let us simply rest in the gentleness of this moment, letting the healing hand of self-understanding and forgiveness touch us with peace.

bell

In the continuing stillness, we pause to remember our larger lives. Let us recall with gentleness 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

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From stillness to the names of those whose lives give shape to our own, now let us move into the celebration that is song. May this music, by the magic of breath and tone, rest and rhythm, carry us anew.

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Readings

Our first reading today is from an essay titled Engagement by Terry Tempest Williams, 2004.

It is easy to believe we the people have no say, that the powers in Washington will roll over our local, on-the-ground concerns with their corporate energy ties and thumper trucks. It is easy to believe that the American will is only focused on how to get rich, how to be entertained, and how to distract itself from the hard choices before us as a nation.

I refuse to believe this. The only space I see truly capable of being closed is not the land or our civil liberties but our own hearts.

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up — ever — trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?

Our second reading this morning is from a more conservative, but no less idealistic voice, in this case the New York Times columnist David Brooks. In a column, published in late September, titled The Limits of Empathy, he writes:

Nobody is against empathy. Nonetheless, it's insufficient. These days empathy has become a shortcut. It has become a way to experience delicious moral emotions without confronting the weaknesses in our nature that prevent us from actually acting upon them. It has become a way to experience the illusion of moral progress without having to do the nasty work of making moral judgments. In a culture that is inarticulate about moral categories, and touchy about giving offense, teaching empathy is a safe way for schools and other institutions to seem virtuous without risking controversy or hurting anybody's feelings.

People who actually perform pro-social action don't only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty. Their lives are structured by sacred codes.

Think of anybody you admire. They probably have some talent for fellow-feeling, but it is overshadowed by their sense of obligation to some religious, military, social or philosophic code. They would feel a sense of shame or guilt if they didn't live up to the code. The code tells them when they deserve public admiration or dishonor. The code helps them evaluate other people's feelings, not just share them. The code tells them that an adulterer or a drug dealer may feel ecstatic, but the proper response is still contempt.

The code isn't just a set of rules. It's a source of identity. It's pursued with joy. It arouses the strongest emotions and attachments. Empathy is a sideshow. If you want to make the world a

better place, help people debate, understand, reform, revere and enact their codes. Accept that codes conflict.

Sermon

Our responsive reading Gina led earlier was all about worship and love. Our ingathering story, which Jolinda told, was about communities of courage and care in a state of political oppression. The readings earlier highlighted political realities and social norms.

You might be thinking, “What in blazes is Eric going to be talking about today? The title of his talk is called Beyond Goodwill. What’s that about? Is that some reference to the line from the Christmas carol that goes, “Peace on Earth, Goodwill to all”? I don’t know whether to be nervous or sleepy.”

Well, for what it’s worth: Yes, Maybe, and I hope not.

Taking a nod from the story Jolinda told earlier... Not so long ago and not so far away — last June in Charlotte, North Carolina, to be precise — the popular religious historian Karen Armstrong gave the main talk at our denomination’s general assembly in which she began by laying down a challenge for us. As quoted at the top of your program today, she said to us, “I urge you — so far businessmen have taken the lead, but why not let the Unitarian [Universalists] come forward and spread compassion throughout the world.”

We had invited her to speak to us on a project she’s been engaged in for a few years now, called the Charter for Compassion. It is the basis of her most recent book, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

Both the Charter and the book were born in response to Armstrong being awarded the TED Prize in 2008. TED, a consortium of leaders in the fields of technology, entertainment and design, is a nonprofit which promotes, in its words, “ideas worth spreading.” But the group doesn’t award its prize solely to express appreciation of past work. Instead, winners are charged with articulating a wish that will change the world for the better. Members of the consortium, then, help the prize winner promote, if not implement, that idea.

Her wish was the Charter for Compassion, a means of lifting up compassion, exemplified by the Golden Rule, treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, as a foundation for our lives, faiths and society at large. It concludes with these words, “Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.

These are noble words. The UUA has signed on as a Charter Partner, and thousands of individuals, including myself, have signed on as well. This summer, Dick Dawson and others from the congregation led a worship service based in large part on Armstrong’s work.

So, back to her challenge. Can we come forward and spread compassion throughout the world?

Well, as much as I’d like to say that I thought we actually were, in all seriousness, I don’t think we can.

My reason for saying so isn't because this is such a small faith tradition in the global sense. I'd love to see greater multitudes become part of our religious movement.

My reason for saying so isn't because compassion is for wimps. Armstrong's compassion is not weak. Listen to her as she speaks of what it means to be a parent. I've edited her remarks to be more inclusive:

"[A parent's] love is hard. A [parent] has to get up every night for her crying child no matter how exhausted she is. [He] has to be aware of what that child is doing at every moment of the day. [Parents have] to put [their] own frustrations and exhaustion and impatience on the back burner, and [their] child must be in [their minds] all day long. And then that cute little baby grows up and can become an awful disappointment. But a [parent] doesn't give up no matter how dispiriting it might be."

Armstrong's compassion is not for sissies. It has backbone, tenaciousness and principle.

No, the reasons I believe we won't be the ones winning the day under the banner of compassion are twofold. The first, smaller, reason why is on account of leverage. The sad truth is that good liberal religious folks going around talking up how compassion will make everything better for everyone is not going to inspire anyone. The business leaders who are backing the Charter for Compassion will be more effective than we will ever be because people don't expect to hear them championing anything other than the next product, or how great their earnings will be next quarter.

Faith communities certainly can support our member in the business world and Charter members directly, but even that won't be enough.

That's because David Brooks has it right this time. Compassion is necessary, but it will never be sufficient to building the kind of society most of us want to live and raise our children in.

Part of the tragedy of the human condition is that, as necessary as they are to the fabric of our lives, by themselves, empathy and compassion will never be sufficient.

Ralph Waldo Emerson knew that when he wrote in his famous essay *Self-Reliance*, "Your goodness must have some edge to it — else it is none."

Martin Luther King Jr. knew that when he wrote, "Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic."

Here is what Brooks had to say again,

"People who actually perform pro-social action don't only feel for those who are suffering, they feel compelled to act by a sense of duty. Their lives are structured by sacred codes.

Think of anybody you admire. They probably have some talent for fellow-feeling, but it is overshadowed by their sense of obligation to some religious, military, social or philosophic code. They would feel a sense of shame or guilt if they didn't live up to the code. The code tells them when they deserve public admiration or dishonor. The code helps them evaluate other people's feelings, not just share them.

The code isn't just a set of rules. It's a source of identity. If you want to make the world a better place, help people debate, understand, reform, revere and enact their codes. Accept that codes conflict."

While Brooks waxes a bit poetic when talking about such moral codes, I have to admit that there is something here that gives me pause.

I don't normally think in terms of having a moral code, per se. I mean I don't think that I'm too much of a social deviant, but thinking in these terms is foreign to me.

And, as someone whose been around our congregations his whole life, I don't hear this kind of talk in our congregations at large. Not that we're without moral compasses, but they are seldom well defined.

This congregation should take some justifiable pride in having a Covenant of Respectful Relations and Mark, Kathleen, Suzan and I adhere to our Ministers' Association's Code of Conduct.

But at least for me those are external codes, not something I feel is part of my character.

When I started thinking about my moral compass, the first thing that came to mind was something that happened to me when I was 9 or 10. My uncle Sandy brought me to a Milwaukee Brewers game. We were sitting way out past third base. When the guys in front of us starting booing the other team, I thought that sounded fun, cupped my hands and booed along with them. In no time at all, my uncle (6'3" and a fit Vietnam vet) put his hand on my shoulder, and said in no uncertain terms, "We don't do that."

Oh.

If it had been my father, I'd be a certified Bleacher Bum today. But I listened to my uncle, and late this summer caught myself saying the exact same thing to my friends' nine year old at a Columbus Clippers game.

Now, there are moral codes and ethical frameworks, and there are moral codes and ethical frameworks. There are the moral principles that are written and professed, and there are the much less visible ones we actually live by. And context comes into play in any unpacking as to what motivates us along ethical and moral lines.

I can guarantee that if I were to spend the hours and weeks and months it would take to unpack the tangled web of moral codes I more or less live by, what I would come up with would be noticeably different than yours. That's just the way of things. And Brooks is right to remind us that moral codes of differing people, let alone groups, will conflict. Such is what it means to live in human community.

What interests me more is where Brooks says, "If you want to make the world a better place, help people debate, understand, reform, revere and enact their codes."

Why, that sounds like a job for a liberal faith community, doesn't it? Hmmm.

I hope I won't offend anyone if I say I think this is something that happens primarily sub rosa around here. We pick up social and moral norms by osmosis in most UU congregations. Anything else reminds us too much of the Calvinism we worked so hard to get away from all those years ago.

And that is understandable because this is risky territory. When we talk about what motivates us to live moral lives, or to stray from doing so, we are on vulnerable ground.

There is the very real possibility that we will find we come up short.

I remember reading about a Quaker woman who despaired and left her local church because she began noticing that, while the members of her church would bake casseroles for any fundraiser and write letters for any progressive cause, none was willing to risk jail for any cause.

I find myself in that same camp of those cooks and letter writers, and it is a realization that does not sit comfortably with me. I've given a great deal of thought to what I would take up arms for, and have come to realize that I'm not a pacifist. But I like to think that the bar is set quite high for what I would go to war for. But jail? Not so much.

I imagine the church folks in Haiti worried about the same thing in the story earlier about Sélavi. But it didn't stop them.

But where do we encourage one another to engage questions like this?

I serve on our Covenant Group curriculum writing team. These questions aren't there.

I lead our Wellspring program. These questions aren't there, either.

I've asked our religious educator Jolinda Stephens; these aren't in other of our fabulous adult faith development opportunities.

How much would it hurt if we gave some of our attention to such questions?

This isn't an impossibility.

Here's a story of how one person is guided by a moral compass instilled in him largely from the faith community of his youth. It comes from Rebecca Parker, president of our seminary in Berkeley.

"Several summers ago, when Rita Brock and I were beginning to work on [our book] *Saving Paradise*, we joined my brother's family for a weeklong backpacking trip into the ... eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. To get to the trailhead, we took a Forest Service bus... and while the bus switched up the narrow road through the pine forest my seat mate struck up a conversation with me. He'd overheard my brother talking with Rita and me about our theological work. He asked if we'd written any books, so I told him about our first book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, which exposes how Christian ideas that the death of Jesus saved humanity have sanctioned domestic violence, sexual abuse, racism, homophobia and war. He nodded. He said that he had been raised Catholic and that his wife was the daughter of a Methodist minister. Church was important to him.

‘I can’t believe all the doctrines,’ he said. ‘I never was comfortable with the bloody crucifix hanging over the altar — I couldn’t understand why we would be worshipping it. But I learned a way of life from the church that I have not rejected.’

‘What was that way of life?’ I asked.

‘Oh, it’s simple,’ he said, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself. Try to help, not harm. Do what you can to make a difference.’ He went on, ‘We do foster care for kids.’ He said it was heartbreaking to see some of the violence, abuse, and deprivation these children have experienced. But he and his wife welcomed them into their home and did what they could. ‘Not even love can repair the damage sometimes,’ he said. ‘I know,’ I replied.”

This man’s moral framework supported him as he continued to invest his heart in caring for foster children. Mine, while I may not have it clearly mapped, supports me to invest my time in helping to foster religious communities.

But I can’t shake the sense that there is a world of hurt out there that could use a bit more attention from folks like, well, me.

I don’t have any definitive answers for you today. Just a reflection on something I’ve been mulling over for a while.

So, back to compassion. It may not be sufficient in itself to get us where we want to go, but it is still necessary. So I will try to be compassionate with myself as I continue working for clarity.

Soon we’ll be singing once again, “Peace on Earth. Goodwill to all.” But we also know that old saw about the road lined with good intentions. To get where we want to go, is going to take more than compassion and goodwill.

It’s going to take honest assessment, a willingness to be vulnerable, and perhaps garnering a little courage.

Sounds like that’s work best done together, friends. Let’s see what we can do.

Offering

Investing in the future of our common house, and our compelling vision of life and love for all people, we offer this time to bless the choice we have made to participate in this beloved community.

Returning

Ursula K. Le Guin’s version of a verse from Lao Tzu reminds us of the necessity of compassion:

Everybody says the way is great
but improbable.

All greatness
is improbable.
What's probable
is tedious and petty.

I have three treasures.
I keep them and treasure them.
The first, mercy,
the second, moderation,
the third, modesty.
If you're merciful you can be brave,
if you're moderate you can be generous,
and if you don't presume to lead
you can lead the high and mighty.

But to be brave without compassion,
or generous without self-restraint,
or to take the lead,
is fatal.

Compassion wins the battle
and holds the fort;
it is the bulwark set
around those heaven helps.

Singing #95 There is More Love Somewhere

Blessing