

December 11, 2011
Hope not Hype
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here
at the sunny beginning of a week,
to worship, to question easy answers
at the same time
as we answer the tougher questions
about life, love and truthfulness
with our lives.

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 all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Sequence

That our eyes open onto the world when we are born.
That we grow and struggle and laugh and weep.
That we learn and unlearn.
That we suffer ourselves, and hurt others.
That we succeed beyond our wild dreams,
and bungle unconsciously as well.
That we can heal most of the time.
That we can live with uncertainty about many things,
even as we sometimes lunge clumsily toward certainty.
That we can love, and that hearts can break,
and that broken-heartedness can be transcended.
That we can let go. That we can bless.
That we can be grateful and upset on the very same day.
That we must each day struggle with what we can control and what we cannot control.
That we can be completely shocked and yet understanding in the same week of our lives.
That we think about the mystery that everything is, and that life and death are a package deal,
and that we never signed on the dotted line for the deal but here we are.
That we will one day close our eyes and not open them onto anything we now know.
That we have done this all of our lives, as each day delivers its cargo of surprises and change.
That finally, we can struggle to name the Nameless, and still live loving lives though every name
we speak eventually fades into silence. Let us open our hearts and palms and receive the gift of
this moment.

Silence

That we are not alone even when we feel alone.
That a great cloud of witnesses surrounds us,
to whom we are related by love and/or blood.
That we can remember them when they are gone, and imagine them when they are not here,
and depend upon them and love them even when they are far away.
Even when they are close.
That we can name them, in our hearts, or whispered aloud in our shared community of love and
life. That we can do that now....

Naming

That music celebrates both heart and holidays,
and befriends us to ourselves and the world.

Music/Anthem

The First Reading comes from therapist David Richo's excellent book *The Five Things We Cannot Change*, published in 2005.

There are five unavoidable givens:

1. Everything changes and ends.
2. Things do not always go according to plan.
3. Life is not always fair.
4. Pain is part of life.
5. People are not loving and loyal all the time.

In the face of life's givens, we might take refuge in rituals of safety we devise to protect ourselves from what we believe is a scary, unpredictable or even punitive world. This is magical thinking, using our wishes or fears to explain what is happening or can happen. Here are some examples:

1. We get what we deserve.
2. If it had not been for this one thing happening, everything would be perfect now.
3. If I don't remain in control, everything will fall apart.
4. Happiness will not last if I enjoy it too much. Full-on exuberance is dangerous.
5. I have to grasp this opportunity right now or lose it. There is no time for a mindful pause.
6. Prosperity will be followed by catastrophe.
7. There is a by-and-by time to come in history in which there will be no violence or evil, and the human shadow will disappear.
8. If people knew me the way I really am, they would not love me or want me.
9. Dangerous forces will erupt if I do not adhere to very precise rules.
10. If I bring an issue out into the open, it will become even more dangerous. If I never mention it, it will go away.
11. The spiritual does not exist since it cannot be confirmed or controlled.
12. I am always indebted. I always owe something to God, or have to keep paying for something I have done that remains unfixably wrong.

The Second Reading *is a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye, a well-respected poet out of San Antonio, Texas*

Enthusiasm in Two Parts

Maybe a wasp will sting my throat again
so the high bouillon surge of joy
sweetens the day.
Shall I blink or wave?
Simply stand below the vine?
Since the singer first pierced my throat
and a long-held note of gloom suddenly lifted, I've considered poisons
with surprise applications. Happy venom. Staring differently
at bees, spiders, centipedes, snakes.

*

We're more elastic than we thought.
Morning's pouf of goodwill
shrinks to afternoon's tight nod.
We deliver cake
to aged ladies who live alone,
just to keep some hope afloat.

Those who are known, rightly or wrongly,
as optimists, have a heavier boat than most.
If we pause, or simply look away,
they say, *What's wrong?*
They don't let us throw anything overboard
even for a minute.

But that's the only way we get it back.

Sermon

Just after college, I found good work as a child-care worker for children with a variety of serious mental conditions. They lived together in a residential treatment center. It was work I really enjoyed. One day, as I was driving down the now famous Eight Mile Road in Detroit, heading to my afternoon shift on a hot summer day, two yellow jackets flew into my open window while I was stopped for a light. They hummed around my head, then landed on my neck and for no particular reason that I could discern, stung me, just like that. Then they flew out the window. I was startled, but didn't feel dizzy or anything, so, when the light changed, I preceded to work.

By the time I got there, my neck was swollen as if I had a goiter, and the head nurse, visibly horrified, gave me some medicine to reduce the swelling, and sent me home. At first I was just plain annoyed that the whole thing happened. My neck hurt, and my head was dizzy. And then I realized that I had driven down Eight Mile a thousand times, and that this had only happened

once in my whole life. I realized that random suffering strikes most everyone's life, the powerful and the disenfranchised both. And I was suddenly glad to be alive, glad that suffering was random and for me, unhitched from any theology implying a vengeful God, or a flippant Devil, was behind it all. The suffering suddenly opened up onto hope and gratitude, and for some reason, those two things have been linked in my heart ever since. The suffering was real, but so was my hope and gratitude.

I'm not the only one to feel such a linkage. Naomi Shihab Nye reveals a similar story in the first part of her poem. In her case, it's a wasp that stings her throat...and yet she says "a long-held note of gloom suddenly lifted" with that sting. She even wonders whimsically if she should stand below the vine where the wasps hover and wave at them, inviting further stings, a strange thought for sure, but clearly meaningful to her. Perhaps her bewildering and heart-changing experience was a lot like mine...she linked random suffering to gratitude and hope...it would seem so, at least, from her poem.

I experienced my mother's death, as I wrote in my newsletter column, through the same lens. I wept mightily, I was torn asunder by the immensity of the loss, felt desolation... and, at the exact same time, I experienced the joy of thanksgiving that she was my mother and I her son, and that I had gotten to know her so much more deeply and joyfully in the last two years. I saw her life as part and parcel of my whole life of love and hope which links all the living and the dead in my heart...my son Tony who lives down the street from me, my friend Stefan Mistler gone now 15 years, my friends Kim and Jane and Chuck with whom I dined in Boston last week, and my late friends Devere and Jeff who died in the last two years at very young ages, 25 and 39 respectively. All of a piece. All part of the world of my life forever. All part of the love, the giving away of my affection and care and praise and thanks, that fills the sails of my hope.

In the second part of her poem, Nye speaks of that hope, putting it this way: *We deliver cake to aged ladies who live alone, just to keep some hope afloat.* She is affirming that we can simply and realistically be there for others. Bring a cake. Then she adds, speaking of herself: *Those who are known, rightly or wrongly, as optimists, have a heavier boat than most. If we pause, or simply look away, they say, What's wrong? They don't let us throw anything overboard even for a minute.*

But that's the only way we get it back.

In other words, a hopeful optimist like Nye is not foolish. Her optimism isn't flighty or some Pollyanna creed. Her feet are on the ground. She's perfectly aware that suffering exists in the world, some of it random and relatively small, like a wasp sting; some of it terrible, inflicted by people who are convinced that their right to do what they do is blessed by their religion, corporation, nation or family. Nye is not afraid to throw her sense of bright hope overboard for a while, and to grieve deeply, knowing, as she puts it, that it's the only way she'll get her sense of hope back in full.

Hope is not wishful thinking, you see, any more than forgiveness is telling the person who has deeply injured you: "Oh, that's OK!" The greater the concept, unfortunately, the more the distortion and debasing of it in pop culture. No, hope is a suspicion, Brazilian theologian and therapist Rubem Alves insists. Not a sunny word, I'd say. It's a refusal to let the creative act

dissolve in immediate experience. It's planting an apple tree with the deep conviction that your children will eat off that tree, even though you may not.

And, he adds, profoundly: "hope and suffering live from each other." Too much suffering without hope, he says, and you court despair and resentment. Too much hope, without being impacted by the real suffering in the world leaves you with illusions and a powerless naiveté.

My favorite spiritual writer David Richo affirms the same thing, that suffering...pain is his word...is part and parcel of life. Loss is inevitable, too, he says. Our best laid plans sometimes come to nothing. Life is clearly not always fair. And people can be trusted most of the time, but sometimes not at all. Add to these realities the presence of deranged people firing guns on campuses, the present finagling of finances all around the world threatening to capsize the whole ship, unpredictable earthquake fault-lines running invisibly under our shining cities, and windy weather catastrophes of all kinds, and some would say a case can be made for pessimism.

I don't agree. Human life has been living with these realities for ten thousand years, and as far as I am concerned, a confident pessimism seems a lot more like what David Richo calls Magical Thinking than a healthy response to suffering. It's a way of saying "If you don't expect anything good to happen, then you won't be disappointed when it doesn't happen."

Naomi Shihab Nye's optimism is something that opens and closes on the hinge of real life. Pessimism, like all forms of magical thinking, tends to nail the door shut once and for all.

Magical thinking seems to have a lot to do with control. Why don't we have control over the suffering or pain that befalls us? What kind of a cosmos is this, that terrible things can happen randomly so much? Shouldn't we be able to stop all pain, all suffering once and for all forever?

No, I don't think that's possible. Oh, I still live in hope, that is, keep myself open to positive change in many areas and in my lifetime, but I am not at all waiting for the Perfect Society to descend from the clouds, magically undoing all the systems we've put in place to keep everyone arbitrarily in their place, all to the end that those who claim control for themselves can keep it. The society of justice and love which Jesus called the Reign of God, or some Japanese Buddhists call the Pure Land, or some Socialists the "classless society," is not so much a detailed portrait of something achievable in final perfection, as it is a path that moves us with integrity and honesty toward greater wholeness of life. But I say utopia can not ever be perfectly realized, since we'll never be able to agree as to what final perfection would look like in the first place. After all, loss, disappointment are inevitable, and nothing can change that, even the arrival of a longed-for dream, the Reign of God, or Utopia.

Yet I do understand why people want relief from pain. I want it when I suffer, be it broken foot, a cold, depression, economic losses, or the death of a loved one. But it's sad to me that so many of us seek relief in magical thinking, myself included, a surprising amount of time. Magical thinking has been going on for ten thousand years too. The modern slang for the therapeutic term "magical thinking" is hype. Hype is the reduction of hope to instant and magical satisfaction. I hope, but what I hope for has to be here in front of me right now. Ever hear the television commercial where people are shouting "It's my money, and I want it now!?" That is the very definition of hype in dramatic form. Our email accounts are filled with newfangled hype: instant

love and devotion from Russian brides or Polish paramours; instant fortunes from African widows who want to use our bank accounts to store their cash; instant turnarounds for our lagging love-making with the help of pills or herbs; instant facial perfection due to painless plastic surgery, or some ab machine that will give you a ten pack in ten days. All hype. Free giveaways on television, free ocean liner trips to the Bahamas on my voicemail. Make sure your car is protected with our policy now...time is running out. You'll be left out in the cold if you don't apply now. You're already approved, so why are you waiting? You know you want this. You know you cannot live without it. All your pain will end if you buy what we're offering.

Hype, hype, hype.

Nothing hopeful about it. Hope is a form of suspicion after all, and hype tells us to put our suspicion down. It may be on our electronic media these days, but it's still all a form of bottled snake oil of the American frontier.

Yet snake oil predates America. Instant cures in a bottle. Ancient Romans and Egyptians and Greeks sold talisman and herbal potions that could cure anything. In the Middle Ages, charlatans stole the consecrated communion wafer, and placed it in a poultice to heal a variety of afflictions. And in our own Central Ohio area, Samuel Hartman of Columbus OH made a fortune selling actual bottled snake oil. He still has a loft-building downtown named after him. Hartman was a physician from Pennsylvania who decided regular medical practice wasn't good enough unless it provided a universal cure-all for everything. He decided that all health problems, from cancer to appendicitis, were due to a substance called catarrh, or mucus, and that a universal solution was available to all for a small price: Paruna. A bottle of Paruna, made here in Columbus and sold nationwide, was largely pure 151 alcohol colored with burnt sugar, or caramel coloring as we would say today, and flavored with cubebs, which is a kind of peppercorn that tastes vaguely like cloves. A few jolts of Paruna, and even if you were in pain, you felt it no more...for a while.

Total hype that made its producer a great fortune. And that, after all, is what it's all about; making a fortune by getting people to believe that their pain is a mistake, not a given. That their loneliness can be ended by Russian mail-order brides, or their sickness ended by a sip of bottled potion made from alcohol, or the embarrassment of their "middle-classness" fixed by a "free" exotic three day and two night trip to Orlando, promised them on the phone by someone entirely too cheerful and peppy.

But none of the snake oil, ancient or modern, is true. A grounded and good theology which teaches us to be grateful for the world as it actually works, suffering and hope woven together tight, can help us not to fall for sparkling promises made by those whose theology is hurtful, promising us that pain and suffering can be eradicated forever. For a cost. No, pain and suffering are part and parcel of life. They are not mistakes. They are woven tight with everything else in life, including joy, gratitude and happiness...and the open heart of hope.

No scalpel exists sharp enough to separate joy from pain forever. The bees that stung me hurt, but my thanksgiving for life itself, a joyful thanksgiving mixed with buoyant hope, is inseparable from those stings. My mother's death brought me tears and left me desolate and grieving for years, but also brought me thanksgiving, and a joyful reminder that the love I felt for her still is

alive in me, and completely blended with all the tender love I nurture for family, friends, members of the congregation, and even a stranger or two I meet on a plane and never see again, or even, for that matter, myself.

Offering

Prayer Looking East: A Circle Prayer

People, look South: it's almost summer in Adelaide Australia and Christchurch New Zealand and Puerto Montt Chile, and the flowers are shooting up so fast you can almost see them. One world. We are part of that summery field of flowers too.

People, look West: the snow is falling in the Rockies, and the winds are blowing in California, and the currents are cooling in the Pacific by the action of El Niña. One world. We are part of those wind, snows and cooler currents too.

People look North. The cooler air of early winter is approaching, the north star is invisible, hidden under the slate gray clouds, the great cities of Canada are hunkering down, with glowing warmth shining from café windows. One world. We are part of the winter, the invisible stars, the warmth in cafes too.

People, look East. Tears and fear at Virginia Tech; holiday bustling in New York, Paris and Berlin; Three women, two from Africa and one from Yemen, opening their Nobel Peace Prize and championing the voices of women. Carols of Advent and songs of Hanukkah getting ready to roll out through the candlelit night perfumed of winter roses. One world. We are part of the tears, the bustling, the championing of each voice, the carols and songs, the scent of rose too.

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