

Experience

April 22, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

on a cool gray April Sunday, to worship,
to celebrate that we are part of the circle
*of all beings---*roses and robins,
the homeless and hurting, the jailed and free,
rebuffers and visionaries, lovers and loners
and that each being on this circle, without exception
is worthy of restoration and respect.

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.

Sequence: *Earth Song*

Like a river moving through space and time,
the path of our planet and its parent star,
curving through the galaxy, a great spiral of warm life in the midst of the cold.
Like waves in that vast river we rise and fall just like all the other current, not by our will, for the river flows forward unaffected by our fears or perceptions. We rise and we fall, we humans, like many species before us or perhaps after us – some of them cresting for fifty million years or more, our species for four million years or less.
So many currents in the river – moth and mulberry, oxygen and nitrogen, salt and rock, apes and sea urchins, coconut palms, apple trees, lilacs and roses, centipedes and tunicates, beryl and iron, silicon and charcoal, passion-flower vines and viruses, granite and mud, the music of Brahms and and drummers in Lagos or Columbus, and films of Spike Lee and Ozu and Yen Tan, the taste of curry leaves and lemon grass, the swell of love and crack of heart-break,
all part of an interdependent system that can be ruined, all part of an interdependent system that can be restored, all part of an interdependent system that can kindle our wonder and gratitude no less than single match can kindle our chalice fire. In the silence that follows – let all the names I spoke give way to the namelessness of this moment, for names can fool us into thinking we can understand it all, and namelessness reminds us, thank Love, that it's not very likely.

silence

But all the names of beings and strata on earth are real in their own way, personal, our roots and wings. Therefore now, in continuing silence, may we feel free to bring to mind, bring to our tenderness, bring to our forgiveness, bring to our embrace the names of all whom we love, struggle with, remember and receive in gratitude. In our private hearts, or whispered aloud as is our pleasure, we name them.

naming

Oh Earth, our home, our holy home, our only home,
flowing river of names and namelessness moving
through space and time, we sing of you.

Readings

1. *Yisayahu/Isaiah (Trito-Isaiah p. 515 BCE)*
Unknown authors and editor. Jewish tradition.

We are sent to comfort all who grieve. To give them bouquets of roses instead of a handful of ashes. We are sent to uplift them instead of offering messages of doom, praising their hearts instead of shoring up their depressed spirit. Rename them sturdy Oaks of Justice. Remind them they show forth the divine glory. Then they will rebuild everything fallen into ruin, and raise a new city out of the wreckage. Immigrants will join you in husbandry and agriculture, and all of you will be ministers of God.

2. *Gospel of Luke c. 95 CE unknown author, but based on earlier material by another unknown author. Christian tradition.*

You don't have to be a genius to understand these things. Just use your common sense, the kind you would use if, while being taken to court, you decided to settle up with your accuser along the way, knowing that, if the case went to the judge, you'd probably go to jail and pay every last penny of the fine. This is the kind of decision I am asking you to make.

3. *Mahdi ibn abi Dharr al-Naraqi c. 1810*
commentator on Quranic ethics, Shia Islamic tradition

The Prophet said: "One *moment* of justice is better than seventy years of worship in which you keep fasts and pass the nights in offering prayers and worship to God." (*Jami'us Sa'adat*, vol. II, p. 223)

4. Judith Sargent Murray *Quoted in Our Women Workers 1882 by a Universalist biographer named E. R. Hansen, a woman celebrating the greatness of her own Universalist tradition. Murray was the first radical feminist of letters in the USA, and the spouse of John Murray, founder of Universalism in the English colonies before the Declaration of Independence.*

Were I to personify Justice, instead of presenting her blind I would denominate her the goddess

of fire; her broad and never-closing eye should stand conspicuous; she should possess the power to unravel the knotty entanglements of the most sophisticated web; she should disclose at a single glance the secret... windings of the most profound labyrinth, while patient and unerring. Justice should feel, hear and see, but truth alone should be the polar star by which she should shape her movements, and equity only should constrain her determinations.

Sermon

A few years ago, after decades of reflecting on the path my life has followed, I finally came to accept something. Namely, that most children are simply wiser than most, if not all, adults. What I mean is this: When I was a child, and somebody in the car in front of our family car threw trash out their window so that it splattered down the freeway next to us, I already knew that this was not a good act. I knew that before Earth Day was invented. I knew that in my bones before I ever heard the word "ecology." I trusted my previous experience of seeing tossed-away trash tangled in tree roots or choking rosebushes in the school yard I played in. As I grew older, I lost that wisdom as I grew to believe what the adults around me were telling me... *"It's ugly yes, but you don't need to worry about the trees and roses. Nature can take care of her herself."* I lost the wisdom I had as a child.

And when I took the streetcar to downtown Detroit and saw the homeless men talking to themselves, or wildly waving their hands in the air to beings invisible to me as they sat near their tarry sleeping bags, I knew in my heart they were abandoned, pushed away by society. I trusted my eyes, which told me they were suffering, and that it made no sense that anyone *chose* to be out of their mind like that, or to live on icy streets. I could feel in my bones they needed help in safe places. But when I grew older, my attentive experience of the world was to be re-shaped by what the adults around me told me:

"No one can do anything about those people. They won't live long. It's sad, but you have to be realistic you know. Besides, it costs money to take care of people like that. And we have more important things to spend tax money on." I once again lost the wisdom of my childhood heart, and gave in to being an adult who could live with inequities and not flinch quite so hard in sympathy coupled with a desire to do something.

Unfair access due to the color of a person's skin? *"That's too big to solve. It's been this way for a long time. You can't change people's prejudices...they were raised in ignorant families, that's all. Nothing can be done. Just don't cause trouble. Don't make demands that people change. It only irritates them when you bring it up."* Again, my trust in my own childhood experience, my own wisdom crumples, replaced by the blindfold restraints of adult fear. What fear? Fear of upsetting any apple carts. Fear of asking for something to be done to restore the world to a place where everyone, no matter their color, or origin or culture, can be counted on as an important voice in the chorus of love and life.

So the nun in my eighth grade class points out some facts and figures one day. So, most people in our prisons are persons from some minority group? Children in Bangladesh are dying of starvation? Our city of Detroit is full of abandoned and burned-out ruins that used to be houses? What a handful of ashes instead of a bouquet of roses. The adult response to those questions when I share my horror: *"Nothing can be done about those things. Life is not fair...get used to it."*

The problems are too big for you to get upset about. You live in a good neighborhood, in the greatest country on earth. You are lucky to live here. You're too sensitive, you know. Toughen up."

So my native trust in my own experience of sympathy and childhood wisdom withers one more time, and I accept that I am lucky enough to have what I need, so I don't have to do anything. Adulthood seals the deal by regarding everything about childhood something to be transcended, not the least of which is the attentiveness and sensitivity to others I am calling wisdom.

And so I yielded and became an adult. Cut off and insensitive to the world that I used to see quite clearly. Growing accustomed to the hard realities by blindfolding myself against their pain. I walked past the homeless, turned the page when editorials decried the inhumaneness of our prison system, ignored the blowing trash along the freeways, gave up on thinking that folks could be people a lot like me if they were already judged to be in the category of those nasty "law-breakers." I protected myself with a thousand "oh so reasonable" excuses. These handily allowed me to live unbent by the reality that many people have to die young, many people have to be locked away because of who they are as much as because of what they do, and that everything falls into ruin eventually, and is buried in trash. *So just get used to it. The earth is ours to use and cannot be hurt by us anyway – it's so much bigger than we are.* And so forth, and so forth....my child's heart experienced the unfairness, and felt the impact of it keenly in my bones; my childhood urge to want to respond with attention and understanding to the state of unfairness around me got shelved as immature. My adult "sensibleness" won out.

No wonder the impatient teacher Jesus is recorded as saying, "Unless you become like children...."

How grateful I am this morning to be able to announce that throughout history, some people have decided to forego standard patterns of adulthood, and have sought to recapture the sensitive wisdom of their childhood experiences of sympathy, care and heart. I love it, for example, that Rosa Parks, when she sat on that bus did not make adult excuses for the folks who were pushing her around. No, she felt the pain of it in her heart, like any child feels when she is pushed around, and she sat down, admitting to one and all that she was sick and tired of all the baloney that hemmed her in. Inspired by her action, and brick by moral brick, others joined her in restoring her home city to a center with some sense of human dignity.

The anonymous editor of the last third of the Hebrew book of Isaiah writes: "Then they will rebuild everything fallen into ruin." Big task, no doubt. He was talking not about moral bricks, but actual stone blocks. Such restoration takes longer than a bus-ride and arrest, and is physically tough. Makes no difference whether we are talking about rebuilding a war-devastated Jerusalem, rebuilding the ruins of Detroit, or removing or restoring dangerous or abandoned ruined houses here in Columbus. Yes, restoring cities is tough work, a big task. Why would anyone want to do such work? The text answers it this way: *"We are sent to comfort all who grieve. To give them bouquets of roses instead of a handful of ashes. We are sent to uplift them instead of offering messages of doom, praising their hearts instead of shoring up their depressed spirit.* In other words, we are not called to say to those who live in the ruins "It can't be done!" but rather "You can do it." Ours is to offer praise. Ours is to offer encouragement.

And who is the "we" who do all the encouraging and praise so that this can be accomplished? For me, Unitarian Universalists, Jews, Muslims, Christians of all stripes: Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, Pentecostal and Anabaptist – working together to do the work of justice – thousands of adults trying to reclaim the sensitivity and feelings they experienced as children before it was drummed out of them, and then to work together to get something done in response to those feelings.

Of course, as most of you know, I am talking about BREAD, the acronym for our interfaith justice organization here in Columbus, with 54 congregations participating. This morning we read from the scriptures of each of these traditions... including our own...after all, scripture only means "anything written." And though I didn't read it, I also *told* our children this morning the story of Nehemiah, the Nehemiah who gives his name to our annual large Action Meeting, which this year is Monday May 7th at 7 PM at the Celeste Center at the Fairgrounds. Nehemiah is the one who not only physically rebuilt the walls and buildings of a ruined city he loved, but who also had to deal with the local leaders who felt he was upsetting the apple cart of their privilege by doing so. Nehemiah also found out that he also had to deal with social issues of income disparity, starvation and political manipulation brought about by this privilege. He had a lot to do all of a sudden, this eunuch who had once lived a more privileged life himself in the courts of Persia.

But, open-eyed, he recognized that he wasn't the only one in town who was outraged by *both* the social issues, and the heartbreak of a city left in ruin after a war. So he linked up with all of these others and organized a meeting to demand justice from the privileged and local powerbrokers. Nehemiah brought thousands together to confront the folks profiting off the misery of others and restored not only the brick-and-mortar of post-war Jerusalem, but the self-worth and dignity of all the people.

I find that BREAD has been echoing much of the Nehemiah Story. For instance, BREAD, after researching the practices of other cities our size, realized the virtue of the Land Bank practice found in such cities. Due in large part to BREAD research and our Nehemiah action meetings, the Franklin County Commissioners have approved 3.5 million in annual funding for a County Land Bank that will address vacant and abandoned housing in the area.

The BREAD Jobs committee has made another comparison with cities our size in the area of employment. Columbus comes in dead-last among 16 cities for its attention to small business, and their capacity to create jobs. In other similar cities, small businesses account for 66% of all new job creation, but in Columbus, small businesses account for only 50%. Why? Because the city focuses on larger businesses and corporations, which, perhaps surprisingly to some, bring in disproportionately fewer new jobs into communities like ours. A number of us will be talking with Mayor Coleman about these issues on Tuesday afternoon.

The Christian writing from the gospel of Luke prefigures another issue raised and supported by BREAD, in concert with the NAACP. This is the idea of Restorative Justice, lifted up in a co-sponsored conference on the last day of last month. BREAD brought to this conference many community leaders associated with the juvenal justice system, including members of the Ohio

Supreme Court and Judge Elizabeth Gill.

"Crime," said one speaker, "is more than law-breaking. Crime harms victims, communities, and offenders, and damages relationships. If crime is harm," he said, "then justice should be healing." This healing approach involves everyone involved, and is primarily aimed at "doing justice by repairing the harm that has been caused by the crime."

This echoes the story of Jesus you heard earlier warning the marginalized people of his own day that the court system is not about healing, but strict fines whether they're just or not. He tells them that it would benefit any of them to try and enter into a healing conversation with their opponent before they end up ground to dust in the legal courts of the day, courts with judges who could easily be bribed by the well-to-do. He recommended relationship, not revenge, coming to terms instead of coming to blows in the courthouse. In this 1900 year old story, we find the roots of present day, and entirely evidence-based, restorative justice practices which BREAD and the NAACP are lifting up. Yes, evidence-based – again, Columbus is just now approaching this practice which has been so successful in other cities – a practice based on community-based reparation instead of revenge, a practice that has had far greater success in restoring lives than our present practice of imprisonment.

And frankly, Universalist Judith Sargent Murray's vision of lady justice that is *not* blind, like that famous statue portrays her, but rather seeing, is a bold scripture from our own Universalist tradition, one which supports and shares BREAD's understanding of justice.

Let me read her text again. *"Were I to personify Justice, instead of presenting her blind, I would denominate her the goddess of fire; her broad and never-closing eye should stand conspicuous; she should possess the power to unravel the knotty entanglements of the most sophisticated web; she should disclose at a single glance the secret... windings of the most profound labyrinth, while patient and unerring. Justice should feel, hear and see, but truth alone should be the polar star by which she should shape her movements, and equity only should constrain her determinations."*

I agree with Judith Sargent Murray. I think that our interfaith work, illumined by a variety of scriptures, but rooted in our own sensual experiences, is not best served by the image of a blind-fold across the eyes. Justice needs to see, to perceive – like I did as a child – the real inequities in the world face to face. My childhood heart saw, and heard, and felt the ache of the those pushed to the margins, those given a death sentence by the unwillingness of my adult eyes to notice, the unwillingness of my adult soul to identify and feel the plight of those struck down by fortune, or systems of oppression. I know that the blindfolded statue of lady justice is supposed to imply impartiality, but I think taking the blindfold off requires a more honest self-questioning, a more demanding spiritual work by us. I want us not just to see the misery of abandoned human beings on the street. I want us to see our own socialized partiality and find ways to root it out the hard way. Justice work, you see, grows from the depth of our own heart, not in the clockwork of good and bad, the righteous and the unjust. Equity and truth should help shape our vision, Judith Sargent Murray insists, and I certainly agree. That's exactly why research and evidence-based approaches are the *discipline* of BREAD; the urgency of BREAD, however, rises from hearts that have restored some of their childhood vulnerability before this troubled world.

Open eyes that see the ruins of a once great city and hurt because of it. Open eyes that pay attention to *visible* inequities in work, in access, in restoration. Open eyes that are like a child's open eyes...

Unless you become as children...unless you become as children...

The Muslim passage will conclude my sermon this morning: I join with the organizers of BREAD who would like each congregation, with their divergent scriptures and theologies and worship styles, to consider the words of the Prophet as offered by al Naraqi: "*One **moment** of justice is better than seventy years of worship in which you keep fasts and pass the nights in offering prayers and worship to God.*"

What would happen if we could get today's attendance at worship out to an action meeting for justice in Columbus area? What would happen if numbers of citizens from 54 congregations ignored their differences for a while, and banded together to rebuild, and restore our city, county and outlying areas to greater justice? What would happen if we could trust the experiences that we once had as children, but have had to recover in our latter days by deliberate and intentional attentiveness. What could happen if we saw earth day holistically – greater justice for, and attention to, all beings on earth.

Offering

Closing New Scripture

"The Circle has healing power. In the Circle, we are all equal. When in the Circle, no one is above you. No one is below you. The Sacred Circle is designed to create unity. The Hoop of Life is also a circle. On this hoop there is a place for every species, every race, every tree and every plant. It is this completeness of Life that must be respected in order to bring about health on this planet."

~Dave Yakima .Chief, Oglala Lakota~