

To Take Life Whole

September 23, 2012

Rev. Eric Meter

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling

Opening

We are here,

at the dawn of Autumn, during the Days of Awe,
amid cool nights and the first fall rains.

We gather to celebrate the possibilities still before us,
and garner the courage among this community of care,
to repair what is ours to repair, and begin again anew in a spirit of love.

And so: Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing #1000 *Morning Has Come*

Ingathering *One Stick – Two Sticks* Wendy Boortz

Greeting

Affirming

A look at the calendar will only confirm what last night's low temperature made clear: it is summer no longer. Let us rise, as we are willing or able, as we welcome autumn with the first verse of hymn #73....

#73 *Chant for the Seasons* v. 1

Religion and Justice by William Schulz

Religion and Justice are borne on each other's wings. What makes them soulmates?

Every single one of us knows what it is like to bleed. Every one of us has experienced pain.

If that were not a fact of human existence, we might not notice the suffering of the world.

Because it is, we do.

Every single one of us knows what it is like to bleed. In one respect pain is a gift because it cultivates our imagination. Without it, we would be far less likely to rail at deprivation, or shrink from cruelty.

In the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.

Sequence

As the center of our time together approaches, let us enter together into a time, marked by the toll of our temple bell, of stillness, imperfect silence, and reflection.

May these words now move us forward together into such a time.

In the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.

This is the time of year our Jewish cousins call the “Days of Awe.” The period between the Jewish New Year of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the Jewish tradition, this is a time to look, with as much unflinching honesty as we can muster, at the way in which we’ve lived since the previous new year. This is a time of taking stock, and making amends so that we are free to enter into the new year, with as clean a slate as possible. These days are not lightly called the “Days of Awe.”

In the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.

Friends of mine love the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. While I’ve never seen the show, I’ve read enough of the books to know what the saying from the story, *Winter is Coming*, means. When the cold comes we won’t do so well on our own. Winter is a time when family and friends are most needed. We need one another for warmth and support. We may be able to get by alone when the nights are warm, but winter nights are another matter entirely.

Though winter is coming, it is not here yet. Autumn is a time for preparation. These “Days of Awe” are a time to do what needs to be done to be able to start afresh.

A new season is at hand, beaconing like the sound of this bell. Are there things in your life that deserve a fresh start? If so, how can you bring those possibilities to life?

bell

We carry with us into each new day those who have helped make us who we are. Into the stillness now let us bring to mind the names of those we love, those who challenge us in old familiar or brand new ways, those we miss, those we long to see again soon. We name them now, either softly into this shared space, or silently in the embrace of our hearts.

naming

From stillness and whispers, the space in which we gather calls for more. Listen. "Fill me," cry these surrounding walls. "We have endured the first strong winds of autumn. Fill this space with music. Let there be song."

Readings

Our first reading this morning is an excerpt from Joan Didion's book *Blue Nights*. Her previous book, *A Year of Magical Thinking*, was a memoir of her grief in the aftermath of her husband's death. *Blue Nights* is about her response to the death of their adopted daughter. This selection is about her own health. It will be helpful to know that Didion has lived for the last many years in Manhattan.

"I see a new neurologist. The new neurologist has answers: all new neurologists have answers, usually wishful. New neurologists remain the last believers in the power of wishful thinking. The answers offered by the particular new neurologist are for me to gain weight and devote a minimum of three hours a week to physical therapy.

I have been through this catechism before.

I happen to have been a remarkably small child. I say remarkably for a reason: something about my size was such that perfect strangers could be relied to remark upon it. 'You're not very thick,' I recall a doctor saying when I went to see him for an antibiotic prescription.

The new neurologist offers, in addition to gaining weight and doing physical therapy, a third, although equally wishful, answer: the diagnosis I received in my late twenties notwithstanding, I do not have multiple sclerosis. Magnetic Resonance Imaging, a technique not yet available when I was in my twenties, conclusively demonstrates that I do not have multiple sclerosis.

In that case, I ask, what is it that I do have?

I have neuritis, a neuropathy, a neurological inflammation.

I ask what caused this neuritis, this neuropathy, this neurological inflammation.

Not weighing enough, he answers. It does not escape me that the consensus on what is wrong with me has once again insinuated the ball into my court.

I am referred to a dietitian on this matter of gaining weight.

The dietitian makes (the inevitable) protein shakes, brings me freshly laid eggs (better) from a farm in New Jersey and perfect vanilla ice cream (better still) from Maison du Chocolat.

I drink the protein shakes.

I eat the freshly laid eggs from the farm in New Jersey and the perfect vanilla ice cream from Maison du Chocolat.

Nonetheless.

I do not gain weight.

I find, on the other hand, somewhat to my surprise, that I actively like the physical therapy. I keep regular appointments at the sports medicine facility at Sixtieth and Madison. I am impressed by the strength and general tone of the other patients who turn up during the same hour. I study their balance, their proficiency with the various devices recommended by the therapist. The more I watch, the more encouraged I am: this stuff really works, I tell myself. The thought makes me cheerful, optimistic. I wonder how many appointments it will take to reach the apparently effortless control already achieved by my fellow patients. Only during my third week of physical therapy do I learn that these particular fellow patients are in fact the New York Yankees, loosening up between game days.”

For our second reading today, I turn again to the succinct clarity of John Berger, English born critic of art, society and politics.

“Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense of that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous.

Every day, all over the world, media networks replace reality with lies.

All the lies converge into one colossal falsehood: the supposition that life itself is a commodity and that those who can afford to buy it are, by definition, those who deserve it.”

Sermon

You might think that by now, I would have learned to be careful about what I choose to preach about.

Especially now that I don't preach as often as I used to earlier in my career, when I was a solo minister, it seems as if every time I put a topic out there, life provides ever more material for subject matter. Sometimes I'm grateful for that. But there are other times when I'd put a cap on it if I could. Today, as you will have guessed, is one of those latter times.

The phrase *to take life whole* comes from a reading I often share towards the close of memorial services. I've said the words often enough that even if I don't use them in a given memorial, they still return as part of my reflection. As we had a number of those late last month, the phrase was on my mind once again.

Here is the passage, adapted slightly from my colleague, the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons:

“There is, finally, only one thing required of us; that is, to take life whole, the bright and dark together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment, out of the vastness of time, for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let [our souls] be ardent — in [facing grief], in yearning, [and in offering] praise. Then may peace enfold our days, and [grace] shall not fade from our lives.”

What I like about those words is that they seem honest and hopeful at the same time. They remind me to keep perspective. How many times has it helped to remember that I’m only one piece of a much larger puzzle, and that to let myself be overwhelmed by the scope of it all takes my focus away from what I can do, what I can be?

to take life whole, the bright and dark together;
to live the life that is given us
with courage and humor and truth.

These words came back to me two weeks ago, when I was playing nursemaid for my girlfriend Ann, after she had surgery on each eye to slow the progression of glaucoma.

Now, what you need to know about Ann is that, besides being an absolute delight, Ann is a tough cookie. She worked at Grant Hospital with families whose loved ones had been declared brain dead, talking with them about the possibility of organ donation, of giving the gift of life to others.

The other thing you need to know about Ann, and it relates to her being a tough cookie, is that she has a tolerance for pain that is off the charts. I won’t go into details, but I will say this: if I had to experience the levels of pain she has lived with for years now I would not be standing here. I would be a puddle somewhere, making my way slowly to the Ohio River.

When she told me after the procedure on each of her eyes, “That was hard,” I knew that her doctor had seriously miscalculated when she told Ann that she would be able to drive herself home.

We were doing so well with the eye drops. Only there wasn’t just one set of drops. While we were good about the medicinal drops, we had both forgotten about the drops to help keep her eyes properly lubricated. The surgeries were on Wednesday and Thursday two weeks ago. While she couldn’t look at her computer screen long, she did a little work that Friday. But by Sunday afternoon the pain was too great to ignore. She went to bed at 3:00pm and didn’t get up until the next morning.

Do you know how many doctors answer their phones on Sunday evening? Not enough.

It's a terrible feeling not to be able to make things better for someone you love.

But, as I have seen her do before, Ann rallied the next day.

We finally got in touch with her doctor, who reminded us about the other drops we had forgotten all about. Insert a heavy dose of self-recrimination, and a small helping of frustration with one's partner here.

The new drops did the trick, and by all accounts Ann's eyes are in much better shape now than they were before.

*to take life whole, the bright and dark together;
to live the life that is given us
with courage and humor and truth.*

It can be exhausting, this business of life, especially when we open ourselves to living it as fully as possible. Exhausting, but also enlivening.

Joan Didion's account of medical catechisms, useless protein shakes, and working out with the New York Yankees highlights how perfectly absurd life can be. What she doesn't tell us is how long she continued physical therapy after she learned she was training with professional athletes, and we would be wise to guess that it wasn't long.

But, for at least those three weeks, watching the baseball players encouraged her.

While I doubt none of the Yankees was born into a body as slight as Joan Didion's, you can be sure they didn't get where they did without training hard.

The more I think about it, and while the idea threatens to devolve into a bad late night TV joke, the more I hope Didion continued working out with the boys. The irony is too good to pass up, and who says a little beefcake isn't good for the soul, anyway?

Still we are called to take life whole, and there is more to life than Joan Didion's dry humor and the New York Yankees.

As we strive to live "the life that is given us with courage," we learn how it works for us to go solo, and how it works for us to be part of a larger group.

There are times we feel so pulled by all our commitments that we long to step aside and unplug from them.

How many times are you being contacted by either or all of the political parties asking for your vote and a donation? Phone, email, FaceBook, Twitter: they've got them all covered. It wouldn't surprise me if Obama won the election when he said he was sick and tired of it all, too.

As much as we're stretched as thin as we can imagine, and as much as retreat looks like a better option everyday, we do ourselves a disservice when we forget that there are ways to engage that give as well as take, and we fail to do our share.

I want to return now to the story Wendy told earlier. It's a simple legend, known across the world. But that doesn't mean it's no longer instructive.

Here is a bundle of sticks. Together like this, they give their strength to one another. Can you break it? (Don't try *too* hard.)

What happens when we remove one of them?

One more? Two? Three?

Each time a single stick is removed, the others take on more of the burden. Under continuing pressure, at some point the bundle will break.

In our second reading earlier, John Berger may have sounded strident to us. Folks who talk about the powers that be claiming that life is a commodity tend to sound that way.

But it's hard not to feel treated like a commodity when insurance companies control our access to health care.

Yet life is not a commodity. It is a precious, vulnerable gift. One we are called to support and protect.

We are stronger together. When we all do our share we are stronger than we might imagine. When we give of ourselves, we receive as well.

And if all of this sounds like a plug for this afternoon's Justice JAM brought to you by our congregation's Justice Action Ministries, you'd be right.

So after you get your coffee, I encourage you to go up to someone at one of the tables in Fellowship Hall. They will be more than happy to tell you about a project they are representing, the good they are doing, whether that be in preparing and serving meals at Faith Mission every other Friday, helping folks register to vote, or helping take a stand for women's health and reproductive rights. These are good people, doing great work, and it is worth your time to learn about what they are doing, just so that you can thank them at least. But also ask them something else. Ask the folks at the tables how what they do nourishes them. And be ready to engage them in a real conversation once you see their eyes light up.

Let me be clear: none of us can do everything. While we are capable, we are also limited. Together, bound by intention and care, we give our strength to one another. This is the magic that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

I did not like seeing Ann in such pain that it quite literally shut her down. But there was no place else I would rather have been, but at her side.

We stand by those we love.

The harder thing is remembering that *in the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.*

And if that is hard for us to do separately, we can still come together to so alongside one another.

The challenge is remembering that standing by family isn't enough when the commons are being paved over for additional parking. When the social fabric isn't strong, or even present, it doesn't matter how rich you are, there won't be anything there to hold you when you need propping up.

So we are called to do our share. We can do it with others so that it doesn't become too much of a burden.

“There is, finally, only one thing required of us;
that is, to take life whole, the bright and dark together;
to live the life that is given us with courage
and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment, out of the vastness of time, for all our wondering and loving.

Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness;

rather, let [our souls] be ardent — in [facing grief], in yearning, [and in offering] praise.

Then may peace enfold our days,
and [grace] shall not fade from our lives.”

Together, my friends, together.

Offering

In gratitude for all that went into making this congregation as truly vital as it is, we pause now for a moment of both appreciation and generosity.

Together we support such a community as best we can, in many ways, through our human presence, our gifts behind the scenes, and through this ancient and thoughtful way of supporting what we love.

Our ushers will now come forward. The offering will be given and gratefully received.

A Mitzvah for Two Voices by Rev. Erika Hewitt

Reader 1 I don't have anything to say.

Reader 2 Well, I do – but it might not be interesting to anyone.

Reader 1 I have secrets inside of me, and struggles, and I don't know if I'm ready to share them.

Reader 2 I want to hear what you have to say.

Reader 1 I want to speak of the deepest things together.

Reader 2 I want to hear what you dream about, what you hope for.

Reader 1 I want to know how you have come to arrive at this resting point along your journey.

Reader 2 What if I speak, and you don't understand me?

Reader 1 I will listen, and listen again, until my | hearing becomes understanding.

Reader 2 What if I can't find the words to share the world inside of me?

Reader 1 I believe that wise words will emerge from you.

Reader 2 How can I trust you to hold my life's stories? You, who I may not even know?

Reader 1 By knowing that, as I receive part of your story, I will give you part of mine.

Reader 2 How will this work? What will happen? What awaits us?

Reader 1 We can find out anything by beginning.

Reader 2 Let us begin to listen, and trust, and to know one another more deeply.

Singing #1037 *We Begin Again in Love*

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference...

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible...

For each time we have struck out in anger without just cause...

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others...

For the selfishness that set us apart and alone...

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit...

For losing sight of our unity...

For those, and for so many other acts, both evident and subtle, which have fueled the illusion of separateness...

Benediction

Too often we find ourselves pining for a new day, a brighter day. Well, you know what? You have it within you to say that day begins... Now.

The new day is here. Begin it with conviction in your step, joy in your heart, courage in your bearing and love, always love, in your hands.