

Authority to Decide

January 12, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening

Shane: We are here
Joe: *after a week of warm and bitter cold,
wet snow and dry wind,*
Shane: frozen pipes and closed schools,
Joe: *to worship, to celebrate a deeper way of life*
Shane: despite the rollercoaster of these past days,
Joe: *claiming our own authority
in our spiritual lives as we do.*

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Singing #363 Alleluia! Sang Stars

Ingathering: (Mark) Once upon a time, under a brilliant night sky with a full moon, and a thousand thousand stars, there was a beautiful forest, beautiful green pine trees, trees that stay green both summer and winter. Their green was so wonderful you could even see their color on the dark night I'm talking about. Some of the older trees had branches that stuck way out from their other branches...the trees didn't all look the same by any means. But no matter the shape of the pine tree, the green was very beautiful, especially in the winter when the white snow surrounded them and landed on their branches, and the moonlight made everything extra beautiful.

One day, a small brown wren, a kind of bird, saw a mouse. Mice usually like to sleep through the winter, but this one was walking about, just taking a break from his long winter nap, to drink a little water...well, melted snow, actually. The wren flew down, and came down for a chat. They huddled together under a branch, just being quiet, when all of a sudden, the mouse asked the wren, "I wonder. How much do you think a snowflake weighs?"

"Oh, I don't know. Not much. Not much at all. Actually, I don't think it weighs anything at all. You don't feel snowflakes thumping on your head like pennies when it snows, do you? I bet even if you put one single snowflake on a scale, it would melt before you could weigh it anyway."

"I agree, I don't think you can weigh them on a scale. But last winter, when I got up to get a little drink and you were not here, it was snowing. A lot. I started to count the snowflakes as they fell.

I got all the way to 3 million, 288 thousand, 604, when all of a sudden I heard this cracking sound. I looked up, and those millions of flakes had fallen not just everywhere, but especially on one single branch. As I watched, one last flake that fell on the branch weighed so much, it cracked the thing right off the trunk and it fell to the snow below. That last snowflake weighed enough to bring a whole tree branch to the ground. It made a difference you could see!

The wren, one of the smallest of birds, was happy upon hearing this. She was so small she never thought that she had much influence over the world, but now she knew that she made a big difference indeed.

Music

Greeting and Announcements Joe and Shane

Affirming

Self determination means the one who is really going to care whether you live or die, and who is going to know the most intimate motivation for your laughter and tears, is the only person to be trusted to speak for you and to decide what you will or will not do.

June Jordan 1981

Singing #1026 If Every Woman In the World

Communing: The Sequence for the Day

Oh That life on this earth exists at all,

despite meteor strikes, ice ages, and the unconsciousness of our own particular species!

Oh That rain and snow still fall!

Oh That trains, highways, flight patterns and cell-phone towers stitch the vast world together!

Oh That medicines and midwives and medical healers support the natural flow of healing in our bodies.

Oh That some people choose not to abuse their authority, even though their power is great.

Oh That some folks refuse to lie, yet remain courteous.

Oh That some still make, say or write beautiful things.

Oh That many people still say No to trying to fool or hoodwink others as a way of making a living.

Oh That roses will grow back again inside the ruins.

Oh That children can still laugh that hard.

Oh That people with different lives, different doubts, and different beliefs can somehow manage to weave community that is real and relational.

Oh That tears still flow.

Oh That some people take up their *own* authority, with trembling, yes, but even in the presence of *bully* authorities.

Oh That some make tough choices, and still love life.

Oh That so many millions have refused to give up on the possibility of peace.

Oh That so many millions imagine growing gardens.
Oh That silence like this can still be such a gift.

silence

Oh that our lives are so rich with relationships.
Oh that our love and loss bind us together as cousins,
no matter how different we are from each other.
Oh that we can lift up the names of those that we love, or who love us, with gratitude.
Oh that we can remember the names of those we miss, or those we mourn.
Oh that we can do this together, with silence inside,
or by whispering their names aloud.
Oh that we can do so now.

naming

9:15 AM *Oh that* music can reform the harried spirit doing what neither word nor silence can do.

11:00 AM *Oh that* the seeds which music plants in the garden of our spirits will bring about a harvest of joy and gratitude to nourish us.

Music

The First Reading *this morning comes from the same book I read from last week, The Precarious Life, by Judith Butler who is a professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In this reading she puts many different groups together, and sees the possibilities for community despite our autonomy.*

(Joe)

Essential to so many political movements is the claim of bodily integrity and self-determination. It is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own*, and that we are entitled to claim rights of autonomy over our bodies.

(Shane)

This assertion is as true for lesbian and gay claims to sexual freedom as it is for transsexual and transgender claims to self-determination, as it is to intersex claims to be free of coerced medical and psychiatric interventions.

(Joe)

It is as true for all claims to be free from racist attacks, physical and verbal, as it is to reproductive freedom, and as it surely is for those whose bodies labor under duress, economic and political, under conditions of occupation. It is difficult, if not impossible, to make these claims *without recourse to autonomy*. I am not suggesting that we cease to make these claims. We have to, we must.

(Shane) But if I am struggling for autonomy, do I not need to be struggling for something else as well, a conception of myself *in community*, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable?

(Joe) This way of imagining community affirms relationality as an ongoing normative dimension of our social and political lives, one in which we are compelled to take stock of our *interdependence*.

The Second Reading *this morning is from the remarkable book Mary: A Flesh and Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother, by Lesley Hazelton. Hazelton has written biographies about many middle eastern people associated with the Abrahamic religions. Her biographies of Jezebel and Muhammed are also remarkable for their realism and for reading through the more piously understood texts into something deeply human. The name Maryam is the Aramaic pronunciation of the name we say as Mary, and the Mary in question, of course, the mother of Yeshu', whom we call by the English corruption of the Greek form of his name, namely, Jesus.*

(Jane) Few people today have any difficulty accepting the image of Maryam as a shepherd girl. After all, that fits our picture of peasant life 2000 years ago. Or peasant life today. But there is a certain condescension in this, very similar to the one we adopt when we imagine that people who could neither read nor write were, by definition, ignorant.

So let's see Maryam as a healer. An assumption, true, but by no means an unreasonable one, for there is strong evidence. Her son was a healer, a rare thing for a man to be doing in those days. How did he come by such knowledge? He grew up in a small village, and every village of the time included a line of women who passed on the knowledge of herbal and manual medicine to their daughters and granddaughters. They were called "wise women." Women such as Maryam were the midwives and pharmacists, the bone-setters and bandagers, the family practitioners and the emergency-room physicians of the time.

As a healer, Maryam would certainly have been as expert in contraception and abortion as she was in midwifery. And we would do her far greater honor by recognizing this – recognizing her as a woman of real knowledge and power – than by ignoring or denying it, for it is precisely this knowledge that places her in sympathy with women throughout the world. Her herbal expertise not only saved women's lives; it made her a strong advocate for the poor and the downtrodden, for those who looked to her for some measure of control over their own lives, as, in a sense, they still do. She was the one who held the power of choice. And she held it as much for herself as for others.

Preaching

I suppose that for many, Lesley Hazelton's book was something of a shock when it was published. The idea that the Mother of Jesus was involved in family planning undoubtedly did not please everyone who read it. But Hazelton says a lot more than that. For example, Hazelton begins by saying something dear to me...namely, that ancient people were not any more ignorant than *we* are, 2000 years later. They completely shared many of our concerns, our doubts, our

multi-cultural realities, and our skepticism; and women in particular shared the same concerns about health, pregnancy and family that many moderns do. I agree with Hazelton that our modern approaches to history...biblical or otherwise... are downright "condescending." And I have said so often from this pulpit during the last 16 years.

Hazelton rightfully describes Mary as a peasant. I know something about peasants, since my grand-mother Carmelina was one of them. And, though she actually *was* a shepherd, she was also a healer of sorts, as many peasant women are. She knew her herbs, made these things called, in English, plasters and poultices. She got me through many a sickness. She wasn't at all against modern medicine, mind you; she just knew that what her own mother and grandmother taught her worked very well indeed.

No, Hazelton agrees that peasants are not fools. My grandmother, who never learned to read or write till she taught herself later, was not at all ignorant. She was brilliant, in fact. My family always said that if she had actually been school-educated, she would have been running the brain surgery wing in a great American hospital.

You can see how Hazelton's book resonated with me deeply. Especially, for this morning's sermon, I was wowed by her undeniably powerful assertion: "As a healer, Maryam would certainly have been as expert in contraception and abortion as she was in midwifery. And we would do her far greater honor by recognizing this – recognizing her as a woman of real knowledge and power." Wow indeed.

Maryam. Mary. I find it interesting that Mary is mentioned in the Muslim Quran far more often than she is in Christian gospels. But despite the scanty references to her in the Christian texts, she quickly rose high above peasant reality to become a real superstar. Later Christendom lifted her even higher, by blending her image with goddess imagery from various cultures. Christian artists reinterpreted ancient images of the Egyptian goddess Isis, for example; or the Aztec goddess Tonan-tzin, now called Our Lady of Guadalupe. The image of the village girl of 13, "wiry, pregnant, and without a husband" was lost entirely to images of silken grandeur and piety far removed from everyday life.

But Mary was a woman like any woman in this room. She was *not* a goddess glowing in the dark. A woman with the same sense of personal authority claimed by many modern women; she, *despite* the men-centered cultures of her time; modern women, *despite* the men-centered cultures of our time.

Now, unlike my grandmother, or Maryam, I am *not* a peasant. And obviously, I am not a woman either.

But, I *have* been alive for 64 years, and I *have* been a parish minister for 35 years. And in those years I have heard hundreds of stories from women about what it is like to get pregnant. Or, to miscarry. I have heard anguished stories about family planning conflicts, some of the saddest from my own mother, for goodness sake. I've heard stories from colleagues in the ministry, colleagues who are preaching this morning, and from dear friends I've worked with in hospitals,

banks and restaurants. I've grieved with women who lost children at birth; and I have grieved with women who want to get pregnant, but can't. I have helped many families adopt. I have wept as I hear stories of rape. I simmer in rage when I hear about sexual abuse resulting in pregnancy. When some man complains to me that some women they know get "too angry" about such things, I usually spit back, "Not angry enough." And yes, I have heard many stories about ending a pregnancy, stories told to me by women who have claimed their own authority to make a decision in this regard...as moral agents for themselves. Some of these were rather painful stories of botched back-room procedures before Roe vs. Wade. And I myself have witnessed modern abortion procedures in medical clinics.

But as I said, I am not a woman. But that does not mean I can't reason about such things in my own mind, powered by my own feelings. For I am a man who has been told by religious organizations, and by the state, that my body can be controlled by others. I am not allowed by law in Ohio to claim that my affection for a man means anything dignified, for my body is not legally my own. This is why, Judith Butler reminded us, "Essential to so many political movements is the claim of bodily integrity and self-determination. It is important to claim that our bodies are in a sense *our own*, and that we are entitled to...rights of autonomy over our bodies."

And so, on this earth, forever turning amid the stars, there are many millions of folks who are denied authority over their own bodies...Butler lifts up destitute bodies, transgender bodies, intersex bodies etc. And of course, men, meaning males only, have lined up in every state recently to pass laws not just against bodies, but against sanity itself, as access to all sorts of family planning counseling and procedures are chipped away cunningly, relentlessly, maddeningly. One law passed in Virginia controls the eyes of pregnant women, who have to see what the state tells them to see. Every tricky and devious method has been used here in Ohio recently too...nothing above-board at all. Shameful.

And look, I do understand that feelings about this topic can run the gamut. Again, as a minister, I hear stories filled with dozens of feelings, not sober philosophical discussions. Feelings of guilt for even thinking about family planning, or terminating a pregnancy for some. Feelings of relief. Feelings of resentment, anger, hurt, confusion and grief. In all my years, no one has come talk to me about philosophy. Or the Bible. Even traditionally religious women I've talked to, don't. If a woman did, I would make clear that the Bible has nothing to say about abortion per se at all. Nada. Nothing. There is a passage in an obscure part of the Torah, which announces that if a pregnant woman miscarries because two rowdy men are having a fist-fight nearby, and one of them accidentally hits her belly during the fray, the guy who did it would be fined. Not killed, i.e. an eye for eye etc. Just fined. It's one of the reason that most rabbis I know support a woman's right to choose. And the famous Torah *Statement*, commonly but mistakenly translated as "commandment," says, in Hebrew, *lo tirsah*, meaning simply "No murdering each other." This refers exactly to what we now call murder in our court systems, and nothing else, despite how people quote it against the whole notion of choice.

Yet the stories continue. With unique and common details. And all the feelings in the stories overlap, but are never wholly the same. Each story is unique. To which I say, of course, what

else could be true? Some express their feelings as strong yes or no statements about family planning, but I am afraid that feelings themselves are not theology. Reflecting deeply on our experiences is. Including all the feelings, as complex as they may be. And in this way alone, theology is important. Theology and condemnation that are imposed by men onto women have never been part of our communal religious tradition.

Butler also reminds us that, though all political movements are ultimately based on self-determination about our own bodies, we are also called to recognize *interdependence* as well as independence. I am convinced that crossing the boundaries of our bodies without our permission is always wrong, but I am also convinced we are called to form communities with other bodies that, despite differences, can accomplish things together, including especially listening to and honoring each other's stories. Not suppressing those stories, or ridiculing them as the Texas legislature is so famous for doing.

Folks from the outside are sometimes surprised that people like us, who call ourselves a church or a congregation, and use the words religious and spiritual, can speak like I am this morning. I think that is something I would like to see turned around in my lifetime...the idea that conservative religion IS religion, and that restrictive codes ARE morality. They are not. Progressives, I am sad to say, have fallen for this nonsense just as much as those who swagger with a puffed up idea that God has appointed them to chastise the rest of us in God's own name. Me, I happen to think that what June Jordan says is a *deeply* religious statement, the ground of a profoundly spiritual life: Self-determination means that you know yourself intimately, better than anyone else, and that the authority to speak for yourself and make decisions falls on you and you alone.

I have to conclude this way. Like Maryam, and her son Yeshu', healers both, we are neither gods nor goddesses glowing in the dark, just ordinary human beings with real lives, with real boundaries, and real moral authority, each of us. *But we are not islands*. Compassion for others is normative for us also, in Butler's words. We do this by joining our personal authority with others to create a deep community. Community that does great things together. Making every single one of our lives, which are each unique as snowflakes, count. Even, like the story reminded us this morning, the very last snowflake, which brought the branch down.

Offering

Joe: Each week this year we have been listing various groups, events, classes, projects and visions of this congregation that proclaim our mission together, and which invite our support, of which the offering is a symbol.

Jane: This week, following on Rev. Mark's sermon, we invite you to explore the subject of Reproductive Justice through readings and discussion to gain a compassionate Unitarian Universalist understanding of the personal decisions made by women and their families (whatever their race, religion, culture, gender identity or orientation), and the impact of society on these decisions. Comments and conclusions will be forwarded to the Unitarian Universalist Association by March 1st in order for our annual all-congregation General Assembly to

determine what actions we will take to support the study results. In this course, we will explore Reproductive Justice; Sacred Sexuality; Inherent Worth and Dignity for All; Reverence for Life; Right of Conscience; and Moving Forward. It starts next week, Sunday Jan. 19 and goes to Feb. 23, from 1:00-3:00 each Sunday afternoon. You can sign up at the Adult Education Programs' table in Fellowship Hall. Child care will be available. Thank you. Also, you should know that our congregation's school youth, under the excellent leadership of Lane Campbell, our Religious Education Director, have chosen to work on Reproductive Justice both with learning and a *local* Justice trip in June. After all justice starts at home.

Joe: For these opportunities and for many others which grow in the garden of this congregation, we now give and receive the morning offering.

Video, introduced by Lane

Singing #163 For the Earth Forever Turning