

A Candle in the Window

December 14, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering

Welcoming

Centering

Kindling

Opening *(please rise)*

We are here,
gray clouds and bright sun weaving our week,
to worship, to make of our lives
something greater, deeper, more whole,
people called to engage with the world,
the way a candle-flame engages with the cold.

And so, in this common house of life and love, may we lead lives of welcome, wisdom and kindness. Bestowing ourselves bountifully to the common good, let gratitude and question displace any easy assumption. Knowing that we are within this hurting, amazing world, not outside it, we approach our earth and social equity mindfully. Let each day express our amen.

Singing #362 Rise Up O Flame

Ingathering

Once upon a time there was a boy who lived in a land that was at war. War is a terrible thing – people on one side think the people they are fighting against are not even people. And usually it's the same way for the other side.

The boy lived in a small house on one side of a fence which separated him from the fields beyond. His house was damaged by the war, but his family could still live in it. The fence was impossible to climb. It had sharp pointy things along the wires which kept people from going over to the other side.

But the boy knew that another boy lived on the other side of the fence. Why? Because they used to play together before the war. Play together in the flower filled fields on the other side the fence. The other boy lived in a small house too, also damaged by the war, about as far away as a strong person can throw a baseball. But they were not allowed to play any more. They could not go to the fence in the day time – even to talk. The soldiers from both sides warned them away. “You can’t talk to each other. Get away from that fence. Right now.”

But the boy loved his old friend, and wanted to spend time with him. He didn't care what the village people where he lived were telling him about his friend. A friend is a friend after all.

One day, when everyone was asleep in his house, he got an idea. He got a candle, put it in a candle holder, and set it on the sill of the window. He waited. After a while, far away, he saw a candle in the window of his friend's house. Up where his friend's bedroom was. That made him happy. He waved his candle in the air. His friend did too. They understood each other. So very quietly, he put his coat on and went downstairs and outside. He brought with him a watering can and a handful of seeds. He dug a hole, put the seeds in the hole, then covered them up. Then he watered them. Then he went back to bed. In the morning, when he looked out, he realized that there was a wet place in the dirt on the other side of the spike fence. His friend had had the same idea!

So every night for weeks, and then months, they would put a candle flame in their window, and then sneak out at night to water the seeds.

Waiting was hard, they both felt. But, they were happy to be able to do something, and they were happy when they saw each other's candle flame in the window.

Several months later, the boy noticed that a vine was growing where he had planted the seeds. Each and every day, the vine was growing the width of his hand. And so was his friend's vine. They were excited. In a month, both vines had wrapped themselves around the wires of the fence and grew taller and taller. The vines spread out, and made almost like a tent on both sides of the fence, green and growing more every day.

One night, under cover of night, the boy climbed downstairs and brought his candle with him. The vines were now so large that he could hide underneath them, and no one would see the candle flame. Suddenly the vines moved and swayed, and under the large leaves ducked his friend, also holding a candle. It had been eight months since they had seen each other, and they both were so happy to see each other they got tears in their eyes. They talked for an hour. Then they carefully reached through the fence, and exchanged candles.

"I don't know how long this war will last, but you and I are friends for life. We may have to wait a long time, but just coming out here at night and talking, or lighting the candle in the window, gets me through all the waiting. I feel hopeful."

Every night they talked at the fence, and soon, others joined them under the vine, their candles making a warm glow under the leaves. For eight years, they did this. They were all grown now. And they were still friends. The boy who first lit the candle in the window was elected to office in his village. And the other boy went on to become a teacher. And they spoke of what friendship means, and about how fences with sharp points are only there to hurt people, not keep them safe. They spread their message, step by step, step by step... until, five years later, because of what they did, day by day, the war ended. They helped end the war. The two of them and their other friends tore down the fence...all of it, except where the vine grew. That, they continued to water and take care of the rest of their lives. And no

one who had ever talked under that vine, the two boys and all their friends, ever went to bed without lighting a candle in their window.

Greeting

Affirming *(please rise)*

"And remember: you must never, under any circumstances, give up. To hope and to act, these are our duties, even in difficult times."

Boris Pasternak 1957, Dr. Zhivago

Singing #348 Guide My Feet *(call and response)*

Communing

Yes, guide my feet, oh Love.

Guide my heart while you are at it.

Settle my mind down as best as you are able.

It's holiday time, but I'm feeling a bit lost this week, and could use a little guidance.

Because this week made me dizzy.

First, that painful contrast between

the United Nations Human Rights Day,

on Wednesday, and its vision of the dignity of all, and then the next day,

the report on torture comes out,

followed by voices shouting at each other:

"Yes, we tortured, and I am ashamed"

and "No, we didn't...it was patriotism."

Dizziness. I am dizzy.

I tell a friend, "My goodness, every time

I read the news, someone is shooting people

at a school." The next day, I open the paper,

and sure enough, it's happened again.

Dizziness. I am dizzy.

Like Hanukkah tops, *dreydls*,

will do this coming week, I whirl and whirl.

I am spinning.

But still, oh Love, out of the corner of my eye

don't I see something? I did notice, didn't I, that in Washington DC yesterday, nobody

whirled. Nobody was spinning. They marched. Peacefully.

Black Lives Matter, their signs said.

And closer to home, isn't it true that a million people had dinner with friends or family

yesterday, right here in Columbus? Didn't they mostly have a good time, remembering

stories, telling tales of how they all got through adversities, and triumphed over the odds, or recovered?

And right now, aren't children stacking blocks with other children, mothers nursing their infant hopes, mourners grieving with tenderness, a few quarrels ending, moving letters

from grandma arriving, holiday music moving hearts to alleluia, and carols and Hannukah songs winging aloft over the glow of warming candles?

Ah, my dizziness begins to subside, Love.

I am spinning less and less, because I have finally noticed hope's little flames burning hot against the chill of human brokenness. The whirling ceases. More and more. I let go, I keep my heart open. I grow more still, Love, motion slows, and like the worn out spin of a top, I fall still, and grow silent, and in that silence, O Love, now I rest.

silence

In the silence, my own life returns to me, the life that accompanies me every place I go. My memories, the love that propels me, the faces of those who have help shape my life...all of these are with me in this room. And yours are with you as well. So in this safe place, may we feel safe to greet our own lives, naming inside or aloud the names of those we remember, or miss, or would like to see more often, perhaps.

naming

Like flames in our heart, these names.

Like wings on our back, the music of the season.

9:15

Maoz Tzur, Hanukkah (in Hebrew) song arranged by Serban Nichifor, Joanna Lowenstein, soloist

11:00

Light One Candle, words and music by Peter Yarrow, arr. Robert DeCormier. Chalice Choir, Brandon Moss, Director; Peter McDonald, bass

Reading

The First Reading consists of two passages from the novel Dr. Zhivago, considered by many to be the greatest single international novel of the 20th century. The author, Boris Pasternak, was pressured by the Soviet government to refuse the Nobel Prize for literature, but his son accepted the honor after the fall of the Soviet Union. The novel has been filmed three times: the famous US version by David Lean; a BBC version, and a Russian televised version made just a decade ago. The photo of the candle flame, melting a clear area in the ice crystals solidified on the window, is an image from the David Lean version, illustrating the following two passages. You do not have to have seen the movies, nor to have read the novel, for these to make sense.

Lara liked to sit in the light of candles in the evening, forgoing electric lights. So Pasha, her fiancé, always kept a few candles around. He replaced the burned-out stump in the candlestick sitting on the widow sill, and lit it. The flame choked and sputtered at first,

shooting off small sparks like stars, and then finally settled into the smooth shape of an arrow. Soft light filled the room. In the sheet of ice covering the window pane, a small clear place appeared, like the iris of an eye, right at the level of the flame.

2. As they drove through Kameron Street in their sleigh, Yura noticed that a candle had melted a patch in the icy crust on one of the windows. The light seemed to look into the street almost consciously, as if it were watching the passing carriages and waiting for someone.

The Second Reading comes from the much-revered Joan Chittister, one of the great social thinkers of our time, a thinker from within her Catholic tradition, but always expressed with a universalist slant.

Powerlessness is not a virtue. We seriously think we have rights, and power, and place. But in this world of mega-corporations, global networks, and invisible international links, the individual has never been so assertive, *and* never been so powerless. Life, for the most part, is beyond our control. We boast about democratic participation, and watch votes discarded at the whim of a few. We glory in the impregnability of our national defense, and watch the economic center of our country go down in minutes under the blow of two commercial airliners, our own, while standing helplessly by.

But we must put down the temptation to powerlessness. *It is a matter of refusing to allow what ought to be changed to conform us to itself.* That alone would be an act of hope to many, and a spark of hope in my own soul. It would tell me I am still alive, that my soul has not died at the hands of the culture around me.

Look, the only difference between hope and despair I see is that despair shapes an attitude of mind, whereas hope creates a quality of soul. Here is what despair looks like. The Irish love to tell the story of Paddy McGarrity, who spent his life bemoaning all the circumstances of his life. Nothing satisfied him. But one gracious summer day, the sun burst through the fog and rain, and spread over the Irish hills in a blaze of glory. "Ho, Paddy," the priest called to him over the fence. "Isn't it beautiful?" "Ah, sure father," Paddy moaned. "But will it last?"

Hope, on the other hand, takes life on its own terms, and expects that, whatever its twists and turns, it will ultimately yield good to those who live it consciously, to those who live it to the hilt.

Preaching

No, the glorious sunlight *won't* last, to answer Paddy in the reading from Joan Chittister. But that is not the sad thing. The sad thing, I think, is expecting that anything *will* last forever. Especially the hard stories, the difficult events, the shocking news, the underbelly of human "so-called" civilization. Paddy McGarrity assumed the permanence of misery. He was living in despair, not hope.

Now I confess that despair is something I have felt. I have given up. I have made no room for hope. I allowed myself to rephrase Chittister, to conform my attitude to what I could not personally change. As most of you know, I grew up in Detroit. When I was a kid, there was still evidence as to why it was called "Detroit the Beautiful" back in the 1930's. Street cars glided down the main streets, architects came from other cities to study our building designs, and so great an artist as Diego Rivera came and painted a true fresco in the art museum every bit as grand and big and powerful as the one Michelangelo painted in the Sistine Chapel, only on secular, not sacred, themes.

But Detroit, over the last thirty years, lost it all. It went bankrupt (an almost impossible thing for a city that size), its downtown was abandoned almost completely, its buildings collapsing, its industry replaced with robot workers and overseas plants. The street cars were ripped up, its schools closed, its libraries were abandoned. Thousands of hectares of downtown land returned to the state that existed at the time of the Potawatomi, or, as they called themselves, the Keepers of the Flame, or *Bodéwadmí*, the original natives on that land.

When I would go up to visit family and friends these last 17 years, I often wept while I drove through the barren, overgrown streets. My city had died. I despaired of it ever rising again. If you have time after the service, please come up and take a look at this giant photo book up here on the chancel, *Detroit Disassembled*. You can get some real visceral sense, perhaps, of why I lived in despair about my home city.

Yet the Latin motto of the City of Detroit has not changed: RESVRGET CINERIBVS. "It shall rise out of the ashes," referring to a great fire that totally destroyed the colonial city two centuries before.

But lo and behold, my despair proved to be cheap arrogance on my part – namely, if I couldn't fix it, or see how it could be restored, then no one could do it. Despite my doubts, Detroit has indeed been "rising out of the ashes," while I was giving up and indulging in long distance despair.

Time magazine did a story last week about how the downtown skyscrapers are filling again, little by little. The bankruptcy is over and done with as of this week. Artists are moving into town in droves, New York city dance companies are moving into abandoned factories, companies are establishing their headquarters there. New buildings are going up, old buildings, many of them wondrously beautiful, are being restored. Where the land is bare – the houses all burned to the ground – urban farmers and entrepreneurs are establishing vital new communities. The auto companies have protected the incredible art collection which many wanted to sell off to save the city. The tiny flames of hope of ten thousand people pulling together for Detroit have melted the ice of my despair, and taught me a lesson about hope.

Oh, I know, it's complex. Hope refuses to be clean and neat. One of the main financial supporters of the new Detroit is the CEO of QuickenLoans, a large mortgage corporation. If you get on line, you will find that there are many, many complaints about the company, and

accusations of fraud and hard-sells. I don't know the whole story, but I am certainly aware of very sticky issues. And the young entrepreneurs are mostly white suburbanites. The majority African American population is hardly represented in this new boom. Ah, yes, it's complex, isn't it?

Of course that is almost always true, isn't it? The early rabbis, when they were trying to figure out the popular appeal of the early celebrations of Hanukkah 2000 years ago, were caught in the same sticky situation. Here was a story about war and the *re-dedication* (Heb. Hanukkah) of a building vandalized during a war. Then there was the story of the miraculous oil: a small jar of oil was able to provide enough fuel for eight oil lamps, (predecessors to our candles,) to burn for over a week, the time it took to press and process new oil.

The rabbis understood that the idea of lighting little flames in oil lamps was simply delightful. They even understood that the story of the Maccabee revolution could be interpreted as a strong statement that nobody has the right to force others into a culture not their own. That's true, certainly.

Still, the Maccabean story was about war, and so they were uncomfortable about it. So they refused to call it a holiday, (like Yom Kippur or Passover) referring to it as a minor observance, and encouraging people to light lights, not glorify violence. Sadly, this minor observance, under the influence of Christmas commercialism in our own consumerist nation, is now, for many, something of a Jewish version of Christmas, complete with Hanukkah trees.

Of course, although the Maccabean War has been over for over 2000 years, war itself is around us still. There has been talk in the US Congress of declaring official war against ISIL in the Middle East; and though the Afghanistan war, the longest in USA history, is officially ended, (as of this week) thousands of troops will still stay there.... indefinitely.

The reading you heard from *Dr. Zhivago* (my favorite novel) this morning is also set during a time of upheaval and war. The First World War, and the Russian Revolution and Russian Civil War. The man who wrote the novel, Boris Pasternak, lived through that era himself, and was writing fiction based on his personal observations, and upwellings from his soul of anguish. Pasternak had grown up in more peaceful times, immersed in the best culture of that era. His father was a famous Post-Impressionist painter. Rainer Maria Rilke, considered by many to be the greatest German poet of all time, and the composer Alyexandr Skryabin, Александр Николаевич Скрябин, whose work you just heard before I began this sermon, were constant guests at his parents' home. And so was the great Leo Tolstoy. Pasternak's family was Jewish, and they originally kept the festivals (including the minor observance of Hanukkah), but more and more gravitated toward Tolstoy's pacifist religious sensibility. But all that fell apart during the Revolution.

The revolution brought dislocation, bloodshed, and a total disruption of normal life, which Pasternak amply portrays in his novel, *Dr. Zhivago*. (Zhivago, by the way, is not a Russian, but a Slavonic word, meaning "the one who lives.") But his novel is nevertheless a novel of

hope, no less than the children's story this morning, also set in war time, and invoking the love of individuals, in contrast to the vast sweep of destructive history.

Pasternak uses the image of a candle in the window to establish the interconnection of individual persons who support social equity, but who nevertheless refuse to partake in violence to establish a fairer life for the many.

The candle burns in windows, warming and melting the ice. Pasternak does not know his future lover Lara is up in the window he notices. Lara does not know that Yura Zhivago, her future lover, is riding in a sleigh down below with his fiancé Tonia. Candlelight in windows. Throughout the novel, Pasternak returns to this motif, so much so that all of the three cinematic versions of his novel make these particular images central. Over and over again, a candle in the window, individual lives kindling lights, connected to people they don't know yet.

Pasternak establishes that hope lies in this, not some grandiose expectation that everything will magically turn out right for everybody, but something far more humble. He is saying that the violent, disappointing and often shocking world is still filled with folks who have not allowed themselves to be distorted into knots of despair, but who imagine that "living life consciously and to the hilt," to quote Sister Chittister, in itself creates a tiny flame of hope which others will notice and move toward, offering their own lights in return, like the boys in the story this morning.

Hope is not grandiose. It's not everywhere, it's just local – a "hope hotspot" to quote Ohma Willette. It is not bright sunshine dispersing the fog over the Irish hills. Neither is hope feel-good optimism, or some happy-go-lucky kick in your step. Hope is small, homely, simple, and achievable. By you. By me. It doesn't exist by itself. It depends entirely on our interconnections. It depends on real community. It depends on not imagining yourself alone, and knowing in your heart that many others see what you see, and are willing to work with you at moving toward that vision, not at the dramatic barricades with flags, but in day to day actions of connection, conversation, and care. Or simply walking step by cold step in Washington DC, or down at the Statehouse.

I foolishly lost hope because I could not restore Detroit by myself, or imagine how it could happen, so I gave up. But Detroit, despite my giving up, is being restored. And so I have retreated from the ease and self-congratulation of despair, and am recognizing little by little, that with others, over time, dead cities can rise, candles without sufficient oil, according to the books, will continue to burn, and the bloodshed of constant war itself can finally be forgotten. Long after we are gone, to be sure, but hopefully, partially because of us, and our day to day kindling of a candle of hope which others can see shining bright through the window of our lives, even if they don't know us yet.

Offering

Let the gifts of the people be for the people of this congregation, and for the world, people beyond our walls. If you write a check specifically for the Holiday Appeal that Tim outlined

so beautifully earlier, make sure you say that on your check. Cash will go to the needs of this congregation. The offering of gifts and donations will now be received.

Returning: An Anticipation of Hanukkah

Let the candles of the night sky
proclaim peace, proclaim hope,
a menorah in the heavens.
May their oil never run out in our days.
Let the light of the lives of those
who struggle to live beyond violence
kindle my own flame.
Barukh atah, Ahavah,
Blest are you, Love,
who bids us kindle all the lights of hope
and wonder in this season.
We begin today by lighting only the *shamash*,
the lighting candle. From this one candle,
all the other candles will be lit come Wednesday
evening. So may it be that we know our own light
will be kindled by others, and that we ourselves can kindle other lights. No real light stands
alone.

#165 When Windows that are Black and Cold

Blessing