

Our Second Source – The Words and Deeds of Prophetic Women and Men

Given by Rev. Allison Barrett

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Opening Words

Today is the day we are given.
Let us rejoice and be glad!
Let us come out of the world
To go into the world
That we may discover who we are
And who we are meant to become.
Let us join our separate selves
In one heart, one spirit.
Bringing the best we can imagine
To this sacred place for a time
That we may bless the world with our presence.

Reading “The Central Task of the Religious Community”

The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.

It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

- Rev. Mark Morrison Reed

Sermon

When I was a child, one day my mother came home with a book she had bought for me called “Adventure Stories for Girls.” I remember how excited I was to read it and I dived in that very night. The first story I read was the story of Harriet Tubman, the African American woman, born into slavery who became famous, nicknamed “The Black Moses” for her own daring escape and her 19 rescue missions into the south, bringing over 300 people to freedom both in the United States and Canada. This story of courage, others of compassion (Florence Nightingale) or spiritual conviction (Joan of Arc) seeped into my consciousness as a young girl. It was my favourite book, and I have always been grateful to my mother for exposing me to the stories of inspiring women at such a young age!

Fast forward to a year or so ago and I was reading stories to my own daughter Lily Rose. I discovered when I became a mother that the world of children’s “literature” has changed a lot since I was little, mainly through Disney marketing schemes! So one night, after we had read through seemingly dozens of Disney Princess stories ad nauseam and my daughter requested yet another retelling of what I call “Dead Girls Waiting” I couldn’t take it any more, dropped the princess book down behind the bed, said I couldn’t find it and said “Let’s read something else tonight!” Look, how about this? “The Kids Book of Great Canadians!” Yeah, let’s see - Terry Fox, now that’s a great story! And she looked up with expectant eyes and said “Tell me the story Mama, tell me!”

So I opened the book and she took one look at the picture of Terry’s artificial leg and said “What’s that?” “Oh” I said – “Terry had cancer when he was young so they had to cut off his leg to save his life.” Her eyes widened. “But” I said “That’s when the amazing part of the story starts!” and I told her all about the Marathon of Hope and how much money he raised for cancer and how the Terry Fox run is still going and she said “He’s still running, Mama?” And I said “Uh, oh, um, no - he had to stop running cause his cancer came back, but the run is still going.” “Where is he now, Mama?” “Well, after that he died. But isn’t that a great story?” Big tears filled her eyes and she shook her head. Back to the princesses, please Mama!

Well, she was only three at the time, maybe a little young for the nuances of the life and death of Terry Fox. They tell me you make all your mistakes on the first one! But I SO wanted her to feel the inspiration I have felt from that story.

Now, almost 6, she has begun to understand the “life beyond life” that Terry Fox bestowed on the world he graced for such a short while. And she has begun to take an interest in some of the other people in the book; Norman Bethune, Rick Hansen, Craig Keilburger. She has begun to grasp something it has taken me forever to

understand; that the words and deeds of those that have inspired us do indeed remain to bless us throughout our lives.

I want to tell you what happened between reading “Adventure Stories for Girls” and “The Kids Book of Great Canadians.” And one of the important things that happened was finding this faith. It’s about a lifetime of being influenced by our Second Source, the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love” – whether I knew it at the time or not.

I grew up in Ottawa with the voice of Lotta Hitschmanova echoing in my ears and consciousness, telling of the work of the “Unitarian Service Committee, 56 Sparks Street, Ottawa” on TV. So when I discovered the Unitarian church as a teenager in Ottawa and began attending when Vernon Nichols was the minister there, I knew that it was a place that cared about the world. Indeed, Vern went on to a distinguished career in justice ministry at the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office without ever knowing how much he inspired a 13 year old girl whose heart and mind were just beginning to open.

It’s always refreshing to be asked if I’m a visitor when I walk through the doors of Toronto First. I first came here in the late 1970s when I was attending the University of Toronto. But the first time I stayed for coffee hour was when Jim Brewer, the Interim Minister at the time said he would be showing his slides and telling the story of his anti-apartheid ministry in South Africa. I was mesmerized and outraged at the classification of human beings in place under that regime – a system that would make my present day family consist of two whites and two non-whites, unless of course my daughters had been adopted from Taiwan, in which case they would be “honourary whites.” My knowledge of South Africa up till this time in my life was scant. I was teenager passionate about justice issues, but woefully uninformed. When I was 14, I think I boycotted Jaffa oranges for 3 months before I found out they came from Israel/Palestine, not South Africa!

During my time as a young adult in Toronto, I went about living my life, working and going to school, attending this congregation whenever I could, singing in the choir and slowly absorbing the messages of compassion, justice and love preached from its pulpit and practiced in its pews. I didn’t know it, but those prophetic women and men were working on my soul from the start. They were all around me.

Inspired by Jim Brewer and organized by the lay members of this congregation who were part of Amnesty International, throughout the 1980s I wrote letters to the President of South Africa, P.W Botha. I remember my last one said “How can you

sleep at night? How can you look yourself in the mirror?” (no form letters for me!) and was stunned when shortly after he had a stroke and stepped down, was replaced by FW de Klerk and a few years later, by Nelson Mandela, South Africa’s first democratically elected President. I always thought it was my letters that gave him the stroke!

In researching the history of Canada’s abolition of the death penalty for an undergraduate class in ethics, I was amazed to discover that the same Frank Lewis I had served coffee to the week before was instrumental in leading that struggle for justice and compassion – a battle that still has yet to be won in countries like China, India and the United States and a victory to which a wrongfully convicted man like Steven Truscott owes his very life.

I sat next to Trudy Vural in church, who spent her retirement years volunteering at Child Haven taking care of tiny babies; I marveled at Shirley Grant’s father Walter Sachs, volunteering at the Red Cross well into his 80s. I figured if Trudy and Walter could volunteer in their 60s, 70s and even 80s, surely I, an able-bodied young woman in my 20s could do *something*.

As it happened, on my way to school every day I walked along Harbord Street, past the Morgentaler clinic where every day, right-to-lifers (or anti-choice as we came to call them more accurately) sent out SWAT teams to physically and emotionally accost the women trying to get in. And so I became a volunteer escort at the clinic, working until the night that a bomb blew the clinic clean off Harbord Street, leaving only a crater and throwing the couple who lived next door against the wall on the other side of their bedroom. I learned something about the risks of social action during that time, risks being borne by people all over the world every day as I speak - that up until then had barely touched my life.

Like almost all of you, I am sure, I signed petitions given to me in coffee hour by Eryl Court whose unrelenting passion for nuclear disarmament and a world safe from nuclear catastrophe is looking absolutely prescient this week.

Later on, when I did a placement at Queen Street Mental Health facility, I discovered that there is a bust of Dr. Joseph Workman beside the auditorium named after him. He is one of the founding 15 members of this congregation and the person most responsible for getting people suffering from mental illness out of jail and eventually, into compassionate treatment.

Researching prominent Canadian women for an undergraduate course in the “Philosophy of Feminism” I came across this quotation from the Vice President of

the University I was attending. Speaking about your and my fellow member Emily Stowe's desire to attend medical school. He said "The doors of the University are not open to women and I trust they never will be." I got two degrees from that university, and female undergraduates now outnumber males 2 to 1 all over Ontario, by the way.

I remember the birth of the CUSJ of which Margaret spoke here at Toronto First and later in the Board Meeting Room at Northwest Fellowship when I was their Student Minister. I think there were about 25 or 30 of us. We wrestled with who and what could we say we were representing given that, surprisingly, our individual congregations didn't always agree on every issue. We debated what we could call ourselves, and decided that we were all Canadian and all Unitarians and all for Social Justice, so there you have it 15 years later; Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice. As Stuart McLean says "We may not be big, but we're small." Grow, little turnip, Grow! We may have only been talking to the turnip, but it has grown, nevertheless.

I think we begin our lives believing that we are a point, when really, we are a line.

It seems amazing to me now that although the examples were before me in history and beside me in church, it took a while for me to realize the effect that these "prophetic women and men, confronting structures of evil with justice, compassion and love" had upon me. It took a while to see that my seeking that inspiration helped me find this faith and then shaped my love for it into a Call to Ministry which transformed my life.

In the Earth Based Women's Spirituality Curriculum produced at around that time, "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" there is a ritual where you light a candle and hold it aloft, naming and claiming your female ancestors – for example: "I am Allison, daughter of Mary Grace, daughter of Bessie Gwendolyn, daughter of Mary, daughter of Anne" and on back as far as you can go.

Being a part of this congregation taught me that these ancestors go back and out in many directions; that perhaps I should add: I am Allison, daughter of Eryl and Frank, who is the son of Walter and Trudy, who is the daughter of Lotta Hitschmanova, who is the daughter of Emily Stowe, who is the daughter of Joseph Workman who is the son of Harriet Tubman, and in the words of K'naan's song for Haiti "and then it goes back, and then it goes back..."

Another ancestor, Albert Schweitzer said, "Each one of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us." Who are the women and men whose lives and deeds have inspired you? Whose name do you hold up? And

who in turn will your life inspire and your goodness touch? How will the world be “changed by your love “as we sang in our opening hymn?

In the sermon from which his “I have a dream” speech is taken, Martin Luther King Jr. says “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” “The central task of the religious community” said our reading today “Is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all.”

In Process Theology, whose basic approach to humanity, God and the universe is as close to Unitarian as theology is going to get, there is really nothing and no-one outside the sum total of our existence. God and humanity and the struggle of good and evil is like a dance where all the dancers’ movements affect the others and no-one sits out. We pull each other and the world toward the good or the other way and every action re-constitutes the world over and over again.

If you understand the world in this way, then everything you do matters, and who and what came before you matters, and who and what comes after you matters, because we are all participants in creation, or we can all participate in destruction instead.

Somehow this seems truer at this time than ever before. Seismic shifts in the earth (Haiti, Chile, Japan) and across the globe (Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain) make our choices for compassion or action all the more important. So at this time of Vernal Equinox, when light and dark literally hang in the balance on our planet; during this time of spiritual equinox, when it seems the safety of our world, its resilience and the power of human good and evil hangs in the balance, the question becomes, with whom will you cast your lot? It brings to mind the words of the poet Adrienne Rich:

*“My heart is moved by all I cannot save;
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.”*

Did you know that one of the first out of the gate with help for the people of Japan was Kandahar province in Afghanistan? That, incredibly, pizzas were ordered by credit card for the striking union workers in Wisconsin by Egyptians protesting in Tahrir Square?

The “world community” envisioned by our sixth principle is here! Because of electronic media, real time communication and participation in events as they unfold around the world, Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” has arrived and we can no longer pretend that we are not “an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny.” Now the threads of that garment that connect us one to the other go back not only through time and space, but out across the entire world. It changes who we are.

When the death of a young Iranian woman (Neda Agha-Soltan) protesting her right to democracy becomes the most watched murder in the world on YouTube; when people in Tahrir square order pizzas for people in Wisconsin and the winds over Japan are heading to Vancouver, then your children’s litany becomes: “I am Maya, who is the daughter of Neda, who is the daughter of Aung San Suu Kyi; I am Nathan, who is the son of Nelson, who is the son of Mohandas.” The invisible borders between you and I, us and them, do not exist anymore, if they ever did.

It has taken me all my life to realize that we are none of us points but lines – streaming backward through time to those who have come before, forward to those who will come after, out across oceans to those we will never know and deep within to the heart of who we really are meant to be.

A few years ago, I found myself on top of a mountain in Nepal, striving to continue the work of that little lady named Lotta I saw on TV when I was 12. Yesterday, my daughters went to a sugar bush a few miles from Harriet Tubman’s church in St. Catharines. And this fall, I will take my youngest daughter on her first annual Terry Fox run. All the threads lead you back home.

I know the kind of world I want my children to live in, and I am grateful to all the prophetic women and men who have inspired me throughout my lifetime and continue to do so. I believe we are here for each other – to leave a tender imprint in the hearts of those who come after – to add our light to the darkness and bring all our strength to bear on the universal struggle for all that is Good. Our loving, free faith requires it of us.

It is my hope that being a part of the human community inspires you to make a difference with your life; that being a part of this spiritual community gives shape to that inspiration; that when you go out from this place, you give the people you meet something of your vision. Know that you carry with you a “great cloud of witnesses” through all time and from all places. So may it be. Amen.

Our Closing Words begin with Reinhold Niebuhr and conclude with Alfred S. Cole describing the ministry of Universalist John Murray, words which we heard set to music and sung so beautifully by Dallas and the Choir:

“Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.”

*“Go out into the highways and byways
Give the people something of your new vision.
You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine
Use it in order to bring more light and understanding
to the hearts and minds of men and women
Give them, not hell, but hope and courage.
Preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.”* ¹

Go out in peace; return in love. So may it be. Amen.

¹ Charles A. Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993), p. 4. ² *Ibid.*