

# “All I Ask of You”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

My birthday is in early December. I'm not one for big celebrations, but for the last few years I've had at least one thing to look forward to on that day: the flood of well-wishes that comes in from dozens of people posting on my facebook wall to wish me a happy birthday. I can't help but feel warm and cozy when that happens, even if it's the only interaction I have with many of those people over the course of the year. Call it shallow, call it fake, it just feels good. But I have a friend who puts a cruel twist on this heartwarming tradition of the internet age. He uses the online reminder of people's birthdays as an occasion to decide if he still wants to stay connected with that person on facebook. If he feels motivated enough to send you a quick birthday note, he goes and does it, and you're safe for another year. But if he feels he can't be bothered, he takes that as an indication that the digital friendship has run its course, and you get cut. With one click it's done, and you have been ruthlessly, anonymously, unfriended. Easy to be hard, indeed. I don't necessarily recommend this as a strategy for handling your interpersonal relationships, though I do admire his decisiveness.

Now if only it were really this easy to manage our interdependence, to decide who we're connected with and how. I think the reality is closer to the way Martin Luther King, Jr put it: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Whether we like it or not, we are connected, and it's up to us to figure out how to deal with it.

It wasn't always this way. True, different cultures in different times and places have had many and varied understandings of how people are connected to each other and to the world and the cosmos. Though I was intrigued to read recently that the term “international” wasn't even coined until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, around the time that modern nation-states started to be seen as the primary form of political and social organization. Fast forward to 2014, and it seems like deep and serious international co-operation of some kind is essential if we are to have a shot at a livable future on this planet.

Last week in New York City, there was a major push for just this type of cooperation. 120 heads of state gathered at the United Nations in New York for talks about creating a global treaty on greenhouse gas emissions; If you remember the last two decades, this was not the first such gathering. What was unique is that it was preceded last Sunday by a “people's climate march,” a call for people from all over to gather in New York and in cities around the world, and press for real action.

I wasn't there. Now it's not because I don't care. In fact, I spent the past year working part-time for the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth on climate justice networking, and spent the last few months leading up to the march encouraging people to come out, and helping organize an interfaith worship service to take place at a New York church on the eve of the march. But as it happened, my father ended up being scheduled for a knee replacement surgery in Ottawa the week before, and I felt that I needed and wanted to be there to help him recuperate. Add in a friend's wedding in Toronto on the Saturday, and the pull of personal relationships, of being present with my own loved ones, started to feel stronger than the pull of joining with strangers bearing witness to our shared crisis, and the desperate need to finally do something about it.

As it turned out, there were an unprecedented *400 thousand* people marching in New York City that weekend, including 1 500 Unitarian Universalists. So even though I was disappointed to miss the event, in the end I'm forced to admit that they didn't really need *me*. Personal and planetary responsibility may be

inseparable, but they are not interchangeable. I could be replaced on the streets of New York, whereas my father would not have appreciated a parade of concerned activists showing up with signs and slogans to help him with his grocery shopping, and I couldn't exactly send 400 thousand people to a wedding in my place, unless I was prepared to cover the cost of catering.

That could easily be the moral of the story, but it still feels unresolved, and there's the risk of letting the tension go too easily. The deeper theological question is: how do we reconcile our belief in the interconnectedness of all life with our day-to-day reality? We UU's may think we have a more rational theology than some other traditions: after all, the interdependent web of life is an established scientific fact. But in some ways, this is no more intuitive than any other claim about how the universe works, given the ways we are forced to draw lines in our actual living, whatever we may believe about our interconnectedness. Marge Piercy says, "every gardener knows that after the digging, after the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes." But the harvest does not come easily or all at once, and we are certainly not gardening alone. Rather we are constantly running in and out of the garden to and from other tasks, forgetting to weed it when we go on vacation, and left wondering, in times of drought, whether we can really afford to give it the water it needs.

Yes, I missed the big moment. I opted to be a friend and family member in a way only I could be, rather than be one more body and one more voice in the streets of New York, and this made sense. But the same could probably be said for each of those many thousands who were there: I'm sure each of them had family, community, and professional responsibilities calling to them, and if they had heeded those calls, then there would have been no climate march at all. In the absence of a precise formula for weighing who and what needs love and attention and action at a given time, we may be left simply trying to trust ourselves and one another to do the next right thing whenever we are able. For myself, I felt a sense of wholeness and hope reading and looking at pictures from the march in New York, not only to know how *many* people had turned out, but also to see pictures of people I knew, who I wouldn't have thought would be there, who always seemed to have other things going on.

I felt it was a time to step up as a son and as a friend, while others who have spent lifetimes as devoted friends and parents chose to stand and be counted on the scale of ecological citizenship and global democracy. And were it not for the scope of crisis we face, it might be tempting to conclude that it just all balances out. And perhaps it does, but the gaping chasm between what the world needs and what we and our political leaders have so far been able to deliver, makes it hard to feel settled in that conclusion.

There may be no easy answers. We are left asking ourselves: just what does it mean, what does it really *feel* like to be tied up in that garment of destiny? Is it something we can put on and take off, or is it something we have to wear day in and day out, like some kind of giant, chafing hair shirt for 7 billion people? In terms of theology, I actually think there's a creation story to be written here, about the well-meaning grandmother of the cosmos, who thought her progeny would just *love* to be knitted together forever in an itchy wool sweater.

The poet Pablo Neruda wrote: "To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life. But to feel the affection that comes from those whom we do not know, from those...who are watching over our sleep and solitude, over our dangers and our weaknesses – that is something still greater and more beautiful because it widens the boundaries of our being, and unites all living things."

The unity of all living things; to me this is a profound and beautiful truth, a truth that is important. And if is to be more than a feel-good platitude, we have to find ways of making it real, of creating connections that affirm our membership in the web of life, and building accountable relationships that strengthen it. It may mean being with our family – biological and otherwise – in their times of need and celebration. It may mean helping people to build for the future in Central America, and it may mean joining with people from all corners of the world in the care of our common home. In my heart I believe that these are not separate callings, though they may feel like fractured pieces of a picture that none of us can fully see.

That is certainly one of the reasons why we gather in communities like this one, to help orient each other toward that larger fabric, to see more clearly the loose threads and the places that need mending, in our own

lives and in the life of the world. We gather together to challenge each other, to call each other to live into our vision for the world, to urge each other to stay in the tension between the intimate and the ultimate, the immediate and ongoing, and resist collapsing in one direction or the other. We gather to affirm each other in the choices we all must make, even if it feels like we never quite get it right. My joy at being at the wedding with my loved ones was tempered by sadness at what I was missing, what I was neglecting, and yet I knew if I had chosen differently I would be feeling the same way. They say the most important thing in life is to show up, but they don't always tell you where.

In the end, I went to the People's Climate March, just not the one in New York City. Instead, I headed down to Nathan Phillips' Square following last week's service, and was one of a more modest three thousand people making some noise at City Hall and in the streets of Toronto, as people did likewise in cities around the world, from London to Madrid, from Delhi to Buenos Aires. So I felt reasonably good about how it all sorted itself out. But to what end?

Well, my dad wrote me to say how much he appreciated me being there after his surgery. His stitches are out and he is up and walking, though of course that would have happened without my presence. My friends are gladly and legally married, though that would have happened without my presence, too. And I'm up and walking after dancing enthusiastically at their reception.

As for the climate and the fragile earth we call home, it remains to be seen whether our government representatives will live up to being called leaders, and agree on a just and effective climate treaty which will actually be implemented. I hope they do, though even then we may never know how the massive demonstrations in New York and around the world actually contributed to that result.

We cannot be in even two places at once, though our hearts may be pulled in many different directions. We may love all beings, but there is only so much we can hold in a single embrace. If it is our fate to live with this limitation, may we seek to do so gracefully, and say yes with our lives, even in those moments when we find ourselves saying no. What is certain is that we are woven into this garment of destiny together. However uncomfortable and ill-fitting it may feel sometimes, however it may stretch and pull and restrain us, it is our burden and our saving grace. Blessed be, amen.

Benediction: The Talmud tells us "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obliged to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." Go in peace, go in hope and in freedom, and stay connected.