

# The Blessing Beyond Our Fears

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

16 October 2016

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.

Well, here it is—my absentee ballot for the U.S. election.

I've voted my conscience,  
signed an affidavit,  
and sealed it all in this envelope.

After today's service, I'll drop it in the mailbox outside,  
but probably not before offering up some elaborate incantation  
to ensure the election goes the way I'm hoping.

I will always count it among your greatest kindnesses to me  
that no one in the past year has asked me to explain  
the current state of American politics.

I take your incredible graciousness as a sign  
that I've finally been in Canada long enough  
that I don't have to answer  
for what unfolds in the country of my birth.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you.

Because if you were to ask,  
I'm not really sure where to start.

Over these past ten years, my visits back to the States  
have felt like trips to an increasingly foreign country.

Some of that, of course, is the natural outcome  
anytime one moves one's life across some significant border,  
whether it be federal or provincial, cultural or psychological.

There's almost always that peculiar sense that eventually sets in

that you can't truly return from whence you've come,  
at least not as the person you were before.

But, that said, the changes I see taking place south of the border  
make the U.S. seem stranger by the day.

Especially when we've been through a string of days  
like the ones we've had in the past couple of weeks.

I say "we" fully realizing I'm speaking  
about another country and a foreign election.

And, yet, the blow-by-blow coverage of this campaign—  
across borders and around the clock—  
has made it hard to dodge the relentless onslaught  
of craven politics and atrocious behaviour.

Over the past decade, I have worked hard  
to avoid bringing up too many  
U.S.-centric issues from this pulpit.

But a case can be made that the looming election  
is an issue for us all, no matter where we live.

This week, J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books,  
tweeted about the nominee of the Republican Party.

She was swiftly called out for interference.

"Aren't you British? Mind your own business."

In reply she said:  
"When a man this ignorant and easy to manipulate  
gets within sniffing distance of the nuclear codes,  
it's everyone's business."

And so it is, whether we like it or not.

Obviously, what happens in the U.S.  
has always had an undue impact on Canada.

But this moment feels far beyond the state of things  
when the elder Trudeau told the Washington Press Club  
that living next door was, for the fabled mouse,  
“like sleeping with an elephant.”

With the election still over three weeks away,  
it’s feeling as though we’re actually sleeping next to  
a dangerous, drunken dinosaur—  
who can’t keep from sending angry tweets in the middle of the night.

It’s been said in countless ways for months now.  
In recent days, the message has become crystal clear.  
The Republican nominee is unfit for public office,  
let alone the presidency.

The litany of insults he has hurled in every direction  
has alienated and infuriated huge swaths of the population.

His vision of America made great  
is apparently one without Muslims or Mexicans,  
refugees or queer people, people who are disabled,  
or people who are poor.

And for a man who repeatedly assures us he loves women,  
he seems to be without a clue or a conscience  
when it comes to understanding how deeply misogynistic  
his words and his behaviour have been and remain.

There is simply no justification, no excuse,  
for his supposed “locker room” banter about sexual assault.

Sadly, I don’t believe he comprehends, even now,  
that what he has so brazenly joked about  
is a moral transgression and a deeply damaging crime.

But as horrible as this whole political spectacle has been,  
I have been heartened by the response, by the pushback,  
by the learning taking place as people talk and tell stories,  
bear witness, and forge a different, better path.

I’ve never spoken out about a particular politician in this way

from our pulpit, and I hope to not feel the need to do so again.

I'm trusting that I'm steering clear of CRA guidelines,  
given that I'm discussing foreign politics...

But, like the lawyer for *The New York Times*,  
who wrote in response this week to the nominee's  
threat of a libel suit against the paper, bring it on.

After all, Trump has sufficiently defamed himself on a daily basis of late.  
Whatever he had left of a reputation is in utter ruin.  
And he didn't need anyone's help.  
He has clearly self-destructed.

Which is why I find myself still mulling over an article I read this summer.

An article that easily discredited the Republican nominee  
and dismissed his chances at winning the presidency.

What caught my attention, and holds it still,  
was the astute observation that this year's nominee  
isn't the one we actually need to worry about it.

What we should worry about is who will take his place—  
the person, who is much more competent, much more skilled—  
who will take up this election's mantle of bigotry and hate  
and seek to make of it a movement.

I read that article this summer while I was in Germany,  
which certainly affected how those words landed for me.

When I tell people about my summer vacation,  
I've wryly shared that Bob and I spent a great deal of time  
visiting Holocaust museums and concentration camps.

While I've been to several such places many times before,  
the visits this time were far more sobering than in the past.

With the U.S. political circus  
running in the background of our trip,  
I couldn't help but see the unsettling parallels

between the conditions that led up to the Holocaust  
and the terribly divisive rhetoric of this year's campaign.

To be clear, I'm not trying to make some facile argument  
by invoking the spectre of Hitler.

But I do believe there is an enduring responsibility  
that we recall Primo Levi's words found  
at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.

"It happened, therefore it can happen..."

At every memorial, at every museum, at every death camp,  
there is an attempt to explain  
how these horrors came to pass eighty years ago.

In its simplest form, I hear that story to be about  
what happens when we allow any group of people  
to be cast outside the human family,  
when we engage in the dangerous game of othering,  
seeking to distance ourselves from "those people"—  
the people we blame for our problems,  
the people who upset or challenge us,  
the people who justify our distrust of them,  
because, you know, "they're different," "they're lazy,"  
"they're taking our jobs," or "they don't share our values."

A few weeks ago,  
proving that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree,  
Donald Trump, Jr. used something  
as simple and seemingly benign as a pack of Skittles  
to illustrate this point.

He said, "If I had a bowl of Skittles  
and told you just three would kill you,  
would you take a handful?"

He then said that summed up the Syrian refugee "problem."

Fear can be a truly terrible thing.

It can protect us from dangers that are real.

But fear can also make our lives small, if we let it take over.

It can drive us to retreat into our bunkers—  
bunkers that eventually become tombs,  
as we are cut off from common sense, from our best selves,  
and from the full flourishing force of life.

I feel truly blessed to call Canada home.  
We are so fortunate to live in this great country,  
where fairness and collective well-being,  
though not yet perfected,  
are at the core of our national aspirations.

And, yet, it's clear we still have so much more work to do.  
And some of that work belongs to us.

It's been easy for progressives on both sides of the border  
to discount Trump's supporters as simple bigots—  
people who are racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and so forth.

Some of that is surely true.  
But we must remember  
that is not the whole of who they are.

To put a finer point on it, it frankly didn't help  
when Hillary Clinton called her opponent's supporters  
a "Basket of Deplorables."

I think we must all resist the temptation, mighty though it is at times,  
to too simply categorize people who are seemingly so different—  
and so at odds with our own world-view.

It is a slippery and dangerous slope.

In recent years, I believe we have flirted  
too much and too often with that slope here at home,  
in both our national and municipal politics.

Campaign talk of banning the niqab,

heated debates over taking in refugees,  
engagement with the demands  
of Black Lives Matter and Idle No More—  
all of these stir our conscience, challenge our mythology,  
and define and redefine our collective identity  
by how and whether we choose to respond.

These same things, I'm sorry to say,  
also unleash a flood of vicious, hateful statements  
in the comments section of our various media.

Reading these comments causes me to despair for humanity  
more than anything else I do.

I am amazed and appalled at how brutal and biting  
people can be with their words.

It breaks my heart to see such bigotry on display,  
especially when it challenges everything I want to believe  
about our commitment in this city and this country  
to living into the promise of our mosaic.

In such moments, I am tempted to write these people off.  
“Haters gonna hate...,” and all that.

But I don't think that serves the cause of love and justice in the long-run.

Our faith calls us to promote and affirm  
the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

That means everyone, even though  
they may have squandered their dignity  
and diminished their own worth by their words and deeds.

Still, as a Unitarian, the commitment of my faith  
is to see that worth and dignity, even when it is barely visible.

Sometimes, this is nothing short of a leap of faith.  
Faith in the humanity that beats in every heart.

That faith calls me to seek understanding.

It calls me to acceptance of the other,  
and the sacred knowledge they are not so very different from me.

Now, acceptance isn't the same thing  
as approving or condoning bad behaviour.

It is, instead, about holding both the promise of a person  
and the reality of their situation in the balance,  
as we try to understand the gap in between.

If this is too hard to try focussed on another person—  
be it someone who wants to close the door on refugees  
or someone who voted for Rob Ford—  
I suggest you try the exercise on yourself.

After all, what would you want for someone to make of the gap  
between your promise—your potential as a person, your highest-self—  
and the manner in which you live out your life on a daily basis?

Maybe you have privilege you can barely even name.  
Perhaps you have challenges others can't even begin to see.

There is so much involved in truly trying to know another person.  
We would all hope for compassion.

This exercise—this spiritual practice at the heart of our faith—  
is a summons to honour the bonds that bind our lives to one another.

And so, I confess, that I've been struggling with how to understand,  
how to accept, how to honour the worth and dignity  
of those who are giving their full-throttled support  
to someone like Donald Trump.

But when I pull back and give it a go,  
when I can try to call up a bit of compassion,  
and wonder just what it must be like to be them,  
I find myself glimpsing people in the powerful grip of fear,  
and then I understand, if just a little bit.

The Australian poet and cartoonist Michael Leunig writes:

There are only two feelings: Love and fear.  
There are only two languages: Love and fear.  
There are only two activities: Love and fear.  
There are only two motives, two procedures,  
two frameworks, two results.  
Love and fear. Love and fear.<sup>1</sup>

There is much that is frightening in our world today.  
Yet, the task is to know what's worthy of our fear, and what's not.

So often we fret needlessly over the wrong things,  
while we miss what may prove to be truly dangerous.

I wonder what would happen  
if our powers to discern the difference were better?

Could we come to see more clearly how others are driven by love or fear?  
Might we better see the same in ourselves?

And might we be willing to go the added distance  
to consider how what we and others fear  
may be ultimately tied to love?

For we fear because something is at stake—  
something precious, something of great value—  
be it life or livelihood, the safety of one's family,  
or the well-being of one's community.

Love can very often be found on the flip-side of fear.

When we grasp that fact, the landscape starts to shift.  
When we see through their fear to the love that may be at risk,  
we can better understand people's motives, including our own.

Of course, knowing doesn't explain or excuse everything.  
But it does have the potential to change the situation  
and open up other paths.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leunig, *A Common Prayer*.

When people are no longer afraid, or are less afraid,  
possibilities for healing, understanding, and bridge-building  
begin to emerge—possibilities that couldn't be seen,  
let alone considered, before.

This is the blessing that can come when we're able  
to move beyond fear, be it others' or our own.

The blessing comes from deciding how to contend with fear.

In whether we let fear draw us into life,  
or drag us away from it.

In whether we let fear drive us into a bunker,  
or take it as an invitation to consider  
what is most dear to us or to someone else.

In whether in the choice between love and fear,  
we are resolved always to choose love.

May it be so.

Until we truly learn how to be led not by our fears, but by our faith—  
our faith in others, in ourselves, and in the life-giving power of love.

Amen.

### **Closing Words – Jack Layton**

“My friends, love is better than anger.  
Hope is better than fear.  
Optimism is better than despair.

So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic.  
And we'll change the world.”