

All Shall Be Well?

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

29 October 2017

Sambain, All Souls, Day of the Dead

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.

Reading

From a speech given by Aaron Freeman on NPR News “All Things Considered.”

You want a physicist to speak at your funeral. You want the physicist to talk to your grieving family about the conservation of energy, so they will understand that your energy has not died. You want the physicist to remind your sobbing mother about the first law of thermodynamics; that no energy is created in the universe and none is destroyed. You want your mother to know that all your energy, every vibration, every BTU of heat, every wave of every particle that was her beloved child remains with her in this world. You want the physicist to tell your weeping father that amid the energies of the cosmos, you gave as good as you got.

And at one point, you'd hope that the physicist would step down from the pulpit and walk to your brokenhearted spouse there in the pew and tell him that all the photons that ever bounced off your face, all the particles whose paths were interrupted by your smile, by the touch of your hair, hundreds of trillions of particles, have raced off you like children, their ways forever changed by you.

And as your widow rocks in the arms of a loving family, may the physicist let her know that all the photons that bounced from you were gathered in the particle detectors that are her eyes, that those photons created within her constellations of electromagnetically charged neurons whose energy will go on forever.

And the physicist will remind the congregation of how much of all our energy is given off as heat. There may be a few fanning themselves with their programs as he says it. And he will tell them that the warmth that flowed through you in life is still here, still part of all that we are, even as we who mourn continue in the heat of our own lives.

And you'll want the physicist to explain to those who loved you that they need not have faith; indeed, they should not have faith. Let them know that they can measure, that scientists have measured precisely the conservation of energy and found it accurate, verifiable and consistent across space and time.

You can hope your family will examine the evidence and satisfy themselves that the science is sound and that they'll be comforted to know your energy is still around. According to the law of the conservation of energy, not a bit of you is gone. You're just less orderly. Amen.

Sermon: "All Shall Be Well?"

It was mid-autumn in Germany,
when the professor,
who had finally had quite enough,
who felt the Church was completely off course,
made his upset known. In a very public way.

On Tuesday, the world will mark,
most likely with muted celebration,
the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's nailing
of his "Disputation on the Power of Indulgences,"
better known as the Ninety-five Theses,
to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church.

While historians suggest that this much-dramatized scene
was likely more akin to his posting an invitation to an academic debate
on a community bulletin board,
it is this moment in time,
this singular act that took place on October 31st, 1517,
that generally marks the start of the Reformation
and the birth of the Protestant Church,
of which we, as Unitarian Universalists,
are direct, if sometimes disputed, heirs.

The Reformation was, of course, about many different things.
It brought about a vast transformation of European society,
with theological and political ramifications
that continue down to the present day.

Over the five centuries since Luther's hammer signaled significant changes within Christianity, much ink and far too much blood have been spilled in making claims on the truth.

Indeed, one of the legacies of the Reformation has been an out-sized obsession with belief.

To the extent that, today, other world religions are often pressed to state what their adherents believe—which is not an easy or essential question for, say, a Buddhist or a Hindu, who don't necessarily focus on belief, but on practice.

Belief is, arguably, a deeply Protestant concern, and one that has garnered much attention within our own tradition over the past few centuries.

Unitarians, by and large, have had a lot to say about right belief, even as we formed a theology that moved us well beyond the creedal confines of Christianity.

Our Puritan forebears took this to exquisite levels before moderation and tolerance eventually kicked in.

Yet, for all of the focus on belief, the Reformation surfaced other questions as well.

And one of the most enduring questions at its heart was about faith.
About what saves and sustains us.
About that in which we place our deepest trust.
About that upon which we depend, with all of our being.

These are pertinent questions on this Day of the Dead, when we look back on lives lived, when we bring to mind those who've gone before, those who taught us so much of what we know about the great gift of life each of us has been given, for a brief moment out of the vastness of time.

As I've reflected on this month's theme of healing, I have found myself in recent weeks and months studying the life

of a Christian mystic who pre-dates the Reformation,
a woman who died in the early 15th century in eastern England.

Julian of Norwich lived much of her life as an anchoress,
the odd title given to a woman who lived as a religious recluse.

Julian likely took her name from the church in Norwich
where she lived in a small room that had been built for her.

Attached to the walls of the church itself,
the room afforded her what few women of her time (and even our time) had:
a room of her own, a place to think, reflect, and pray in peace and quiet.

Julian is best known for a short declaration of faith
that has been passed down the centuries,
in books and on bumper stickers:

“All shall be well, and all shall be well,
and all manner of things shall be well.”

It is a powerful statement of faith.
The words of someone with a tremendous sense of trust in the future.

It would be easy to dismiss these words as those of an extreme optimist.
The naïve ramblings of a misguided mind.
The medieval version of the power of positive thinking.
The banal assurance that “It will all work out,”
that “everything will be okay.”
Don’t worry, be happy.
Akuna Matata.

Several years ago, my colleague, Meg Barnhouse,
wrote a powerful song about Julian and her statement of faith.

In the song, she asks Julian, how she can possibly say that
“All shall be well.”

She presses her.
“Don’t you know about sorrow and hunger and shame,
don’t you know about loneliness and disease and cruelty?”

She wants to know how she can assert that all will be well,
when there's clearly so much heartache involved in the human experience.

In her imagined response, in the song, Julian replies,
“Nobody does not know about sorrow and hunger and shame.
No one does not know about loneliness and disease and cruelty.”

And then Julian presses back:
“But don't *you* know [that] there is also tenderness and friendship
and love that never ends.”

“...don't *you* know [that] there is also tenderness and friendship
and love that never ends.”

To dismiss Julian of Norwich as naïve
is to ignore the facts of her life.

As a young woman, she lived through the plague, the Black Death,
that wiped out the lives of half of her village.

At the age of thirty, she was on her death bed.
She and those taking care of her believed she was near the end.
A priest performed last rites.
And, yet, she somehow survived the ordeal.

And in the midst of that experience she had a vision so powerful,
it became the focus of her life to understand it.

The vision was the basis of her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*,
the first book we know to have been written by a woman in the English language.

In it, she speaks of God as Mother.
She sees suffering outside of God's will.
She looks forward to a reconciliation of all creatures,
which anticipates a theological form of universalism
that would take shape in our own tradition four centuries later.

This was cutting edge theology for her time, and arguably still for ours.

And some would still say it is naïve.

But it speaks to me of a deep and abiding faith.
A profound trust in something bigger that carries us,
whether we give to that something
the name of Goddess or God, the Spirit of Life, Universe, or Life, itself.

It echoes what I heard in those words from Aaron Freeman,
in the reading I shared earlier,
about the need to have a physicist speak at your funeral—
to offer words of assurance that the force of life within each of us continues on.

That through the laws of nature,
through the laws of thermodynamics,
the energy of everything, including our small and fragile lives, endures.

No matter the details of one's theology,
these facts of our existence undergird everything.

The energy that comprises our lives, that makes us who we are,
is part of the larger and ever-unfolding story of the cosmos.

Born from the dust of the stars,
we are part of the great song of the universe,
even when our lives are done.

This, for me, is the foundation of my own faith.
While misery and despair and death
are certainly part of the human experience,
I believe we are held in a larger story.

I honour the fact that this story is told in many different ways.
That it has countless interpretations.

As a Religious Humanist, I take comfort
in the blend of mystery and scientific knowledge
which assures me that in the widest frame, in the biggest picture,
all shall be well, that all endures.

That in ways we scarcely understand,
we are held together with all that is.

Again, this is not to dismiss or minimize the complexities and injustice

that are so much a part of the human experience.

It is an appeal to see them in the broadest context,
and to not lose sight of the hope that sustains us.

In the book *Good to Great*, there is a chapter entitled,
“Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith)”.

The chapter introduces the term the “Stockdale Paradox,”
named for a man who, during the Vietnam War,
was held at the “Hanoi Hilton” for eight years.

This is how Stockdale’s conversation with the writer Jim Collins unfolded:

“I never lost faith in the end of the story,”
Stockdale said, when I asked him.

“I never doubted not only that I would get out,
but also that I would prevail in the end
and turn the experience into the defining event of my life,
which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

I didn’t say anything for many minutes,
and we continued the slow walk toward the faculty club,
Stockdale limping and arc-swinging his stiff leg
that had never fully recovered from repeated torture.
Finally, after about a hundred metres of silence, I asked,
“Who didn’t make it out?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” he said. “The optimists.”

“The optimists? I don’t understand,” I said, now completely confused, given what
he’d said a hundred metres earlier.

“The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said,
‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’
And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go.
Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’
And Easter would come, and Easter would go.
And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again.
And they died of a broken heart.”

Another long pause, and more walking.
Then he turned to me and said,
“This is a very important lesson.
You must never confuse *faith that you will prevail in the end*—
which you can never afford to lose—
with the discipline to confront
the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

I believe that is what Julian of Norwich did, in her own time and way.
And I believe it is what we are called to do in ours.

To take in both the hard and beautiful realities of this life,
while holding them in the grandest frame of our existence,
while always maintaining our faith that we will, somehow, prevail.

This does not mean that everything always or ever
works out as we might hope. It won't.

It often points to the promise of healing,
when we're holding out for the certainty of a cure.

It involves embracing disappointment and hope together.

It means living at peace with life's unknowns.

Holding its ambiguity with intention.

Trusting to the end the life that gave us birth.

It is to live, in a word,
in a very complicated word,
with faith.

Recognizing these complications,
I leave you with this helpful definition from Galen Guengrich:

Faith is a commitment to live as if
certain things are true and thereby
help to make them so.

Faith is a commitment to live
as if life is a wondrous mystery,
as if life is good, as if life is divine,
as if we are responsible for the well-being
of those around us...

Faith is a leap of the moral imagination
that connects the world as it is
to the world as it might become.

May we live with such faith, trusting that all shall be well,
as we do our humble parts to make it so.

Amen.