

“The Complicated Webs that We Weave”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

Three stories.

The first, I caught this week on *The National*.
Perhaps you did, too.

It was the story of the Rainbow Resource Centre,
a new living space for people who are homeless in Winnipeg.
It’s a shelter specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
The space includes fifteen bedrooms and a lounge.

This is an important innovation,
given that queer people can face
a particularly tough time when homeless.
There is often an increased vulnerability
to discrimination and physical violence.

The numbers in Winnipeg follow the trend
elsewhere in Canada and the US.
Just over 10% of the homeless population identifies as LGBT.
For those under 30, it rises to 23%.

There are reasons, of course,
that a disproportionate number of queer people
are among the unhoused.

Fortunately, there is an organisation in Winnipeg
that has decided to provide a safe space
for this particular population.

What’s most surprising about this story

is that this organisation is The Salvation Army—
an organisation with a reputation
for discriminating against queer people rather than helping them.

It is that reputation that is causing a certain amount of suspicion
among leaders in the city's queer community.

And it doesn't help that The Salvation Army has yet to reach out,
as they have prepared to launch this new centre,
to build bridges with community leaders,
or enquire about how to best serve LGBT people.

And, yet, the fact of the matter—
startling as it is, and potentially as refreshing as it is—
is that The Salvation Army has opened this centre
to serve a population very much in need of a safe harbour.

It's a one-year trial at this point.

In time, it may become clear, as some suspect,
that there's an ulterior motive at play;
that this outreach is as much or more about proselytizing
to a group of people those in The Salvation Army
feel are in need of saving as about anything else.

Or, it may be that in time their response in recent days rings true.

That they really do hope their actions will demonstrate
that they genuinely want to help people,
and that they serve others without discrimination.

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Second Story.

On Monday afternoon, I was at the offices
of Social Planning Toronto, for a meeting
of a group of interfaith leaders called "Faith in the City."

This group comes together periodically,
and with increasing regularity, to discuss

how we can make Toronto a better city for everyone.

Our present focus is on the 2018 Budget, which goes to City Council this week.

In the early drafts of the Preliminary Budget, many of the City Council's previous initiatives to serve vulnerable people in our city were substantially unfunded or underfunded, including most of the Poverty Reduction Strategy passed by Council three years ago, as well as wide array of programs that include transit, student nutrition, affordable housing, library hours, environmental protection and an increase in the number of available shelter beds.

In recent weeks, as the budget has been debated back and forth, the funding for a number of these programs has been found, though there are still areas with inadequate budgets to carry out promises already made by Council.

The question we are sitting with as faith leaders is why does the budget process unfold like this, year after year?

Why is it always a cliff-hanger to determine whether core programs that serve the least among us are going to survive for another year?

Why must it so often be an unsettled question as to whether we will take care of our most vulnerable citizens?

I understand that our councillors and the budget office have an unenviable task in trying to manage and fund the needs of this large and complicated city.

But budgets are moral documents. They show the truth of who we are, and who we aspire to be. They reveal our true priorities, and our real commitments.

Which is why we need to take an approach to budgeting that is built on a clearer vision

of becoming a city that truly works for everyone.

Here on the pulpit table are postcards with more information,
and an opportunity to add your name
to the Toronto Can Do Better petition.

I will take any of these collected after the service today
down to City Hall in the morning.

While the budget discussion is important,
given that it is our core principles
of human worth and dignity that are being debated
when we talk about some budget lines,
what I also want you to know about Faith in the City
is that it's a group made up of a great deal of religious diversity.

And, to be very frank, there is a diversity of religion
that I sometimes find personally challenging,
from the more conservative faith groups present,
to those representing a group I struggle to even consider a religion.

And, yet, what I admire is that this coalition comes together
in an effort to take meaningful action for the common good.

We don't worship in the same ways.
We believe very different things.
We hold divergent viewpoints on important
theological and social questions.
I'm aware that there are almost certainly others in the room
who likely struggle to consider Unitarianism a religion.

And, yet, we're working for the well-being of all in this city,
led by a vision that things can be better than they are.

* * *

Third Story.

As many of you know, I have, over the past two years,
performed in a show I co-wrote
with an Anglican priest and a Reform rabbi.

Thus far, because we have produced the show out of our own pockets and been grateful for donated space for performances, we have not produced the show in a wheelchair accessible venue, which is deeply troubling to each of us in the cast.

We have committed to doing at least one more performance—we call it the show that won't die for a reason—because we want to make sure it is accessible.

We have had many invitations and offers to perform the show in a variety of places, and often as a fundraiser.

We've turned them all down, and often had to state that we feel the show always has to be performed for an interfaith audience, not a single faith group.

And, yet, a few months ago, we received an offer that was very hard not to accept.

After much debate, we took it.

The sponsoring group had agreed to book the theatre, handle ticket sales, and cover publicity—which is a relief, because all of us, after all, have day jobs.

The group also agreed to cover all of the production costs, and bear all of the risks, if we did the show, for one night, as a fundraiser for their charitable work.

It was a very generous offer.

The rub, for me, is that the sponsoring group, Hadassah, isn't an exact fit for my personal politics, even though I recognize and applaud the amazing humanitarian work they have done in Israel, Africa, and North America.

The challenge for me is that Hadassah explicitly identifies as a Zionist organization and has from their beginnings in 1912.

The challenge for me is that I have tried
to hold open a middle ground in our congregation
for discussing tensions in the Middle East.

And, well, the term Zionist is such a complicated, heavy-laden word
that does little to invite compromise and understanding.

So, I felt deeply conflicted about agreeing to do the show.
To step back and refuse could have seemed anti-Semitic.
To go forward could seem that I was ignorant or unmoved
by the plight of Palestinians.

So, I kept the rest of the cast waiting as I made my decision.

I spent a full day studying up on Hadassah's history,
reading everything I could find online.

But, what I ultimately found persuasive were stories of healing.

In fact, much of Hadassah's efforts
have been focused on health care in Israel,
where they have built
most of the major medical facilities for the country.

And the beautiful thing is, they treat people in their hospitals,
regardless of religion or ethnic background.

The beautiful thing is, Hadassah's hospitals
are among the few places where
Muslim nurses and doctors and administrators
work closely alongside their Jewish counterparts.

There is healing that happens in the halls,
and the operating room, and at the nurses' station,
that isn't about medical treatments,
but about how walls can crumble
when people live and work in proximity to one another.

Last June, there was a terrible car accident in the West Bank
that left a father dead, his wife with a serious head injury,

and their baby hurt and refusing to take a bottle.

He cried for hours, and his aunts implored the staff
to find someone to breast feed the child.

When a Jewish nurse coming on to her shift heard the story,
she quickly volunteered to take care of the child
and then nursed him throughout the night,
as though he were her own.

After my trip to Israel and Palestine a few years ago,
I returned deeply disheartened about the prospects for peace
in that part of the world.

But the hope I do have is found in people like that nurse,
and in places where such moments can unfold,
moments when people rise to the better angels of their nature.

* * *

Three stories.

A Salvation Army shelter for homeless LGBT people in Winnipeg.

A clergy group organizing around the city's budget in Toronto.

A nurse feeding a baby,
and healing her corner of the world in Jerusalem.

The lesson I take from these stories—
the thread I find running through them,
indeed, the lesson I am learning myself—
is that, in this interdependent world—
in these times when people need to come together
rather than be driven farther apart—
we can't waste time waiting for the perfect partners to appear.

We need to work with what we have,
and with whomever is willing and able.

It's not easy to do.

It means letting go of perfection in exchange for action.

It means overcoming biases and prejudices, not least our own!

It means finding common ground with people
who may be unlike us in significant
and sometimes uncomfortable ways.

And it means recognizing
that a greater good can be better served
through imperfect and unlikely partnerships
than will ever be served by a coalition of the unwilling
that fails to even come together, let alone act.

This is a lesson I feel we must learn, again and again,
because our lives depend on it.

Because the healing of the world depends on it.

* * *

At the core of our theology is a felt awareness
of the web of all being, of which we are a part.

Truly, what touches the life of one of us affects us all.

And, yet, it's easy enough—
for some, and for some of the time—
to live as though that's not true.

That is until you realize you can't do it all,
or you can't do much of anything,
without someone else's help.

A couple of weeks ago when Prime Minister May
announced that the UK would have a new role in cabinet—
the “Minister of Loneliness”—I'll admit it caught my attention.

Of course when I hear the word minister
my mind always goes first to my own profession.

And so my initial response was to ask,
“Aren’t all clergy these days Ministers of Loneliness?”

After all, so much of our work
is about trying to foster connections.

In past years when I’ve polled the congregation
about the topics you’d like to hear preached from the pulpit,
loneliness has always come out in the top three.

I am mindful that I am, that Lynn and I are, indeed,
Ministers of Loneliness, or at least Ministers of the Lonely.

Brene Brown writes about how much shame we feel
in our culture these days about feeling loneliness,
which, of course, only makes it worse.

And which is why I applaud Theresa May
and other heads of government for creating these roles
that recognize that we are living through
an epidemic of disconnection and isolation,
which brings with it terribly high social costs,
and often comes at a deeply worrying personal price.

A 2015 meta-analysis of various studies on loneliness
found that being lonely can be deadly.

While living with air pollution
raises your odds of an early death by 5%,
and obesity raises it by 20%,
and excessive drinking increases your odds by 30%,
living with loneliness increases the chance
of an early demise by 45%.

Bearing that in mind, having a cabinet minister
to address this epidemic is long overdue.

But somehow this crisis of loneliness, of isolation,
has crept up on us.

While I'm glad that it's getting government attention,
I'm not so sure governments will be especially effective
at helping people to break down walls that separate and divide.

I think that only comes from a change of heart.

The change of heart that helps us to see
we share a common destiny
with everyone and everything on this planet.

The change of heart that happens
when we truly see the humanity in others,
and when we can see it in ourselves.

Brene Brown says the magic ingredient
in overcoming loneliness is vulnerability,
and I believe she is right.

Because there is a risk in reaching out beyond our silos.

Because there is a risk of encountering real differences.

Because there is a risk that those differences
will somehow ask us to change.

But may we decide that these are risks
we are willing and courageous enough to take.

And in reaching out,
may we rise to the better angels of our nature,
to bring healing and hope to our interdependent world.

Amen.

Benediction – Wayne Arnason

Take courage friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.
For deep down, there is another truth:
you are not alone.