

First Unitarian Church Albuquerque

April 17, 2016

Who am I to offer you a blessing?

Toward the end of this service, you'll be invited to come forward to receive a touch of clay and water on your forehead or hand. It's a tradition we've had for several years now, an earth day blessing.

In the first year, the topic of the sermon was water. In the second year, dirt. The third, air. And now, fire, which is a symbol of energy and power.

What will it be next year? Maybe glitter. The fifth element. I hear there was a glitter communion in this church before I arrived. Anybody remember that? I've always been sorry I missed it. Although I hear the cleaning crew could have done without it.

What does it mean to offer a blessing? And who am I, or the other ministers, or any other person, to offer one?

A couple of years ago, my husband, Carlos, was blessed by a curandero. A holy man, an ancient looking man, Carlos says, with a wise old face and a gentle spirit. As many of you know, a curandero is a traditional folk healer, and an important figure in the culture of the southwest and in Latin America.

A curandero or curandera's rituals and treatments are rooted in indigenous wisdom. They include especially the belief that body, mind, and soul are connected, and that people are part of an interdependent web of being: along with animals, plants, water, fire, and the earth.

In curanderismo, the curandero channels healing powers from the divine realm, often by calling upon saints or ancestors. The curandero blessed Carlos with touch, words, prayer, symbolic foods... and confetti, which was to be sprinkled around our home. We did sprinkle it, and it was there for a long time, a year maybe, which is sweet, and made me realize how rarely we vacuum all the way to the corners of rooms. Every time we looked at it, we remembered the blessing, and we felt blessed all over again.

Some of us, when we imagine what kind of person gives a blessing, imagine that they'd have—or that they'd *think* they have— some kind of special spiritual power or authority. Or, on the other hand, we might imagine blessing itself to be powerless. Frederick Buechner writes that

“the word “blessing” has come to mean more often than not a pious formality such as ministers are continually being roped into giving at high school graduations, Rotarian wienie roasts, and the like, and to say “God bless you”

to a person, unless that person happens to have just sneezed, is generally regarded as a pious eccentricity.¹

He goes on to say that this hasn't always been the case. He reminds us of the story of Jacob tricking his nearly blind father into giving him a blessing that was meant for his brother, Esau. When he discovered his mistake, Buechner writes, "Abraham could no more take the blessing back and give it to Esau again than he could take the words of it out of the air and put them back into his mouth again." The blessing contained not only the energy of the person giving it, but some of the life-giving power of the Spirit of Life or ground of being, known in this story as God.

In Latin American families, it is common for regular people to bless one another, especially elders to youngsters. A parent or grandparent may give a blessing to their child whenever they say goodbye, especially if the child is going on a long trip or facing a big event of some kind. Maybe some of us here grew up in a family like that, as my husband did.

A blessing can flow quite naturally from one person to another. And the power comes both from the spirit of the person offering the blessing, and also from what they help open us to receive.

Whether it is from a curandero, an elder, a minister, or a friend, to bless a person is to connect them with some power of love, protection, or healing.

In this congregation, when we pray for people, we often say we are lifting them up to "the great powers of healing and renewal known by many names."

And so, as you can see, I'm thinking today about the connection between blessing and power. I'm going to come back to blessing. First, I want to point out that in the ancient scriptures of many traditions, the divine *is* power. The power that caused the universe to exist, and the power to destroy, too.

In the Hebrew scriptures, that power first caused there to be light, and then...sun, sky, earth.

Later, the *destructive* power of the divine is portrayed in stories—for example, the story of God's interaction with Job, who saw his entire life crumble. In that story, God collaborates with Satan to allow hell to break loose in Job's life. He loses his life's savings and all the wealth of his household, and then his precious children. His body breaks out in boils, and his wife finds him "sitting in a pile of ashes." His friends tell him to his face that his suffering must be punishment for his sin.

When he confronts God asking, essentially, what have I done to deserve this? God, the text says, speaks from a whirlwind.

¹ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: a seeker's ABC*. HarperSanFrancisco: 1993.

“Brace yourself like a fighter,” God says. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundations?” The rest of the speech is a long and illustrative poem about the scale and grandeur of the planet, life, and the universe, from a birthing deer to the constellations of Pleiades and Orion, from the gates of death to ostrich eggs, warmed by the earth. The whole universe, within which Job is a speck, and not entitled to an easy life.

Job acknowledges that he’d had a sense of entitlement. And then goes on to build a new life.

While other stories hint at a divine theodicy, or system of justice, in which the good are rewarded and the bad are punished, and we *wish* it were so, the story of Job is an extreme example of something we actually observe in this world: that there is creation and destruction, and humans are made pityingly small in the face of it sometimes.

We like to talk about the gentler awe-inspiring side of the world. Like in the reading by Victoria Safford this morning: red-winged blackbirds, crocuses, “and wind to lift the tiniest hairs on naked arms in spring when you run out to the mailbox.” And that’s real and beautiful.

But there is a harsher side, and the book of Job doesn’t dance around it. In the mountains behind me, coyotes are devouring ground-squirrels. Scorpions are eating mice, and birds are eating scorpions.

In the end, everything is consumed.

And humans are part of that great cycle.

It makes us small... and yet there is a reflection of it *in* us. We, too, have incredible creative and destructive powers—more than any other creature on the planet. We turn rivers into lakes, and develop technologies that allow us to speak, almost instantly, to someone on the other side of the planet. We created nuclear weapons.

Many ancient scriptures from around the world not only describe the divine as power, they also portray humans as being made in the image of the divine, or from divine blood and clay, or divine breath and clay. If the divine is a way of describing the great powers of creation and destruction, then there is a deep truth to those allegories in which humans are made in the image of the divine.

And of all the ways we express these powers we have, the ways in which we have harnessed energy, as in fuel and electricity, may be the most illuminating. No pun intended.

This is Faith Climate Action week, a week in which congregations all over the country are talking about climate change, and how their tradition calls them to respond.

We have used our power to harness energy, to make light when we want it, to make “stuff”—lots of stuff that we sell in stores, and stuff package all that other stuff with. Have you ever bought something that is already packaged in a bag, like a bag of apples, and then had the cashier try to put it in yet another bag for you to carry it to your car?

Energy enables us to move quickly across the face of the earth in cars and airplanes. But in doing so, we have lost sight of the limits of our power, and of our place in the order of things.

We have begun to behave in a way that invites a Job-like response from our powerful earth. A show of power back at us, that puts us in our place.

According to NASA, 97% of actively publishing climate scientists agree that climate change is extremely likely due to human activities.² There is clear scientific consensus that this is the case. Often in the media, one of the few scientists who do not believe humans cause climate change is presented side by side with one of the vast majority who do, giving the impression that the debate is about 50-50. But that isn't the case. There is a consensus.

Humans cause climate change. We do it mostly by burning fossil fuels: coal and oil. The US is the second biggest offender, right after China, which passed us in the last decade.

The level of heat trapping “greenhouse gasses” in the atmosphere is the highest it has ever been, about 30% higher than the highest point in the last 400,000 years.

The earth is warming. The 20 warmest years having occurred since 1981. Ten of the warmest years occurred in the past 12 years.

Glaciers are melting. When they do, they stop reflecting light, and become water that absorbs heat.

Sea levels are rising, swallowing up land, twice as fast in the last ten years as in the last century.

And water patterns are changing all around the planet. Some places are flooding, while others are becoming new deserts.

What will happen? Well, the earth is going to go on. The question is whether we – and other creatures we need and love—will be able to live here, on it, anymore.

Earth prevails. We cannot bend her to our will, not in the long run.

And in the nearer term, will we hasten and increase suffering? Will we make places on our planet, filled, in this moment, with people like ourselves, raising their

² <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

children, making breakfast, practicing their religions, will we make those places suddenly uninhabitable?

Every major religion includes teachings about caring for the world, and being good stewards for future generations. It's why religious organizations are a particularly good place to work on climate change.

In Unitarian Universalism this takes the form of our seventh principle, respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part. Our interdependence extends not only horizontally around us, but forward and backward in time, too. We inherited a planet with abundance and clean air. It is not moral for us to leave it used up, with water scarcity, and toxins, for our grandchildren to deal with, just so we can have a fatter economy for a few more years.

The good news is that good things are happening.

Climate change can be slowed by decreasing our dependence on fossil fuels, through conservation, and by turning to renewable energy.

Wind energy, solar energy (like we generate with the solar panels on the roofs of our church).

In Colorado they are getting really creative about it: there's a wastewater treatment plant in Grand Junction, Colo. that takes in 8 million gallons of raw sewage each year— what's flushed down the toilet and sinks—and processes it. That process used to result in a lot of methane being released. That's another greenhouse gas, like carbon dioxide. But they figured out how to process it further, turning it into natural gas that is chemically identical to the stuff we find underground. NPR ran an article about it called From Poop to Power.³

The manager of the plant is proud. He says the old process was "not good for the environment and a waste of a wonderful resource." That is the perfect job for that guy.

We aren't quite THAT resourceful around here, but we First Unitarians practice our commitment to the earth by supporting a certified wildlife habitat, just outside these windows. By having solar panels. This sanctuary is certified LEED Platinum, the highest certification for environmental sustainability. We recycle. We compost. We are upgrading our thermostats. We are members of Interfaith Power and Light, an organization that is dedicated to the promotion of energy conservation and renewable energy.

³ http://www.npr.org/2016/01/01/461692939/from-poop-to-power-colorado-explores-new-sources-of-renewable-energy?sc=17&f=1001&utm_source=iosnewsapp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=app

I'll bet in your personal lives, most of you also do something for sustainability. Recycling, or trying to conserve water. Some of us use bicycles or public transportation, and that reduces your carbon footprint.

Today, you are invited to do at least one more thing. In particular, I hope you'll do one thing to join your voice to the chorus of people who are telling local and national leaders to respond to climate change. If you can't afford solar panels, that's ok. There are lots of other things you can do.

Our congregation's Earthweb team has put together a little fair in the courtyard, where you can find sustainability pledges with Transition ABQ, as well as petitions supporting strong methane protections and postcards to senators that can be signed from NMIPL, urging support of the Green Climate Fund; and the Paris Pledge from NMIPL, and more.

And to our listeners at the branches in Edgewood, Socorro, and Carlsbad, I've sent many of the same materials by email.

I want to close with a **Poem by Rabbi Arthur Waskow**

We are the generation that stands
between the fires;
Behind us the flame and smoke
that rose from Auschwitz and from Hiroshima;
And from the burning of the Amazon forest;
Before us the nightmare of a Flood of Fire,
the flame and the smoke that consume all Earth.

It is our task to make from fire not an all-consuming blaze
but the light in which we see each other fully.
All of us different,
all of us bearing
One Spark.

We light these fires to see more clearly
that the Earth and all who live as part of it
are not for burning.
We light these fires to see more clearly
the rainbow in our many-colored faces.

Blessed is the One within the many.
Blessed are the Many who make one.

Blessed. One of the powers we have is to bless. We can choose to bless the earth. We can use our power to bless and heal the world, and to bless and heal one another, by companioning each other.