

First Unitarian Church

September 10, 2017

Gathered here in the struggle and the power, spirit draw near.

What a month September has been so far. What struggle! Our country's Dreamers betrayed—their lives placed in peril—with the Attorney General announcing the end of a program meant to protect them from deportation. They were brought here as children, raised as Americans. They are our children. They are in danger of exile.

And what power. Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Jose. Flooding in India. Wildfires here at home. A massive earthquake in Mexico.

Then there is North Korea.

Spirit draw near, indeed. We need an anchor. Some direction.

You know it's bad when the New York Times runs an article about "end times." They did that on Friday, exploring the religious tendency to turn to sacred scriptures at times like this for some kind of concrete information to ground our understanding about what's happening. A prediction—as in these are the exact signs of God's overall plan. Or an explanation—as in, this exact thing is happening because God is angry.

But ancient scriptures have never been at their best when it comes to predicting historical events. That's why the image of a guy with a sign yelling about end times on a street corner has become, at this point, a caricature of religion. There has always been someone doing that.

And as for explanations, if we examine the present and past, we see that good and bad things happen to pretty much everyone. I remember a little poem that was quoted in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

Rain falls on the just and the unjust fella

But the unjust has the just's umbrella.

And so, while the question of why is a natural and interesting one, in the Unitarian Universalist tradition we tend not to dwell so much on "why," as on "what now." What now? Meaning, how does our faith call us to respond. And how shall we be in this world, knowing what we know about it?

The answers have to do with hope. There are a couple of kinds of hope.

One kind of hope comes from the expectation that we either will or might get what we want.

One time when my daughter was three or four years old, she was playing in the backyard of our little home in Oregon, and she heard a song. I can still hear it now. It's one of those tunes you can't get out of your head easily.

Eddie Murphy did a whole skit about this back in the 80's, in red leather pants and a red leather jacket unzipped to his navel. No shirt. He made comedy sexy. Anybody remember the Ice Cream Man skit?¹ Ice cream man! Whatever a kid was doing, they'd stop and fly into a full blown panic for the Ice Cream Man, Eddie Murphy said.

I was in the kitchen with the window open, and in the backyard I heard my tiny daughter start yelling like Eddie Murphy: ICE CREAM! And then she propelled her forty pound body right through the sliding screen door, flattening it—the whole rectangle frame came out of its tracks and landed on the dining room floor—as she continued to make a straight shot for the front door.

That's one kind of hope. Hope that you'll get what you want, or a situation will change as you'd like. This kind of hope tends to operate on short—or at least measurable-- timelines. We hope to catch the ice cream truck. We hope a law protecting civil rights will be enacted. We hope for a cure. We hope to reach safer ground.

This kind of hope may spur us to a targeted kind of action—run through the screen, call our legislators, read medical studies or get in the car. *Prayers* arising from this kind of hope are intercessory—as in “please, let the good thing happen.”

This kind of hope is energizing. It's the carbohydrates of hope. Gets you going. We need that, especially when there is an act-fast, life-or-death kind of situation. Like an ice cream truck. When the situation is not acute, though, there is one potential pitfall to this kind of hope, and that is if we get so focused on some future event that we forget to experience the present moment. This day that we have been given.

There is always something to be grateful for, some bit of joy or some measure of love we can share, right now. We have to make sure we are connected to the present even as we are hopeful for the future.

The other thing about this kind of hope is that it's a feeling and feelings come and go. We don't always feel hopeful, do we. Or sometimes, we have that kind of hope, but it doesn't seem like enough and it is in fact not enough to overcome the vast need and suffering and enormous problems that lie before us, some of which will surpass our lifetimes.

It's like you're departing base camp at the bottom of Mount Everest, and all you've got is some crackers (carbohydrates) and you're going, *I'm going to need some oxygen*. Not to mention some better nourishment. And you know you cannot make that kind of climb alone.

¹ No? Well, here you go. Rough language warning! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vg-csjbwo5s>

Does it sound like I'm talking about church?

No, I'm talking *in* church. This is what we're about. About life. Including the tough stuff. And hope! All of the kinds of hope.

When the time limited *feeling* kind of hope is not enough, that's when we need another kind of hope: a kind that transcends the events of our lives. A kind of hope that cannot be taken away. It's less a feeling, and more an inner orientation and a practice.

It comes first from the knowledge that our lives matter. Your life is precious. It is sacred. It is worth protecting. In the Jewish and Christian scriptures it is said that humans are made in the image of God. In the Unitarian Universalist evolution of those traditions, we say that you are born already holy.

Listen: this week I had the opportunity to sit down and talk with one of the people who have taken Sanctuary in churches in Albuquerque, to avoid deportation.² Emma has lived in the US for 25 years, and is married to an American citizen. She has no criminal history. When she arrived to the US from Honduras in the 1990's, she applied for asylum but she never received a court date, and she went on with her life. In 2011, ICE arrested her in her home and issued a deportation order. But at that time, a deportation order wasn't necessarily immediate. So she was released, and as long as she kept showing up at regular appointments with immigration authorities to check in, it seemed they'd allow her to stay and possibly find another solution to her immigration status.

Then the Trump administration began prioritizing easy targets for deportation. And suddenly, there were stories of people showing up at their appointments and being jailed and deported without warning. It happened to a woman in Arizona, the married mother of two American children who was brought to the US when she herself was only 14.

Knowing this, Emma took refuge at the Friends Meeting House instead of going to her next appointment. She is still hoping her immigration status can be resolved.

We discussed the uncertainty of Emma's situation. Perhaps it is somehow part of God's larger plan, she said. And Emma's story has indeed become part of a larger movement toward humane immigration reform—by taking sanctuary and speaking with the media, she has allowed her story to become visible, in such a way that others may now become aware of just how senseless our country's current system is.

But no matter what happens, no one can take away Emma's inherent worth and dignity. Am I right?

² Shepard, Maggie. "Quaker meeting house provides sanctuary for immigrant." *Albuquerque Journal*, 14 Mar. 2017, www.abqjournal.com/968753/immigrant-takes-sanctuary-in-abq-church.html. Accessed 8 Sept. 2017.

The US may reveal its ugliness in the way it treats her, but she will not be any less holy or precious. And because she is precious, what injustice she has suffered or will suffer only magnifies the shamefulness of this nation's policies and the scourge of racism that is increasing the meanness and violence.

Emma's life, and your life, and my life are valuable, precious, and they are consequential.

It matters what we do with our lives. We can use them to bless the world, or to curse it, either with indifference or meanness.

Either way, your life is part of something larger than you. It is bound up with other lives, and with all the possibilities for love, healing, kindness, compassion, wisdom, and beauty. It is part of a larger story. What will your role in it be? Will it reflect an inner orientation of hope? Will it be a story of practicing hope?

Here's the thing: this kind of practiced hope that comes from an inner orientation, it requires doing what Sister Simone Campbell calls "walking toward trouble." It asks us to be present with whatever is happening. And to find ways to connect our precious lives with hope in action. To connect with other people, too, for the greater good.

Last week I mentioned the work of Juana Bordas, who points out that the dominant culture of the US is a very individualistic one—all about personal responsibility and personal morality. A lift yourself up by the bootstraps kind of ethic. But it's physically impossible to lift yourself up by your bootstraps. And this mindset blinds people to the ways systems create insurmountable obstacles for some people, while rolling out the red carpet for others. It focuses on individual morality while ignoring the collective morality—or in this case—collective immorality. What is needed now is an ethic of the collective good.

An ethic of the good of the whole, such as we find in Latin American, African American, and Native American cultures. This is a time for a moral movement led by a diverse coalition of leaders.

And there *is* a diverse new movement underway, a new movement with a long name. It's "The Poor People's Campaign: a National Call for Moral Revival."³ The movement's co-chair and most prominent spokesperson, The Rev. Dr. William Barber, visited Albuquerque last month. How many of you either went to the Mass Meeting or tried to go? The crowd overflowed the church that hosted this event. I heard there were 1200 people. People sat in the aisles, and listened from the foyer. There were people standing all the way out in the parking lot listening.

The original Poor People's Campaign, many of you will know, had Martin Luther King Jr as its leader and spokesperson back in 1967 and '68. Back then, that

³ <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org/new-poor-peoples-campaign/>

campaign sought to address systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and economic issues.

Today's campaign picks up those themes, and links them with new ones—new old ones really. Dr. Barber draws connections between healthcare, environmental protection, access to education, transgender equality, LGBTQ, women's rights, and voting rights.

Can you believe we are still having to talk about equal voting rights? We are. We really are. We have to because politicians have limited voting hours, increased ID requirements, and done redistricting precisely to weaken the voting power of people of color. In North Carolina the US Supreme Court said they did this with "surgical precision." That's chilling. It's unconscionable.

Now, it is often the case that all these causes don't seem to go together. You don't usually hear about environmentalism and LGBTQ issues going together, right? Or racism and transgender? You don't hear that much, either, even though the Black Lives Matter movement does explicitly link them. Advocacy groups for these issues tend to work in isolation.

But they have something in common. They are moral issues. They are issues relating to the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the interdependent web of life of which we are a part—two of the seven principles at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.

How Americans handle these issues will reflect how well we have grasped the golden rule taught by every major world religion, and likewise whether we have understood the world religious imperative to welcome the stranger.

The religious right is obsessed with controlling women and sex, apparently to the point of not noticing a record breaking hurricane taking lives and causing mass destruction to the south, and not having much to say about a violent white supremacist rally to the east. Did you hear about the so-called Nashville Statement?⁴

It was put forth by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, an organization founded "to help the church defend against the accommodation of secular feminism." The organization explicitly argues that women should be submissive to men. On their website in its section on the proper set up of households, it also cites the words of the Apostle Paul when he urged slaves to be obedient to their masters. ⁵ I'm not kidding. You can go online and see for yourself.

The statement laid out the usual *conservative* Christian judgments about being gay or transgender, argued that marriage should be between one man and one woman, and also said basically that no good Christian will agree to disagree about these things, if you don't impose these rules on others, you're a sinner.

⁴ <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement>

⁵ <https://cbmw.org/about/mission-vision/>

The mayor of Nashville called it poorly named and said it does not reflect the city's values.⁶

The statement was signed by 150 prominent evangelical leaders, overwhelmingly men. And I don't know this for a fact, but I'd venture to guess that there wasn't a lot of racial diversity in that group. Certainly the staff and board of the Council appear to be almost exclusively white men. I don't mean to dis either men or white people. It's just that when one powerful demographic tries to legislate morality for everyone else, it's gonna be morally suspect sooner than it's gonna be morally right.

Case in point: in the Christian scriptures, Jesus says nothing at all about homosexuality or transgender. He does not tell women to obey men. He is pretty clear about one thing though: he said divorce is wrong.

He also seems to suggest that if a person gets divorced, the most ethical thing to do afterward is remain celibate for the rest of your life. That's exactly what the Nashville Statement wants gay people to do. But...

Divorce does not appear in the Nashville statement. At all. Nor is it something evangelical leaders are trying to pass laws about. No one has taken a case all the way to the supreme court to prevent a baker from having to sell a wedding cake to someone who's on their second marriage. In fact, 80% of white evangelicals voted for a president who is on his *third* marriage.

On the other hand, the gospels and the rest of the bible have a lot to say about poverty, welcoming the stranger, and helping the afflicted. The scriptures rail against economic oppression and greed.

How did the religious right end up being the morality party when—to borrow the words of Rev. Dr. Barber—they say so much about what god says so little, and so little about what God says so much?

What passes for morality is not moral at all. It's time for a moral revival.

And that's what the Poor People's Campaign is all about.

Albuquerque was the second stop in a 25 state tour. From each state, the campaign is going to train 1000 people in nonviolent resistance. Next spring, there will be a highly publicized act of civil disobedience spanning those 25 states, over a period of six weeks. 25 states, 1000 people per state. 25,000 people. That should make an impact.

The goal, according to the campaign's website, is to "force a serious national examination of the enmeshed evils of systemic racism, poverty, militarism and environmental devastation during a key election year while strengthening and connecting informed and committed grassroots leadership in every state, increasing their power to continue this fight long after June 2018." If you want to get on board,

⁶ From the Twitter account @MayorMeganBarry. 29 Aug 2017. 9:45am. <http://tinyurl.com/y7bb67kh>

you can go to their website and sign the pledge. I did. It's just PoorPeoplesCampaign.org or Google Poor People's Campaign and you'll find it.

Our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, has also endorsed the campaign.

When I came across Maya Angelou's poem, Still I Rise, again this week I remembered Emma, and the hope, power, and strength that come from deeply knowing that your life is precious and holy—body, mind, and spirit-- and that it matters what you do with it. And I thought of the Poor People's Campaign, and how we affirm that sacred truth for one another by standing with each other, building connections, empowering each other, listening, and speaking up for what is good, compassionate, and right.

There are many things we cannot control in this world. But there are also many things we can. And no one has to do it alone.

There is so much to be hopeful for.

I'm going to wrap up in just a minute, but before I do, there are some opportunities I want to lift up. These are things that are very much connected with what I've been preaching about this morning.

First, twenty-five members of 1st Unitarian have volunteered for the past several months to "accompany" the two people—Emma and Khadim—who have taken Sanctuary in Albuquerque to avoid detention and deportation. Accompaniment means attending a training to learn what to do if ICE shows up, working a "training shift" with an experienced volunteer, and then covering shifts at the two locations.

Coverage is provided 24 hours a day every day. 1st Unitarian has committed to covering the 8 shifts every Thursday. Shifts are 4 hours long during the day and 12 hours for the overnight.

Our 1st U group is doing a great job – and receiving so much in return as they get to know Emma and Kadhim, their families, and their stories -- but we need more help.

[Unfortunately, neither current Sanctuary situation looks like it will end soon. There may be more people going into Sanctuary in the near future.]

So, I invite you to visit the table in the social hall after service if you might want to volunteer. The folks there can answer your questions and connect you with the next training. By the way, First Unitarian is hosting that next training, on September 22nd.

Next, we are also hosting an Interfaith Community Organizing training, next weekend. This is an Albuquerque Interfaith event, and all are welcome. When you learn how to organize for collective action—how to inspire and organize regular people to advocate for the common good together—you learn how to change our community and country. Community organizing was a strategic foundation of major successful movements in our nation's history, including civil rights, farmworkers

rights, and women's rights. There's a table for that in the social hall too. You can still sign up. The cost of the training is \$25, and I think scholarships are still available.

Finally, our church is also hosting a series of Community Conversations on Race with the mediator, restorative justice expert, and diversity trainer Tonya Covington. The conversations are open to the wider community, and will be held every Thursday for six weeks, starting Sept 21, in the Social Hall, with \$10 payable at the door. You don't have to attend all of them, you can drop into any one of them. If you've been needing a place to bring your questions, concerns, or swirling thoughts about issues pertaining to race in these times, this is a great place to come for learning and connecting.