

Homilies for Easter Sunday

First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque

April 21, 2019

Spring by Jane Davis, Ministerial Intern

Reading: Prayer of Letting Go, by Mark Belletini

<http://www.firstuucolumbus.org/images/sermons/2002/2002-03-17%20Surrender,%20Rev.%20Mark%20Belletini.htm>

It is clear that spring is here now. There is new growth bursting forth all around us.

I was born in the spring and I am reminded that soon another year of my life will have passed and another spring of my life is coming into bloom. I once looked at my life in a very linear way, following a straight line from beginning to end. In that linear thinking, I never imagined that someday I would take my life in a very different direction than I had originally planned. And, I never imagined that making such a change would cause me to feel as though my life is headed into a new spring following a rather harsh winter.

We humans often compare the span of our lives to the seasons of the year.

When we make this comparison we usually start with spring and end at winter. I have often wondered why we do not form this comparison in a way that more closely reflects nature. If we looked at our lives as more similar to the seasons would we look at our lives differently? Would we then consider that there are cycles in our lives and that our lives are not linear (starting in spring and ending in winter). In nature the cycle repeats. Winter is followed by a new spring. That new spring is abundant with new growth made stronger and more vibrant by water from the winter snows.

We also draw comparisons between the seasons of nature and the seasons of our communities. Shakespeare wrote such a comparison and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King quoted this comparison. The comparison was made with respect to the seasons of our social discontent. The reference spoke of the winter of our discontent being transformed to the summer of our discontent with help from the sun. In this reference, transformation occurs such that the winter of our discontent could transition and burst forth into a summer. This transition occurs with assistance. The assistance comes from the sun and there is a play on words with respect to whether this is the son s-o-n or the sun s-u-n. Perhaps this country is in such a season of social discontent. Perhaps we need only to weather the winter of our discontent in order to burst forth

into a new more enlightened spring: A spring made possible by strength gained during the cold, barren winter.

In these comparisons with the seasons of nature, we are reminded of the teachings of Buddhism. In Buddhist teachings, we are urged to accept change and not to cling to what we consider to be the good or to push away what we consider to be the bad. We are reminded to accept change with equanimity or evenness of mind. This evenness of mind allows us to accept all the seasons of our lives not just the springs but also the winters.

We are apt to want to rush through the down times of our lives and focus on getting through them quickly, to more pleasant time. We seem to find little value in the winters when things are bleak, dormant, not growing, and not colorful. We could imagine nature as showing equanimity or evenness of mind. Nature seems to embrace the winters with faith that the winters are necessary. Nature seems to behave as described in the Belletini poem just read and “run from winning and losing and losing and winning, and be still”. If we took nature as our guide would we be able to be still, embrace the cycle, and see that it is the snows of winter that permit the growth in spring. Would we also give ourselves and our communities permission to burst forth into a new spring season following a harsh, cold, dormant winter.

I hope each of us can embrace this spring season and embrace the seasons of our lives. All around us nature is going into spring. Maybe this is a good time for us all to permit a new spring. By that I mean to allow a time of bursting forth with new growth within ourselves, a time to give ourselves permission to burst forth and do things differently than we did in the previous season. Perhaps we can permit new growth in the flowers of our lives. Perhaps we could nurture those flowers and display them and admire how they have grown. Perhaps we can also share with others the flowers we have nurtured.

Perhaps we can turn back to the world and its promise of spring with faith that what we carry from having weathered the winter is enough to sustain us in this bursting forth.

Passover by Dan Lillie, Ministerial Resident

Reading: Ready, by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/ready>

Lectio Divina

There is an ancient Benedictine practice called Lectio Divina, which translates to “Divine Reading”. This practice is used to engage with a sacred text in a deeper way than merely trying to determine a scripture’s literal meaning. The Lectio Divina process invites multiple interpretations and responses by asking, not just what you think about a reading, but how you feel about it; what you associate with it; what connections it brings up from your own life and experiences.

As I used Lectio Divina to engage with Rabbi Rachel Barenblat’s Passover-themed poem *Ready*, one line, near the end, kept repeating in my head: “Trust that what you carry will sustain you.”

For some reason, this was the line that spoke to me; it was the affirmation and encouragement that I needed to hear.

A Dialogue with Myself

“Trust that what you carry will sustain you.”

When I read this line to myself, it set off a dialogue in my head, between the me that trusts myself, and the me that’s not so sure. The first “me” is guided by love. The second “me” is guided by fear. The dialogue went something like this:

Me #1: “Yes, I trust that what I carry will sustain me.”

Me #2: Are you sure? What if I’m not ready? What if I haven’t done enough to prepare for the challenges ahead? What if I’m not enough?

Me #1: Our lives are not meant to be spent endlessly preparing, they are meant to be lived. You are alive, so you are already living. You are enough. You already have enough to do whatever your life will require of you next. The poem is true, “if you wait until you feel fully ready, you may never take the leap at all”

And so it was that I listened to these competing aspects of myself, vying for attention and validation. Once I was able to acknowledge the fear and doubt coming from Me #2, I could then choose to accept the wisdom of Me #1, the more authentic me rooted in love and trust.

You too?

Now I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that most of us have these different aspects of ourselves competing for our attention and seeking validation.

Consider this Chasidic Prayer translated by Rabbi Chaim Stern:

"I am afraid of things that cannot harm me, and I know it.

I yearn for things that cannot help me, and I know it.

What I fear is within me, and within me, too, is what I seek."

So, amidst the competing voices trying to tell us who we are, how do we invite and encourage our most authentic self to burst forth?

Perhaps that voice of doubt, the one motivated by fear, has some reason to be afraid- there is always more we can do to be ready for what we fear might happen.

And that's the point of the poem, isn't it? That often, the challenges we have been preparing for never arrive, and instead we find ourselves facing something we never expected.

Reflection Questions

So let me ask:

Can it be true that we are never ready, and that we are always ready?

Can you trust, not that you have all the right tools and skills, but that you will do what you can with what you have?

Can you ground yourself, not in having prepared perfectly for what you thought was coming next, but rather in a deep self-trust that you will show up as your most authentic self?

I invite you to reflect for a moment, on your own internal inventory: What do you know to be true about yourself that you rely on to face challenges? How do you draw on your inner strength and resilience? Where is that deep well within you?

Affirmation

As I reflect on the well of strength and resilience within me, here is the truth I found at the heart of my authentic self. And I have the audacity to believe that this is true of you as well, so I invite you to repeat after me:

I am enough. [*I am enough*]

I will do what I can with what I have. [*I will do what I can with what I have*]

I am grounded in trust and love. [*I am grounded in trust and love*]

When I am challenged, I will show up as my most authentic self.

[When I am challenged, I will show up as my most authentic self]

This is all the preparation I need.

[This is all the preparation I need]

I trust that what I carry will sustain me.

[I trust that what I carry will sustain me]

I am ready.

[I am ready]

Let the people say "Amen." *[Amen]*

May it be so.

Easter by the Rev. Angela Herrera

Jesus was a spirit person. An activist. A nonviolent leader, who organized others. He challenged the dehumanizing, oppressive structures of his time. He lived *as though*. As though there is another truth, besides the one dictated by culture. As though untouchable people are touchable. As though we can love others beyond our own tribes. As though people with disabilities have abilities. As though women are spiritual equals to men. As though the poor and the ill are deserving and holy. And as though death does not have the final say in our relationships with each other.

He was killed for it. He received the punishment reserved for the crime of sedition- for inspiring people to rebel against the state. In the scriptures, it says Jesus was crucified next to two thieves. But the Greek word translated in English as “thieves” is *lesti*, which means bandits. Bandit was the word for a rebel, not just your regular kind of thief.

Jesus was a rebel, executed next to other rebels—but he was a different kind. He was a spirit person. People were drawn to him. He had that clarity and that thing that—if we saw it today—we would call an old soul. He was impossibly courageous. He put his life on the line for what he knew to be good and true. And he was violently killed.

For his disciples and followers, it was an unbelievable, devastating turn of events. How would they make sense of the story they now found themselves in? What *was* the story?

One story that emerged over the twenty centuries that followed is the story of substitutionary atonement: the idea that Jesus died to save everyone else. In the gospels, people had sinned by losing sight of what was true and good. In government. In economics. In houses of worship. And they sinned by dehumanizing each other. By looking at people who were suffering, and instead of thinking, *those people are badly in need of help*, thinking *those people are bad*.

Maybe humans are prone to that, because these are timeless themes.

This week a paramilitary group held two hundred children and adults at gunpoint in the dark of night near the border right here in New Mexico. In the video they made and posted online, the frightened, weary families are on their knees blinking in the glare of the militia’s headlights. The woman narrating the video calls the families “an invasion.”

Instead of “*those people are badly in need of help*”

“*those people are bad.*”

Substitutionary atonement is the idea that God could not forgive humans for all of this, without some kind of violent payment in exchange. And that’s why Jesus died. I understand the way this might help make sense of what—to the disciples—must have seemed utterly senseless. And yet, that’s not the kind God Jesus seemed to be in

relationship with. The one who inspired him to say love your enemies. Feed the hungry. Blessed are the poor.

And what I know is that we become like what we worship. Worshipping a violent God who is pleased by suffering has led people to become violent, and inflict a lot of suffering.

And... that is very far away from some of Jesus' last words: "Today you will be with me in paradise." He said this to one of the men being killed alongside him.

Today you will be with me in paradise. Meaning with God. It does not sound like a place of violence.

In the days after he died, his disciples did not feel they were in paradise. In the Gospel of Luke, after he is resurrected, Jesus appears to two of them as they walk sadly along a road talking about his death.ⁱ They don't recognize him. They fill him in on the events of the week as though he were a stranger. "We had hoped" that Jesus would be the one to set our people free, they say. "We had hoped" are called the three saddest words in the scriptures.

Anyone who has experienced a great loss knows why. The loss of a loved one—and we've lost so many loved ones in our congregation recently— or the loss of a pregnancy or a planned adoption, or the loss of the thing that made us who we are—or so we thought—anyone who has been through this kind of dashing of hopes knows what "we had hoped" means. What it *really* means. How the process of grief and healing is its own kind of death and resurrection.

We are never ready for those things. And yet they happen to us all. Here in this room, there are more stories like that than I can count.

Marcus Borg writes that

...death and resurrection are an archetypal metaphor of transformation.
"Archetypal" means something so deeply imprinted in the human psyche that it seems to be from the beginning [of humankind]. Dying and rising is one of those archetypes, found in perhaps every religion and culture that we know about.ⁱⁱ

It's in every religion and culture because it is important for us to remember that we aren't alone when we grieve, and that while dark nights of the spirit are not something we would ever ask for, through them we may be transformed.

The liberal Presbyterian minister and writer, Frederick Buechner believes that "whether we recognize [Jesus] or not, or believe in him or not, or even know his name, again and again he comes and walks a little way with us along whatever road we're following."ⁱⁱⁱ Something happens to us then and we receive a new vision.

The thing about “We had hoped”—about dying and rising—is the way it reorients us. Softens our hearts. Awakens our compassion for others—as we realize how they too have hoped. Shifts our focus from things like being rich, to things like richly being. As in living authentically. With gratitude. Content with less because we know something about permanence and impermanence.

We learn more about the landscape the spirit, of love and relationships. *Where you go, I will go beloved. Where you go, I will go.*

In the resurrection story, we have a story of loss, despair, resurrection, and transformation. The meaning of Jesus is transformed when his disciples encounter him in a new, unrecognizable form, and discover that what they carry forward really is enough to sustain them.

What is paradise if not a place where what we have will sustain us? Where we learn to trust that winter is not the final season of our lives?

Easter is a story about faith in the love that holds all, through all of the seasons, and faith that—come what may— together, within and among us, we have all that we need.

ⁱ 24:21

ⁱⁱ Borg, Marcus. “The Real Meanings of the Cross.” Patheos. 29 Oct. 2013.

<www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/10/the-real-meanings-of-the-cross/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Buechner, Frederick. “The Secret in the Dark.” *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. HarperOne, 2007.