

Thought for Contemplation: “Love doesn’t change the world...But it changes the lover.”
--John Dufresne¹

Worship

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Sunday, September 30, 2018

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS Troy Moon (9 am)

CHALICE LIGHTING. Liam and Ethan Scott (9am)

To face the day’s shadows

A chalice of light

To face the day’s fears

A chalice of courage

To face the day’s angers

A chalice of peace

Let its light lift our spirits, recalling us to love.

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

CALL TO WORSHIP *We Are Called* by Natalie Fenimore

¹ John Dufresne, *Deep in the Shade of Paradise*

We are all called.

Called by the wind, the rushing water, the fireflies, the summer sun.

Called by the sidewalk, the playground, the laughing children, the street lights.

Called by our appetites and gifts-our needs and challenges.

Called by the bottle, the needle, the powder, the pill, the game, the bet, the need,

The want, the pain, the cure, the love, the hope, the dream.

Called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, and visions of god's purpose for our lives.

We are all called.

What do we choose? How do we answer?

In Voices from the Margins, Jacqui James and Mark D. Morrison-Reed, ed.

HYMN *Wake Now My Senses* #298

CHILDREN'S TIME Bob Moseley DRE

9amSong (seated) *Go Now in Peace* #413

(Children are invited to go now for a brief introduction to their program.)

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDIATION AND PRAYER

READING: *Let the Wrong Ones In* by Susan Ritchie reader: Miriam Congdon

We often speak of the mantle of leadership as involving an inheritance from the past. We sing that "what they dreamed be ours to do," and speak of torches given to our temporary care as they travel from the past to the

future. Yet in progressive religious tradition, this is especially challenging. Most of our personal identities and theologies would shock our religious ancestors. They did not dream us, unless in their worst nightmare. So who did? What legacy can be honestly invoked to sound an authentic note for progressive leadership?

Somewhere along the line someone left this tradition open for me. Someone invited me in, someone made the way for me even though there is no equivalent for me in our forbear' imagination. And when things have been bad, when I have been bad, this tradition has carried me around in my sorry little basket and given me over and over again the invitation to relationship, the invitation to be human, as human as I dare. When I am privileged to lead, I feel the power of this invitation behind me. But who issued it?

In the early days of American congregationalism, membership in the church was tightly controlled. The covenant of membership was restricted to the saints: those who were destined for heaven and who could prove it before a parsimonious clergy and a small number of pious church members. But many people in the pews refused this narrow view. When the minister preached about how the covenant- the very love of God and the love of the people-was reserved for the elect, the people heard something different. They heard the offer of covenant extended to all who desired its embrace. Eventually, this generosity led to a different church: a church with doors held open wide, our church. And it is in this spirit that I imagine speaking to our leaders, saying:

Remind us of how for all but five minutes of our history we have been the wrong people. Help us to identify, name, and invite all the wrong people who may, in fact, turn out to be right. Show us those who need our invitations to participate in a whole and holy humanity. May your leadership, (and our community) be one of radical hospitality and inclusion.

From *Bless the imperfect*, meditations for congregational leaders, edited by Kathleen Montgomery

OFFERING Share the plate: Welcoming the Stranger

READING: *by David Orr*

“The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane. And these qualities have little to do with success as our culture defined it.”

MUSICAL INTERLUDE (9am)

ANTHEM *Building Bridges*(11am)

SERMON

What's Church Really For?

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

My father came from a Lutheran background. He grew up in Germany during Hitler's rise to power. He refused to join Hitler Youth and consequently was not allowed to participate in many activities, including attending college preparatory high school. In 1939, just before Hitler's army marched on Poland, my father was able to leave Germany for the United States because his mother was an American citizen. He had no use for the church. As he told me, “The church could not do the only thing it was ever put there to do- to speak truth to power.” He'd watched it fold in the face of the Nazis. Except for the rare church wedding I do not think he ever stepped foot in a church in this country.

My mother was a second generation American. Her grandparents had come over to New York with the first great wave of Jewish immigration in the early 1880s. They were orthodox Jews, as were her parents. My mother was in high school during World War II. Rosie the Riveter was a poster icon, and women were out doing the business of the country while the men were off to war. My mother had aspirations of college and beyond. She had no interest in sitting behind the curtain with the women during Sabbath services, or being relegated to the tiny world of the home and kitchen. She raged and fought with her parents for the right to go to college. And when she finally left home, she left the synagogue too, angry at its constraint of women, and its apparent unconcern with their hopes and dreams.

As a result, I was raised what they used to call “unchurched.” We celebrated holidays in the home, Christmas, Chanukah, Passover, Easter. But organized religion got bad press in my house- it was, they thought for the small minded and unenlightened, it seemed.

When I was in high school, the Civil Rights Movement burst on the scene. It was the early sixties, and I got involved. The Civil Rights Movement was seeded and grounded in the Black church. I spent a lot of time in the Black church, as a result. And I was astonished. These people were not constricted or constrained by their church or their

faith- they were empowered by it. They were neither small minded nor unenlightened. These Bible stories were not the opiate of the people as I had been led to believe; they were part of a continuing saga of the human enterprise, and its striving for justice and freedom. And the Black church placed us right into that story and that struggle, with a role to play in the unfolding of a peaceable and just world, a story in which we were actors companioned by the ancestors who toiled in that same vineyard, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Isaiah, Amos, and Jesus, to name a few.

Much to my amazement, I realized that my parent's values, and the aspirations of justice with which I had been raised had not just fallen out of the sky, but had come from somewhere. They were rooted in the very Bible that my parents had nominally rejected. The visions of Isaiah and the peaceable kingdom, the idea that one day people would beat their swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:3-4) was a Biblical vision and aspiration. It was not merely political, it was deeply and enduringly, spiritual.

The call to be about the work of liberation which we had been taught as the lesson of Passover was not something my parents had made up. It was there, in the tradition. I came to the sobering thought that my parents had not left organized religion because they no longer

believed that stuff, which is what they had said, but actually, they left because they had believed it too much, and had been too deeply crushed and disappointed at its failures to live up to the vision. It was the gap that caused them to leave, not the dream and the enduring human story of struggle to get us there.

Maybe that has happened to you, or to people you have known. The vision is so compelling, and the longing so deep, that when the church stumbles, is avoidant, or complicit, it becomes painful. In those times, we can choose to leave, or we can choose to stay and try to right its course. How important is it, this church? What is church really for anyway?

Our mission statement says that we transform lives through the power of love. What does that mean? Does that mean we are always loving? Always on the side of love? Probably not. So, what does that statement mean? Is it just braggadocio? Foolishness? Or, is it deeper than we often know? Is it possibly that the transformation is not something that happens to us, as objects or persons acted upon, but rather that we are transformed when we remain committed in love to a people and a purpose, even when it is disappointingly off the mark? Is it maybe that we are transformed when we learn to love the imperfect, and thereby love the imperfect into a new way of being?

David Orr says”

“The plain fact is that the planet does not need more successful people. But it does desperately need more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind. It needs people who live well in their places. It needs people of moral courage willing to join the fight to make the world habitable and humane.”²

That sounds to me like church...like what church is for...for being the place in which peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers and lovers of every kind are seeded and nurtured, nourished in house, and sent out into the world. It’s in our mission statement: “We empower our members to share their gifts to build a world of compassion, equality, and freedom.” But we need to nurture them first, before we are equipped to effectively send folks out to share them.

And we are going to do it wrong. I don’t need a crystal ball to know that. I’m going to do it wrong. And you are going to do it wrong with me, some of the time. And some of the time, with holy grace and patience, and a generous helping of humor, we are going to get it right-

² David Orr, “What Is Education For?” in *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Project*.

or right enough that we are transformed, and the world, in modest increments, changes with us.

Susan Ritchie said,

Somewhere along the line someone left this tradition open for me. Someone invited me in, someone made the way for me even though there is no equivalent for me in our forbear' imagination. And when things have been bad, when I have been bad, this tradition has carried me around in my sorry little basket and given me over and over again the invitation to relationship, the invitation to be human, as human as I dare. When I am privileged to lead, I feel the power of this invitation behind me. ³

And that, my friends, is what church is for as well. To be invitational. To be the place of the open mind, yes, open heart, yes, and open doors as well- authentically open, being not just welcoming, but invitational. Hmmm.

Think about it. What if I were to say to you: *You are always welcome at my house.*

It might feel nice, right? Might.

³ Susan Ritchie, "Let the Wrong Ones In," from *Bless the Imperfect, meditations for congregational leaders*, edited by Kathleen Montgomery., Skinner House

But, what if I said to you, *I would love to have you over. Could you possibly come for coffee on Tuesday?*

That is really different. A passive commitment to welcome you if you happen to show up on my doorstep is not the same as an invitation to come on over, is it?

Someone invited me in, someone made the way for me even though there is no equivalent for me in our forbear' imagination. And when things have been bad, when I have been bad, this tradition has carried me around in my sorry little basket and given me over and over again the invitation to relationship, the invitation to be human, as human as I dare. When I am privileged to lead, I feel the power of this invitation behind me

The congregation that invited her in was transformed by their love of her. She was transformed by her love of them, and the world was made better, not just for her, and for them, but for us, here, years later, in space and time, as she went out into the world and carried her church and her faith with her. Isn't this what the church is really for?

My father thought the purpose of the church was to speak truth to power.

And surely it is.

My mother thought that the purpose of faith communities was to expand the horizons and encourage the exploration and growth of all the people in its embrace, loving them for who they are.

And surely it is.

Susan Ritchie thought the purpose of church was to invite in the sad, the lost, the misguided and the lonely and love them into being their best selves.

And surely it is.

At Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church, we are growing a community that transforms lives through the power of love.⁴

Surely, we are, or at least we are working on it. For we are called to be the lovers, transformed by our love.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be.

Moment of Silence

CLOSING HYMN Love Will Guide Us #131

BENEDICTION

Extinguish the chalice

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)

⁴ Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church, mission statement.