

Thought for Contemplation: “People wish to be settled - only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.” -Ralph Waldo Emerson

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

January 5, 2020

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 9:00 & 11:00 am

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this chalice, as the year turns,
And we turn with it, looking backwards and forwards.
Back with gratitude for those who came before,
Protecting this flame of love, and peace with justice.
Back with forgiveness to ourselves and our forbearers,
For the times we did not see or hear,
for the times we were afraid and did not act.
And we look forward.
Guarding our faith, keeping this chalice burning.
The flame of tomorrow
That those who come after, might inherit a more caring
world
That we have loved into being.

Anita Farber-Robertson

INTROIT *Turn the World Around*

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us be called to worship,

We who are joyful and full of hope

We who sorrow and come with heavy hearts

We who are fearful and need the company of others to gather
courage

We who are triumphant and wish to share successes

We who manage to live, day by day, ordinary lives that challenge
and reward in ways great and small.

We who gather here this morning in this place of memory and
hope

Let us be called to worship.

-Anita Farber-Robertson

HYMN *We Three Kings of Orient Are* #259

SHARING OUR JOURNEYS: Suzanne Federer

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

READING: *One Art* by Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster.

OFFERING

READING: Gospel of Matthew 2:1-15a

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was

to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod.

ANTHEM *Return Again*

SERMON

Every ‘Yes’ is a ‘No’

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Well, Good Morning! All of you who are here. All of you who decided to be here and therefore decided not to be somewhere else. Good morning! Thank you-on behalf of myself, and all the others who are here, who decided to be here, with you, and not somewhere else, not with someone else, but with you. Not that it was a decision against the someone else. I have no reason to think it was anything but a positive decision to be here, in church, in community, to be a part, connecting, even belonging.

Welcome, and thank you. Because I know you could have said 'yes' to other things...staying in bed; going for a walk; watching TV; visiting friends; going out for brunch, just to name some possibilities. And you said 'no' to all of those, so that you could say 'yes' to being here. It's kind of a thrill, a little startling- to realize that you did that for us, to be with us. But that's what it took-of every one of you sitting here. Because in truth, every 'yes' is a 'no.' We might not like it, but it is true.

If you go into the ice cream store offering 27 varieties of ice cream, and you choose one, you are saying 'no' to all of the others. Ouch! Sometimes, to ease the pain of it, we get two scoops, so we can have two choices. Am I right? But we have still said 'no' to the 25 flavors left behind. The freedom of choice is delightful, and it comes with a price – you pick something and say 'no' to all the others. In some things, simple or silly. In others, serious or sobering.

When the Interim Minister Search Committee chose me to be your Interim Minister, they had to say 'no' to all of the others who were interested in serving here, and that may have been hard...but was

necessary. And I had to say 'no' to the other Search Committees, in order to say 'yes' to A2U2. Your Settled Minister Search Committee is starting to get names of ministers who are interested in serving here, in being your minister. It will be exciting for them, maybe a little overwhelming. And they will start conversations with many of those ministers. Some of them will be really nice people, engaging in interesting conversations, but who may not fit the profile of what you want in your next minister. Your Search Committee will have the job of saying 'no' to some really fine people that they like a lot, but who do not seem right for here, for now. Have compassion for them. It's a hard job.

But this truth, that every 'yes' is a 'no,' is a demand on all of us. When we choose a spouse, we say 'no' to all of the other people out there in the world who might have been our spouse. But we don't usually dwell on that. We decided to choose that one specific person, and thereby decided to refuse all the others.

When we decide to raise children, we say 'no' to being childless, footloose and fancy free. When we decide not to raise children, we say 'no' to having the privilege and responsibility of shaping the generations yet to come. Every 'yes' is a 'no.' And it goes on and on. As our days continue, the number of options to which we said 'no' increases exponentially, as we make choices about our direction and what it means to go forward. Every single 'yes' is most likely many 'no's.'

I remember, shortly before my wedding day, as I sat in the kitchen with my mother, at the tender age of 18, the strangest thought came floating through my head, about my upcoming marriage. "Now I will never be able to be Miss America."

Silly. But true, that that silly thought came into my head. Not that I had *ever* entertained the idea of becoming Miss America. I'd always thought the whole thing rather silly, if not downright offensive. But the weight of all the things that would no longer be options for me, because I would be a married woman, registered fully in that moment, expressed in that one silly and frivolous thought. I understood, in that moment, that in addition to saying 'yes,' I had said a thousand 'no's.' Sobering.

Studies show that we are more afraid of losing things, than we are motivated by possible gains. Even when it is a really good bet, we are more likely to choose the least risky option. The old proverb, "The devil that you know is better than the devil that you don't," is still what usually drives us- maybe even more true in these days of heightened insecurity. It explains why we stay in jobs that are unsatisfying or live in areas that do not support us well. The poet says that "the art of losing isn't hard to master."¹ But she goes on to acknowledge that it does look, to her, and us, like disaster. All of which creates an anxious desire to compulsively keep all of our options open.

I suspect that is the reason why many of you say 'no' to the simple, important and enjoyable job of ushering. It's not that you don't like ushering. It is fun. You get to socialize with people, read their nametags and learn their names, you can laugh with someone while you fold orders of service together. And the truth be told, when some of you said 'yes' to ushering today, January 5, you agreed to say 'no' to sleeping in, or going out for brunch, or taking your kids or grandkids sledding, or just staying home in your robe and slippers. When you are asked to usher, or greet or even teach Religious Education, what may first come to mind is all of the 'no's' you'd be saying in that one simple

¹ Elizabeth Bishop, *One Art*

‘yes.’ What you may forget, is all that you are losing by saying the ‘no,’ for you have closed the door on that option, which might have been just the one you needed.

When the wise men heard of the birth of a baby who was to be a savior, they said ‘yes,’ and turning down all of the other demands in their lives, went straight to Jerusalem to speak with the king and tell him of this great news, which, it turns out, he did not receive as great news at all. He sent them to greet the child, and to then return to him, and tell him exactly where the baby lay. They were determined to find the child, but to whom was their ‘yes’ committed? And to whom, their ‘no’? They had to choose. Say ‘yes’ to their God and their conscience, or ‘yes’ to their king? Each ‘yes,’ came with a ‘no’ or many ‘no’s. Each ‘yes’ came with risks. Who to serve, God or country, conscience or government?

Unfortunately, it is not an old story, even though it happened 2000 years ago. These three wise ones chose to say ‘yes’ to the moral/spiritual demand, and ‘no’ to the secular/political command. They found the baby, paid him homage, but never suggested to his parents that Herod wanted to see them. By withholding the desire of the king, which they had been instructed to convey, they protected the vulnerable family, who they knew were in danger. Whistleblowers of sorts, they unmasked the sinister side of the king, and paid a price. In saying ‘yes’ to that moral demand, they had said ‘no’ to ever going back through the land that they knew, of ever returning to ordinary lives.

These three opened the door to changing the world, but at great personal cost. They lost their own individual safety, comfort, and a predictable future, as we have seen in our own day happen to many who have testified against the powerful in ways large and small.

But in this case, *we*, with the clarity of hindsight, know their story, their choice and their sacrifice and why it mattered. As they rode off into the night on an unfamiliar road, they had given us the world with a new hope for love with justice.

The poet says:

-Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like ...like disaster.²

What are the heroic, or simply wise decisions we face to which the answer 'yes,' is imperative, profound, or simply right? What 'yes's' shall we muster, despite the 'no's' they will require...the loss of options?

"... the art of losing's not too hard to master though it may look like disaster."

The world needs courage now, and faith. It needs wise people, more than three, to speak the truth and set us free. It needs those things, of you and me.

Amen. And blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN *The Fire of Commitment* #1028

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)

² Ibid

