

Whole Wheat Faith

Delivered by Rev. Sadie Lansdale at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro
March 3, 2019

Pastoral Prayer

Spirit of Life, God of many names, our hearts are with our Methodist kindred this week, particularly the queer Methodists, against whom the General Session has just voted. The church faces schism and our precious human family faces violation and harm from a place that ought to heal and hold. Our hearts break for all those whom the church has harmed, all those whom any religion, including our own has harmed. We do not come here to point the finger at other people and look away from our own failures.

So I will start, and I offer my prayer of confession before you today -

It is heavy with me - what I have done and what I have left undone.

I have been silent when I should have shown courage.
I have been timid when I should have been bold.
I have been comfortable when I should have been enraged
Because of the harm caused to my neighbor.
I have believed the lie that I am worth more or worth less than another.

If you are so moved, you can pray this prayer with me:

I have been silent when I should have shown courage.
I have been timid when I should have been bold.
I have been comfortable when I should have been enraged
Because of the harm caused to my neighbor.
I have believed the lies
that I am worth more or worth less than another.

Spirit of life, we turn over the stones of our hearts once again, asking that love make its way to us, and to all those in need.

Amen.

Reading

“Of The Empire,” by Mary Oliver

We will be known as a culture that feared death and adored power, that tried to vanquish insecurity for the few and cared little for the penury of the many. We will be known as a culture that taught and rewarded the amassing of things, that spoke little if at all about the quality of life for people (other people), for dogs, for rivers. All the world, in our eyes, they will say, was a commodity. And they will say that this structure was held together politically, which it was, and they will say also that our politics was no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, and that the heart, in those days, was small, and hard, and full of meanness.

Sermon

I have a friend who was in a very serious motorcycle accident a decade ago, who recently wrote this about it:

“Ten years ago tonight, on the other side of the world, I almost lost my life. Many days into a journey by motorcycle from New Delhi toward Hyderabad, many months into a long, long trip, our bike crashed late one night on an empty road. That night, [my companion] went to great lengths to save my life. My head trauma was severe: We crashed on December 16th, and I don't have any memory until after that Christmas. Doctors in India and in the US told me I was very lucky to survive. In India, they insisted that this date was now my second birthday.

I'm not entirely sure why I've chosen to observe this anniversary publicly, or why anyone brings their most traumatic experiences to Facebook. To remember it intentionally; to face it fully; to share a part of one's life that's usually not very public? Maybe it's all of those. But today one reason stands out.

Largely unrelated to the accident (somehow), the past 10 years haven't been easy. But nonetheless, as each day passes, I am so continuously overcome with something beautiful, some courage, some light that pours into my life and makes me so intensely grateful for still being here that I can hardly contain it.

Whenever I'm so in love with the world, which I am at this moment, I feel that whenever Death does stop for me in his carriage, it will be too soon. Age 19 certainly would have been. But as we ride away when that times comes I know we'll be traveling along those endless miles inside the human heart, far more miles than there are from here to Hyderabad and all the way around back again, and I'll know that by then, wherever I've gone, wherever I've been, somehow, those were always the only miles that mattered. And if I turn around in that carriage to look back on the evidence of having ever lived, a quilt of my life will be stretched out behind us, my memories

embroidered by the ricketing carriage wheels like so many fallen leaves, and anyone reading this now will be visible within it, and even now my heart is filled to the brim with all of you because of it.”

That’s his testimony, his story about a brush with death, and I know you may have your own. For many of us, brushes with death are clarifying, though they may be traumatizing too. They help us to see what is really important, they help us to shed our pretenses and face the truth of our lives, to pay attention. My friend was strengthened by his brush with death - more in touch with what is holy, overwhelmed with a gratitude for living that all of us owe and few of us remember.

Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return - so goes the refrain on Ash Wednesday, which begins the Christian season of Lent. For those keeping track at home that is this coming Wednesday.

I came to appreciate the disciplines of Lent when I was a chaplain in seminary. Ash Wednesday begins with the command to reckon with mortality and to do something different with your life. A piece of the old liturgy says: “Remember that you are dust and unto dust you shall return. Repent, and sin no more.” So the first part is: remember that life doesn’t last forever, and the second part says: so what are you going to do about it?

I administered ashes as a chaplain with the Fire Department, and as a chaplain in the hospital. I raised my hand, I rubbed the ashes and the oil on my thumb, I said to sick people, grieving people, heartbroken people, traumatized people, dying people: remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return. It is no accident that many of us experience brushes with death and find ourselves more in love with life and more profoundly connected to the world around us - those who face serious illness, those who suffer accidents, those whose work brings us daily in touch with the realities of human frailty and death.

Many people misunderstand Lent to be about a practice of individual moral purity. In fact, many people misunderstand *religion itself* to be about a practice of individual moral purity! Giving up chocolate or social media or alcohol, feeling guilty when you give into temptation, sort of a new years resolution reboot. I wonder how many of you have experienced Lent in this way in your religious pasts, as primarily a test of will and innate goodness, rather than a discipline that brings you closer to the heart of things.

A focus on personal purity makes people eminently controllable, and *being controllable is not my understanding of my obligation as a religious person*. It goes something like this: we become so consumed with our own personal choices, personal purity, or our neighbors’ personal purity, personal salvation, personal beliefs, we forget to work together, we forget collective might, we are willing servants of a status quo that concentrates power in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

My friend Matt Meyer, a leader in the UU Musicians Network and a founder of several UU living cooperatives in Massachusetts, reminds us about the “litterbug campaign” of the 1950s.

Matt says; “with the rise of plastics, some states looked at passing legislation to ban single-use

containers. Pepsi, Coke, Phillip Morris, and others came together to form a lobbying group called "Keep America Beautiful."

They coined the term 'litterbug.' *They* shifted the responsibility for pollution from corporate producers to individual consumers and our environment and humanity have suffered the consequences ever since.

It's time to shift responsibility back to the source. Systemic problems require systemic solutions." A focus on internal purity, an obsession with individuality, leaves us controllable, easily manipulated, and subject to the rule and profit of the few and the greedy.

You, in your house, by yourself, can compost all you want while the floodwaters rage and the energy companies profit while the people cough and drown. Personal purity does not save us. And that is something of a relief, I imagine, when we reflect on Integrity, which is our theme for this month. Because when the preacher says "integrity" in a booming voice with a meaningful glare, the congregation may wither and squirm. Integrity, in our common usage, is sort of a scary word for many of us, if we're honest. If we're peering in to our heart of hearts and shuddering with fear at the things we sometimes find there - sometimes small, and fearful, and mean. But a lot of us, when we think of integrity, are actually worrying about purity. We're worrying about getting it right all the time, about being "good," about keeping our resolutions.

It may interest you to know that integrity has its roots in the word for wholeness. In Italian, the word for whole wheat flour is "farina integrale." In Spanish, the same - harina de trigo integral. Flour with integrity. Wholeness. All the rough stuff, all the grainy-ness and the nutrients. That's interesting, no?

The Gospel according to wikipedia says - "In contrast to **whole grains**, **refined grains** are milled, a process that strips out both the bran **and** germ to give them a finer texture **and** longer shelf life. The refining process also removes many nutrients, including fiber." And I, frankly, feel a little called out by that.

The purifying process - the processing of wheat and the refining of it - removes the nutrients so that the texture is finer, smoother, and the bread stays okay longer on the shelf. But it cannot give life. That's why mold doesn't grow on the processed bread on the shelf for a while - because the stuff that gives life has been stripped. This is what a focus on purity does to us.

There are ways that we so process and strip the grain at the core of our faith that it no longer gives life. We do that when we make our principles about me, about you, about individuals and individuality at the expense of a collective reckoning.

We have the tendency to move from "human beings are beloved" - the world-altering proclamation at the center of our Universalist heritage - to "people are good, which means we are good, which means I am good, which means I am off the hook."

We slip from a commitment to co-creating a world that honors the worth and dignity of every person to thinking it means we should all get along while our neighbors go hungry, or go to jail.

We slip from the powerful, foundation-shaking proclamation from our Unitarian forebears that you interpret the divine for yourself without mediation from any authority - to silliness about our inability to agree on anything.

There is so much power in us, in our congregations, we could be such a force for liberation, but we are so obsessed with our own navels we may yet render ourselves completely irrelevant. Trying so hard to get it exactly right among one another that we forget there's a world.

My despair about us - not you - but us as a faith tradition, and liberal religion in general, is with the ways we try to purify the messy heart of our faith - which is a commitment to applying our seven principles to the full range of human experience. Are you with me? Do you see how we cheapen our faith by trying to make it last longer on the shelf? Inherent worth means I can act however I want, the democratic process means my opinion had better be heard or else, respect the interdependent web of creation is primarily about my purchases.

Because faith is not meant to sit on the shelf. It is meant to be eaten every day, wrestled with every day - the ancient Christian prayer says, after all, give us this day our daily _____ (bread). Faith gives life, and is meant to be ingested daily. Whole wheat faith. Complicated faith. Messy faith. A faith that reckons with the moral complexity of the world and has space for the sorrows which that complexity produces. No simple answers.

And this brings us back to Lent. You might see a UU Lent photo series floating around - where you are supposed to notice the world and take a picture corresponding to a word. This discipline is not so much a newfangled Unitarian Universalist reinterpretation of Lent - it's right in line with the traditional practices of prayer and fasting, removing distraction, paying attention, and trying to get closer to God, closer to the heart of things, closer to the truth, closer to what Parker Palmer calls the "hidden wholeness" at the center of everything.

The poet says our society is no more than an apparatus to accommodate the feelings of the heart, but what if our hearts were open, and grateful, what if they were connected and nourished, what if there was room for the messiness of living in our search for a whole and disciplined life - a life of integrity - what if they came to say about us that the heart, in those days, was not small and full of meanness, but overflowing with gratitude and connection and purpose because we knew that we were dust and unto dust we would return, and we did our best to reckon with it.

This is a little close to home for some of us right now, this reckoning with mortality business. Any of us who have had recent or ongoing health scares, any of us with fresh grief. And yet, this is part of the heart of living. So can you make some time, between, say, now and Easter, or now until the day Death stops for you in his carriage, to reflect on your own mortality, and to let it bring you closer to the hidden wholeness all around us?

What if that, too, is a part living with integrity? Not shame and self-punishment, not guilt and self-denial, not a ledger where all of our sins are marked down in red ink, but a practice of reflecting on the experiences we choose and those we do not choose to find the ways we are called into gratitude, and to a greater wholeness. Because when we are closer to what is holy, what is life-giving, our individual and collective choices are laid out before us like the journey to

Hyderabad - toward love for ourselves and for our neighbors, toward gratitude, toward curiosity, toward liberation for all people.

Can you find a practice or a discipline that strengthens you, not in escaping the sorrows of the world but in falling more in love with the world, sorrows and all?

Because if we lived like that all the time, then we would remember our belovedness and be strengthened to wrestle with the rightness or wrongness of our collective actions.

Because if we lived like that all the time, then we would be assured of our own worth and dignity and we could enter into the struggle about strategy and collective decision-making together with some humility.

Because if we lived like that all the time, then we would know that our connections to the divine are unmediated and inalienable, and we would understand that other people's are too, and we would work together without competition or pettiness to bring about the world we long for.

May this life of integrity be so for you and so for us all. Amen.