

Lenten Sermon Series 2 Two Women and the Tribe

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

March 7, 2010

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INVOCATION

We give thanks for this day, and its beauty and promise.

We give thanks for the light returning from darkness.

We give thanks for the blessings of family, friends, and the company of companions.

We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.

We give thanks for a day we did not create, and the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.

We give thanks for having been given trust and love, to give trust and love back to the world, and from the gift of this day, build a greater life for all souls.

CHALICE LIGHTING

We light this Chalice to remember a truth,

Consecrated through the ages by the service and sacrifice

Of individuals and communities:

There abides a unity and freedom of the Spirit,

Expressed through a love for all souls.

Readings

Book: "Two Old Women: an Laska legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival," by Velma Wallis

Abandoned by their tribe during a brutal winter famine, two old women are left to perish on their own. Although they've grown used to complaining and letting others do for them, the two resolve not to wait passively for death but to fight against it. With trapping skills they haven't used for years and strengthened by their bond of friendship, the two women survive the winter, ultimately to come face to face with the members of their tribe, none of whom has fared as well as they have. How will the two women, betrayed by The People, engage them when The People find the old women alive and thriving, and The People are struggling to survive? Can forgiveness ever occur, and can trust between individuals and a group ever be rebuilt?

Brent: What I have tried to accomplish in my time with you as your Minister includes teaching about the spiritual life, and more specifically, how to read the world through the lens of spirituality. There are issues that are spiritual, residing inside of our everyday acts and events, and to see them requires learning how to understand the spiritual qualities in everyday experiences. As a child is born with the capacity to read,

*but must be taught to gain the ability, we are born as human beings with the capacity to “read” our world spiritually - that is, to make meaning from our existence – but must be taught to gain the ability. When you read a book, if you use it as practice on reading the world spiritually, your practice can reap untold rewards when you begin to consider the spiritual depth of your own life. The readings this morning are excerpts from the book, *Two Women*, with a preface concerning the spiritual issue involved:*

Sometimes, though not all times, we use the phrase “God’s Will” as justification for giving up, for not seeing human contribution as integral to the unfolding of creation, which is the error of predestination: *“Perhaps it was not meant for them to go on [thought the two old women]. Perhaps the young ones were right – they were fighting the inevitable. It would be easy for them to snuggle deeper into the warmth of their fur clothing and fall asleep. They would not have to prove anything to anyone anymore. Perhaps the sleep they feared would not be so bad after all. At least it would not be as bad as [the cold and struggle for food that threatened to engulf them.]”*

Helplessness is more than poor self-image. It is the inability and unwillingness of the self to accept the responsibility and opportunity of being created in a divine image: *“We are like babies [said the two old women thinking of the banishment and exile The People forced upon them]. We are like helpless babies. We have learned much during our long lives. Yet there we were in our old age [before we were left behind], thinking that we had done our share in life. So we stopped, just like that. No more working like we used to, even though our bodies are still healthy enough to do a little more than we expect of ourselves.’ [There came upon both of them the sudden revelation as to why the younger ones thought it best to leave them behind.] ‘Two old women. They complain, never satisfied. We talked of no food, and of how good it was in our days when it really was no better. We think we are so old. Now, because we have spent so many years convincing the younger people that we are helpless, they believe that we are no longer of use to this world.’”*

We are created for moral discernment and have the mental ability to seek to understand the subtle differences in situations, so as to exercise our discernment to choose justice when it needs be chosen: *Both old women remembered times when they were young and older ones were left behind. “... we experienced our worst winter [one of the Old Women said remembering long ago when she was a little girl]. Even babies died, and grown men began to panic, for as hard as they tried they could not find enough animals to eat. There was an old woman in our group who had to be carried, who was blind and feeble and could not in any way care for herself. The chief did not want this burden, so he told everyone that we would leave her behind. No one argued except me. I was shocked and furious. I felt that The People were being lazy and were not thinking clearly. It was my job to talk some sense into them. I asked the men if they thought they were no better than the wolves who would shun their old and weak. The action was wrong, and I meant to make it right. [The chief made me stay with the old woman as The People moved on.] After they left I was not so brave. [There was not enough animals to catch and eat.] The woman died that winter. Then I was alone. I talked to myself all the*

time. Who else was there? Then I realized the importance of being with a large group. The body needs food, but the mind needs people.”

When a group errors, it is not like when an individual errors, for a group’s mistake can involves morale and trust in itself and what is the aim and purpose of covenanting together: “[Upon reflection the chief held that all he] *knew for sure was that in hard times The People should hold together, and last winter they had not done so. They had inflicted an injustice on themselves and the two old women, and he knew that The People had suffered silently since that day. Finding the women alive would give The People a second chance and that, perhaps, was what he hoped for most.*”

Prayer

**OH GREAT SPIRIT WHOSE VOICE I HEAR IN THE WINDS.
CHIEF YELLOW LARK, LAKOTA**

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds.
And whose breath gives life to all the world.
Hear me! I am small and weak.
I need your strength and wisdom.
Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes
Ever hold the red and purple sunset.
Make my hands respect the things you have made.
My ears sharp to hear your voice.
Make me wise so that I may understand
The things you might teach me.
Let me learn the lessons you have hidden
In every leaf and rock.
I seek strength, not to be greater than my brother.
But to fight my greatest enemy, myself.
Make me always ready to come to you
With clear hands and straight eyes.
So when life fades, as the fading sunset.
My spirit may come to you without shame.

Sermon

I have news. I was offered and have accepted a position on the faculty of GVSU to help create a Religious Studies major. This means I will still be living here and that poses a peculiar problem for me and you, as a group, a congregation, a People.

The other liberal church in town, independent Fountain Street Church, did not address this peculiar problem when it arose there in 1980, and has suffered ever since because of this neglect. The peculiar problem concerns the concept of the individual and the group; in this instance the former minister and the congregation. We will make choices that will influence the future health of this “tribe.”

My unique relationship to the congregation could easily weaken the “tribe” if you and I don’t recognize and respond positively to the change. I can promise you I will endeavor to aim my choices at the health and long term maintenance of the congregation, the People, even though it may offend particular individuals at particular times under particular circumstances. I can tell you Pat and I will continue to support the congregation financially, and hope the 90% of the congregation who give less money than we do will step up and surpass us as you should. Your FORMER minister should not be one of your largest pledgers to the church, and Pat and I are not going to change all that much. But, you need to change with the change in our relationship. For, as two characters in a story, Brent and All Souls, our relationship has changed.

Which brings us to the story of *Two Women*, by Velma Wallis. The book contains two main characters, one whose life the author follows in detail while the other is camouflaged for most of the book. The first character is the two old women, a literary device called the doppelganger, the “twin,” two characters who together make up one character. The second character in the story is the Tribe, the People, the congregation. The book is about many things, including their relationship throughout changing circumstances.

The People are facing starvation during a particularly brutal winter and decide that two old women must be cut loose for the group’s survival. The two women have in their elder years withdrawn their contribution to the life of the People, settling for complaining and criticizing and living off of what others provide. So, they are left behind.

The story follows the women as they struggle to survive, now required to do the things that previously they let others do for them. They survive and thrive, and at the end of their second winter are found by the People who have fared poorly. What will happen between the two characters, the Women and the People?

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The area of the country we live in has a peculiar, and unhealthy, concept of the relationship between the individual and the group. It can be traced to two trends from the 20th century: The growing influence of Calvinism, and the withdrawing and declining influence of liberal religion. Most hold the illusion that Dutch Calvinists held this land from the beginning. Most also hold the illusion that liberal religion has always been the tiniest of minorities in the area. Both are illusions. There were 10 times the religious liberals a century ago than there are today!

Thus, the 20th century saw the rise of Calvinism to prominence in terms of shaping the concept of society and social relationships, and the withdrawal and decline of liberal religion in the same arena. This has had devastating effects of the concept of the relationship between the individual and the group for all.

Calvinism's view of the relationship of the individual to the group is deeply flawed, though other parts of that faith tradition are admirable. It contributes to the generalized feeling in this area that there is an "in" and "out" group, and that which groups accept you is crucial to your concept of self-worth. There is a desperation about the pervading question of one's acceptability which borders on psychosis.

The evidence is striking. One member of this church lamented how she cannot talk freely with people at work about deep issues of meaning in her life without being judged by the company itself for the different way she believes. When I arrived to be minister at Fountain Street Church it refused to print a membership directory because so many feared to be open about their affiliation! Many individuals confess to me their struggles to be worthy of the approval of others through joining groups and causes others approve of.

This is about the concept of the individual and the group. In Calvinism the individual may be worthy if he or she belongs to the rightly believing church. But even then the individual never knows whether he or she is worthy in God's eyes, because God has determined who is and who isn't worthy long before any human beings were born; the Doctrine of the Elect. This produces a deep-seated, double anxiety: *Am I accepted by the right group?* And, deeper still, *Am I worthy to God?* It produces neuroses that permeate everything. It's visibly on display, as our town has an abundance of buildings with the names of individuals and families on it, so deep is this desperation to be accepted by others and shown to be worthy to God.

And sadly, it produces in individuals not only a suspicion of groups, but groups who cloth injustice in the garment of virtue by losing their sense of spiritual mission, consumed by a drive to survive as having been deemed worthy by others.

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In *Two Women* it takes a while before the *Two Women* realize their complicity in creating the group's opinion they are unworthy!

"We are like babies [said the two old women thinking of the banishment and exile The People forced upon them]. We are like helpless babies. We have learned much during our long lives. Yet there we were in our old age, thinking that we had done our share in life. So we stopped, just like that. No more working like we used to, even though our bodies are still healthy enough to do a little more than we expect of ourselves.' [There came upon both of them the sudden revelation as to why the younger ones thought it best to leave them behind.] *'Two old women. They complain, never satisfied. We talked of no food, and of how good it was in our days when it really was no better. We think we are so old. Now, because we have spent so many years convincing the younger people that we are helpless, they believe that we are no longer of use to this world.'*"

The Women were taken to be unworthy by the People because long before the People banished them, they had withdrawn from an active life within the larger whole.

They had deemed themselves unworthy and only worthy as objects to be taken care of and accommodated. They made themselves captive of their own helplessness and powerlessness, to which the People obliged by deeming them unworthy.

When individuals deem themselves helpless and powerless when they are not, then the group's capacity to choose the path of love becomes so deeply flawed as to dress injustice in virtue. One of the Women remembers when as a young girl she witnessed the People banishing an aging elder who truly needed the help only a group could provide. This inability to exercise moral discernment occurs when those with power think they are not powerful, and those who can help think they are helpless. Groups lose their aim and purpose, worshipping the group's survival at the cost of injustice:.

Both old women remembered times when they were young and older ones were left behind. "... we experienced our worst winter [one of the Old Women said remembering long ago when she was a girl]. Even babies died, and grown men began to panic, for as hard as they tried they could not find enough animals to eat. There was an old woman in our group who had to be carried, who was blind and feeble and could not in any way care for herself. The chief did not want this burden, so he told everyone that we would leave her behind. No one argued except me. I was shocked and furious. I felt that The People were being lazy and were not thinking clearly. It was my job to talk some sense into them. I asked the men if they thought they were no better than the wolves who would shun their old and weak. The action was wrong, and I meant to make it right. [The chief made me stay with the old woman as The People moved on.] After they left I was not so brave. [There was not enough animals to catch and eat.] The woman died that winter. Then I was alone. I talked to myself all the time. Who else was there? Then I realized the importance of being with a large group. The body needs food, but the mind needs people."

When individuals do not rightly conceive of themselves as made in a divine image, and therefore all souls are made in a divine image, then when others really need help no group will give them the aid they need. Groups need be formed for purposes larger than their own survival. Groups need be formed to invigorate and liberate the moral capacities within human beings; otherwise, when times are hard they will become like wolves and devour those whom they do not deem worthy of surviving.

Without individuals who know all souls are created in a divine image, without groups serving something larger than their own survival, without a spiritual reading of what we are called to do and become spiritual things are not possible. Forgiveness, trust, freedom, and love! But when individuals form groups under the recognition of humanity's divine likeness, and groups aim their activity towards the liberation of fear and an affection for all souls, things can, like spring, become new again.

"[Upon reflection the chief held that all he] knew for sure was that in hard times The People should hold together, and last winter they had not done so. They had inflicted an injustice on themselves and the two old women, and he knew that The People

had suffered silently since that day. Finding the women alive would give The People a second chance and that, perhaps, was what he hoped for most.”

So the Chief sent out a Guide to search for the Women. The Guide found the Two Old Women, who had survived and had secured such a large abundance of food that the whole tribe could be fed until spring when new life came. But, is forgiveness possible, is a new day possible, or is all just predestined to be what we call “God’s Will,” that there are some who are Elect and others who are destined to unworthiness and annihilation? Can our active lives, like our withdrawing, shape how creation unfolds?

“[The People] are starving [the Guide said to the Two Old Women] and are in the same shape as when we left you. But when the chief hears you are well, he will ask you to come back to our group. The chief and most of The People feel as I do. We are sorry for what was done to you.’ One of the women responded, ‘So you may leave us alone once more just when we need you the most?’ The Guide replied, ‘I cannot say that it will not happen again. In hard times, some grow meaner than wolves, and others grow sacred and weak, like I did when you were left behind. I can tell you one thing right now. If it ever does happen again, I will protect you with my own life as long as I live.’”

As an individual I have had a role in this group which is coming to an end. I am not being exiled and you are not banishing me, but you will grow and change as will I. It’s the way of life. We will establish what will serve the health of the People, the congregation. And though our relationship will change, there are some things that are certain. The People of West Michigan are starving for a freedom that is spiritual and a love that is broad. The quality of life here will be shaped by whether you, as a presence for liberal religion, exile yourself from the life of Grand Rapids by focusing on your survival and offering no hope of spiritual health to the many, old and young who yearn for it. Or, whether you take the steps necessary to offer your spiritual abundance to those many who stand in need of it. There are some things that are certain even though winter changes to spring. The spiritual health you offer is about individuals being free of fear, realizing they are already worthy in a Divine Love, and are part of the Divine image in which all souls are created. And, the People out there hunger and thirst.

AMEN.