

**LAST SERMON SERIES PART 2: IF NOT ABOUT ME, THEN WHOM OR
WHAT?**

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

June 13, 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 to God for having been given love, to give 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.

READING

The Layers, Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
 out of my true affections,
 and my tribe is scattered!
 How shall the heart be reconciled
 to its feast of losses?
 In a rising wind
 the manic dust of my friends,
 those who fell along the way,
 bitterly stings my face.
 Yet I turn, I turn,
 exulting somewhat,
 with my will intact to go
 wherever I need to go,
 and every stone on the road
 precious to me.
 In my darkest night,
 when the moon was covered
 and I roamed through wreckage,
 a nimbus-clouded voice
 directed me:
 "Live in the layers,
 not on the litter."
 Though I lack the art
 to decipher it,
 no doubt the next chapter
 in my book of transformations
 is already written.
 I am not done with my changes.

Exodus 22:21

Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.

-New International Version (©1984)

You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.

-New Living Translation (©2007)

You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

-English Standard Version (©2001)

Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

-King James Bible

Prayer [from Jenkin Lloyd Jones]

O Thou infinite energy that swings the planets and keeps them in their courses and brings the flowers in their season, give us of Thine own strength, renew our courage

and direct our energies along the paths that lead to the triumph of the spirit, the dominion of the mind.

We pray for that freedom that truth alone gives, freedom from the blindness of prejudice, freedom from the corruption of hate, freedom from the withering blight of pride. Give us that freedom, that seeks the truth, that brings to us a sense of our ignorance, that realizes how far short we fall of the life we might lead, that opens up to us the paths of righteousness and peace. Make us free with the freedom of the open mind, the freedom of the tender heart, the freedom of the willing hand.

We ask not for escape from the turmoil and trials of the world; but we ask that we may be enabled to carry our burdens in such a way as will approve itself to the strains of conscience, to the God of history, to the liberty of the soul proclaimed by prophets, that the community of free spirits might come here on earth, in our homes, in our nation, in Thy world.

AMEN.

Sermon

I have a fear I have to work out. Early in my 26 years as a minister I discovered that sermon writing during the week and preaching on Sunday morning was my spiritual practice. It is an informal discipline, not like morning meditation or evening prayers, or like yoga or running, all of which can be a personal spiritual practice. But, sermon writing and preaching structures my day, week, month, and year, and my fear is that as I move out of parish ministry and into university life I will not find and create something that has equal depth and meaning.

To me the spiritual life has particular qualities. Its aim is for transcendence, to lift the self out of its narrow but intense self-interest and into deeper concerns and wider sympathies. It is founded upon rigorous self-critique that pinpoints the illusions and distortions that the self reveres as true. It reaches towards self-knowledge as a means to understand self, others, and those sources of strength that transcend both. My sermon writing and preaching has always involved connecting with others during the course of the week, and all of my encounters in any given week have become conscious and unconscious food for the Spirit. This is what I have tried to develop.

You can see how it dovetails so well with our faith tradition, as our public worship has the same kind of quality to it. It is aimed towards an intense self-scrutiny in order to serve large, transcendent purposes.

So, you can understand my fear as I move from parish ministry into academia. It is the fear of the unknown.

For example, the poem and Bible quote, which I chose at the end of last week, have shaped my conversations and observations all week long as I “tried them on” like a pair of slippers, to see if they would wear well in terms of the depth of meaning to

existence for a week. It's been this way nearly every week for 26 years. The preaching of the sermon is where I share my experience with others, my private thoughts, and what ideas came to me as if from beyond, the fruit of self-discernment, analysis of culture, judgment of what is timely, and how to fulfill the freedom existence contains.

I think that as much as any of the resources of our culture and history, the Bible and poetry can tell us something deep about who we are and what meaning existence might have. There is a huge difference between taking the Bible seriously and reading it literally, a distinction that has been lost on many. And poetry is, perhaps, the hardest form of human communication to create and understand. Yet, both aim towards a deeper understanding.

Reading the Bible literally, or dismissing and rejecting it as some do, is, as poet Stanley Kunitz calls it, living on the litter. The underlying fear that leads one to dismiss or reject the Bible outright is the twin of the underlying fear that leads one to accept it without question, without education, blindly and literally. The deeper way is to live in the layers; to know there are errors in translations, errors because it was written before modern science, history, and psychology. But, living in the layers demands more of us than just pointing out the shortcomings, real as they are. "Living in the layers" means pushing ourselves deeper.

Take the Bible quote this morning in its various translations. The deeper question is not which translation is correct and most accurate, but how changing one word here, another there, expands the meaning of the phrase. It can be directed towards our treatment of illegal aliens in Arizona; or, apply to you when you are visiting a foreign country; or, strangers, as when you go downtown, walk the streets, and see faces you don't know. It can occasion contemplation of individual ethical behavior rooted in knowing how it feels to be deemed "strange."

But, if you push yourself and demand a deeper reading still, it yields more about how in Western religion, distinct from Eastern religions, we read things "sociologically" as well as "psychologically." The self is not a self without others. "Strangers" beg the question of our belonging.

To be human is to seek to belong. It's why being a stranger is such a vulnerability. The stranger, the alien, the foreigner, doesn't belong. And to belong, to be connected deeply to and with others, is a spiritual yearning as deep as anything that makes us who we are. Our religion has to be more than just what I believe individually. Individual spiritual practice has to yield something in relationship to others, in relationship to groups to which we belong.

To be rejected by a group, or not to know which group I belong with, is a source of personal disarray even if it is a dislocation so deeply embedded in the unconscious that we are not aware of it. You see it explicitly in the adopted adult child who doesn't know who his parents are. He doesn't know who he belongs to. You see it in the immigrant, and even when she becomes a citizen, maybe in her children, that sense of which culture

and history do I belong to? When you move to a new town, or change jobs or professions, the spiritual yearning to belong is just below the surface of our anxieties driving many of them!

To know who you belong with and what you belong to, forms and shapes you whether you know it or not. It's what the poet Kunitz calls our "campfires" which, when we look back upon our lives, we can see upheld us and comforted us and challenged us when we needed them to. We want to be recognized by others around the flame, not in a celebrity sort of way, but in the way of human connection when eyes meet and hands are held in solidarity and we sing together around the campfire for comfort and camaraderie.

But, lest I litter our lives with a "Kum-By-Yah" moment, let me pause to tell you of an observation from yesterday. I was at a high school baseball game and was watching a mother with her 3 month old baby, assisted by baby's grandmother and grandfather. They would take turns holding the baby in their lap and on the shoulder and walking with the stroller. The mother, the grandmother and grandfather, all had to learn the deep value of human care offered from one to another. And the vulnerability of human being was displayed in its full truth.

By fate and not by choice, we are vulnerable, and especially so in the long, formative stage into adulthood, long in its duration in relationship to other mammals. We are born with this "belonging" capacity and yearning, its part of human nature. And yet, it is part of human nurture that we need to learn how to shape it towards hope and dignity, or not. Left on its own the infant will not survive physically except by miracle and chance. And yet there is something more than physical survival that life yearns for and requires. We need to learn to give to others what we ourselves yearn for. Love God, an "Other," and neighbor, an "other," as you love the self.

Psychologist Erik Erikson claimed that there is something basic formed in human being during our earliest days: Trust and hope. "*Hope*," he wrote, "*is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive.*" It is a fundamental trust and confidence "*established as a basic quality of experience... in spite of the dark*" urges and fears that mark the beginning of each individual's existence. The dark urges and fears of the infant cannot be communicated verbally, for that skill is yet to be achieved. But it was easy to see that if that baby had been deprived of care the impact would be beyond words.

The purpose of spiritual community is to care for all souls not just the ones around the campfire at any given time. Yet, the purpose of our belonging together is something more than that, too.

If you saw the video your 9th grade Youth ROOTS class' trip to Boston, then you saw the evidence of what that "something more" is. If you did not see it, demand that it be regularly shown on Sunday mornings in the foyer before and after worship so you can see it and be reminded of it. In that video you will see the embodied aim of caring for the infant human beings, in the form now of almost fully matured adults. You will see the

miracle of human beings transformed out of childhood and towards something more. It is a miracle, and if you doubt that, ask the parents themselves, especially in those moments of great doubt that occasion every instance of parenting. The 9th graders are coming into the age of loyalty to something larger than self and family and tribe. Erikson called this “*Fidelity... the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems.*” Spiritual communities are humanly-made creations, as are creeds, doctrines, and beliefs. None are perfect and completely free of contradiction and irony. They are all provisional and incomplete, and none contain absolute truth and should not be considered or worshipped as if they do. But that does not mean that loyalty and trust should be withdrawn or denied to things larger than the self. Quite the opposite. Because a community isn’t perfect, as none of us is, we should flee from human belonging any more than we should think the group we belong to believes what God believes!

The purpose of spiritual community in our faith tradition is to teach all souls how to care for and utilize the freedom all human beings are endowed with. And that freedom is evident when the mind is creative and unfettered, and the heart is broadened to sympathize with those most unlike itself.

Freedom requires individuals devoted spiritually – that is, with mind, body, and soul - to its appearance in the groups we belong to.

When the infant is held in arms that care for it, trust and then hope is established in the flesh. The ability and capacity to transform the world for good has a chance. When the boy is to become a young man, and the girl a young woman, and a spiritual community supports that transformation into a loyalty to freedom through human belonging, then care and love has a chance beyond the campfire of the family, and into the campfires of the world. Love, the “*mutuality of devotion forever subduing antagonisms*” has a chance to transform lives and the world into a realm of dignity, compassion, justice, and peace to which all souls belong.

A sociological study which came out a few years back, and was highlighted in the recent book *The Art of Choosing*, by Sheena Iyengar, noted two characteristics of modern life to which we need attend. The first, is that the multiplication of choices available to each individual has not produced a deeper sense of satisfaction in life, or a greater sense of well-being, meaning, or fulfillment. We can choose which schools to send our children to, but parents don’t seem any happier. We can choose from thousands of items at the grocery store, and yet we still hunger. We belong to something larger and other than our individual needs, which the consumer culture affirms through offering so many choices and so many items from which to choose. Yet, just having an abundance of choices has not of itself made for greater satisfaction, fuller and more meaningful lives. Freedom doesn’t mean endless choices, an extravagance of alternatives that leaves our yearning to belong unyoked. Fidelity, loyalty, allegiance, and devotion to something larger than the self strengthens the belonging which is part of our individual identity!

And the second characteristic the author noted was disturbing to us in particular. She found in her research that the two religious groups that were most pessimistic about the future, were the Reform Jews and the Unitarian Universalists, both of whom admitted an abundance of choices. Pessimism is a spiritual disease, one philosopher noted, because it robs the person of hope and a future. Pessimism is the chain that ties a person or group back to the past.

The spiritual yearning to belong has a distortion. We can close off our campfires and make them inhospitable to strangers, explicitly or implicitly. For strangers are a threat to the safety and security of the camp. Or we can worship the campfires we used to have, formed by the illusion and defeat that tomorrow can never be better than yesterday.

Ultimately, this church isn't about me, because no church is primarily about any one minister. Come August 1st I will be the minister of your yesterdays, your past campfire. But, this church isn't primarily about you either. The question of what this church is about is the question of belonging and hope. Does All Souls Community Church belong to the future of humanity? Can it be a part of creating a hope for tomorrow? Can you belong to the sanctity, dignity, and inherent worth of the individual, and not to this congregation as the "former minister's church"? Can you uphold the holiness of freedom, and not to the church as belonging to your needs? There is something more to which all need bend their spiritual practice, regardless of what that practice is or whether we call it spiritual or not. Do you belong to a freedom and unity of the spirit expressed through a love for all souls? Will you create a spiritual community with that holy purpose and that sacred aim as a roaring campfire for all strangers to see?

AMEN.