

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Redwood City April 5, 2009

Rev. Julia Older

Benediction:

There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls. Howard Thurman

Sermon

The Disinherited

“You cannot think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth...A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.” -William Sloane Coffin

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week which will crest on Good Friday and break into celebration next Sunday, Easter. This Wednesday evening, the eight days of Passover will begin. Quite a few of us will be attending Seders as we did last year together as a community.

Last summer as I planned our year, I decided to use this fertile week to share some of the ideas of Rev. Howard Thurman, minister of San Francisco's Church for the Fellowship of All People, which was the first fully integrated, multi-cultural church in the U.S., and where our own Rev. Daniel Panger served some years later.

Before Rev. Martin Luther King, to whom Thurman was spiritual advisor, gained prominence; before “liberation theology” took root in Latin America; and after growing up in Florida and Georgia and therefore steeped in the horrors of racism, Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman preached and ministered and served. Dr. Thurman spoke from inside a community of people who were largely cast away by this society as

not worthy, as less than, as not fully, human. Yet, Thurman found in his study of Christian scripture a message of hope and healing. Dr. Thurman believed that Jesus responded to the needs and hopes of the oppressed, the left behind, the forgotten, the disinherited. Thurman declared that the message of Jesus was meant for those who have their backs against the wall. Those who “need profound succor and strength to enable them to live with dignity and creativity.” Thurman found Christianity in the churches of his day way too often on the side of the powerful and against the weak. Published by our own Beacon Press, his book, which gave me the title for this sermon, is the centerpiece of his lifelong attempt to “bring the harrowing beauty of the African American experience into deep engagement with ‘the religion of Jesus.’” (Vincent Harding, Thurman’s student) Note that he says, “The religion of Jesus” rather than Christianity. This is important because he was deliberately, carefully, trying to recover the teachings of Jesus not mimicking the often-oppressive interpretation of Jesus’ teachings.

In 1935, Thurman visited India, where a Hindu law professor confronted him: “The men who brought slaves to this country were Christian. The writings of Paul give sanction to slavery. Did you know that one of the vessels carrying slaves from Africa to this country was named, “Jesus”?”

“I read,” he continued, “a newspaper clipping telling about a regular Sunday worship service interrupted so that the men who were gathered could rush outside and join a mob against a black man. When he had been caught and done to death, they came back to resume their worship of their Christian god.

What can you say in defense of your religion? Are you not a traitor to your race?”

Thurman wrestled with such questions, with oppression and Christianity. He wondered if it was possible, in the midst of such sanctioned violence and believed superiority of one race over another, that the religion of Jesus could be recovered.

Thurman met Ghandi who asked him questions about being a person of color in America and Thurman asked Gandhi questions about the

relevance of the nonviolent struggle that was going on in India as a model for what might go on here.

Thurman became spiritual advisor to Martin Luther King who is said to have always carried the book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* with him. Thurman helped King deepen his understanding of nonviolence -- not just as a tactic, but as a way of life.

King was saying some very, very powerful spiritual things to anybody who would listen. Here is how, in 1966, he expressed his spirituality:

“I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way. Because I heard the voice saying: do something for others.”

These people -- Gandhi, King, and Thurman -- regarded religion as a guide to living rather than a system of belief. Their emphasis, like ours, was on tolerance, good works, and community. Of course, I am forced to ask myself what the purpose of religion should be and specifically, what Unitarian Universalism is about. Are we important here and now? Beyond our particular community, in which we all find some comfort and belonging, what are we about that makes life better? Are we different from Kiwanis or any other civic club? Now that many churches are putting emphasis on the religion of Jesus and good works rather than on dogma, do we still matter?

Why do we come to church? Does it help us to lead lives we find more meaningful? Do we ask better questions and wrestle with stronger angels because we come here? Are we challenged and molded and supported in our desire to live lives of greater meaning? Do we experience here a powerful call to develop our own interior lives, which is the most important quest, I think, because without persistent self-examination, we may be merely players in someone else's game and we could fail to engage a deeper life at all.

I believe that coming here should help us to wake up -- help us ask better questions and think and be comforted. This comfort is profoundly important – to be comforted by what I might call balm for our interior lives. And, I yearn, as many of you also yearn, for experiences of the numinous. For more moments when the ordinary drops away and I am struck again by the wonder of being awake in this experience we call life. Church should help me, help us, be awake to those moments.

We use different language. Some of us are uncomfortable with religious language. But we want those moments, when we drop out of intellect and are in our hearts, that place where we feel something beyond mere language, that place where everything is holy, everything is connected and everything belongs and everything feels like a miracle.

I went to the Chabot observatory last week and saw not just Orion's belt, but his sword. And not just the stars of his sword, but the nebula of dust and stars we call his sword. Now that is the kind of moment that can make me feel either insignificant or, through the lens of my heart, I may be shocked into the numinous and feel myself part of the same creation. In a moment like that I may feel inconsequential or have that oceanic feeling of belonging, of being swept along in the river of everything, startled to find myself in the wonder of it all. I remember again that everything is holy.

Howard Thurman wrestled with the great questions of meaning from his location in the world, just as we must. He was a person of color growing up with a compassionate heart and a great intellect in the very deep south in the 1920s and 30's. His writings are beautiful to read. He always identified as Christian though his openheartedness and intellect make me want to claim him as Unitarian, and when I googled his name, all the sermons that popped up had been given by UU ministers. But, Thurman loved "The Book" and he loved Jesus. He understood Jesus as a Jewish man displaced by the hegemony of Rome, living among outcasts, and struggling to make meaning in an environment that kept pushing him down and trying to silence him. It is easy to see why Jesus as healer of the disinherited resonated so profoundly with the experience and needs of a black man in America.

And it is not much of a leap to see how the Jewish story of being slaves in the land of Egypt and liberated by the arm of God is deeply resonant.

Here is a statement crafted from a psalm and the idea of liberation theology by Rabbi Arthur Waskow for the Passover ritual:

“Why do the mountains skip like mountain goats and the hills like lambs? Because they are in the presence of the God of liberation, the power that brings forth water from the rock, that can turn flinty stone into a gushing spring. We believe that the universe is not neutral with regard to the liberation of the human body and spirit. There is a mysterious force that works through us and throughout history, that turns the seemingly immovable rock into a gushing spring, that makes the desert of our hopelessness bloom with new life.”

About ten of us were able to go to El Buen Pastor last Sunday afternoon to be with a mostly Spanish speaking congregation that felt they were being treated differently by the local police. Inspired by our membership in Peninsula Interfaith Action, we gathered there together. Council Member Alicia Aguirre, and a representative from the Mexican consulate, an attorney, and members of the Redwood City police were there to listen and respond to requests for equal treatment with regard to car impounding.

Creating justice is a slow process. Later stories hold up the rare moments of great drama, but mostly the work is mundane. Progress in any one lifetime may be almost imperceptible. Freedom comes into being over eons. The part we play most often seems insignificant. But nothing is wasted -- the story of the Jews being freed from bondage in Egypt; the story of Jesus ministering to the poor and using his life to stand against the empire of Rome; the civil rights struggle in America; sitting at St. Peters just last week with members of the immigrant community. None of it is wasted.

”Go to the people. Learn from them. Love them,” as Lao Tsu said nearly 3000 years ago.

We were part of that endless line of people walking toward justice last week as we sat in St. Peters and listened. It wasn't very glamorous. It rarely is. And moments when something visibly changes seem terribly far apart. So groups like PIA and Pastors for Peace and the likes of Madre Anna and I, continue to hold up the goal of just communities for you to remember and take heart.

Thurman wrote, "Every person wants to be cared for, to be sustained by the assurance that we share in the watchful and thoughtful attention of others—not merely or necessarily others in general but others in particular. We want to know that—however vast and impersonal all life about us may seem, however hard may be the stretch of road on which we are journeying—we are not alone, but are the object of another's concern and caring; we want to know this in an awareness sufficient to hold us against ultimate fear and panic."

We need to hear one another's stories. Even if there seems nothing will be changed, and there is always something that can be changed, but even in the absence of systemic change, listening to one another is important and healing.

I know there is some fear that being interested in justice work might make others see you as strident and annoying. And you might see so much suffering that you become overwhelmed. And what about telling our stories? Weren't we all taught not to air our dirty laundry in public? We might be judged. We could even be told that our problems are our own fault.

Well, being invisible and alone hurts even more.

Caesar Chavez built the farm workers after being trained in Saul Alinsky's organizing method of listening. Obama learned organizing in the Gamaliel Institute in Chicago, another descendant of Alinsky's method . . .and look where it got him. PIA . . .same strategy. Nothing is more important and powerful than sharing our stories . It is precisely at the point of sharing personal stories that an individual can begin to find an answer to the question: What makes me come alive, and how can I share that aliveness with the world?"

When our health care team invites you to come and listen and share

stories after this service, remember this. It is not about one more busy thing. It is the immensely important work of listening and figuring out what matters and what makes you come alive.

Let me end with the prayer Cesar Chavez wrote for the United Farm Workers with which our meeting was opened last Sunday at El Buen Pastor:

Show me the suffering of the most miserable;
So I will know my people's plight.
Free me to pray for others;
For you are present in every person.
Help me take responsibility for my own life;
So that I can be free at last.
Grant me courage to serve others;
For in service there is true life.
Give me honesty and patience;
So that the Spirit will be alive among us.
Let the Spirit flourish and grow;
So that we will never tire of the struggle.
Let us remember those who have died for justice;
For they have given us life.
Help us love even those who hate us;
So we can change the world.

Amen

Use this holy week to reflect on how you live and what you serve and what makes you come alive. Spring is passing; the gardens are planted. The work of summer is upon us.

Blessed be.