

“What Was I Thinking” - Service text, 2 July 2017, UUMAN

Meditation

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...

A moment of silence....

Sermon

I have a confession to make... generally when I do these sermons I run my ideas and an outline by someone who I feel is safe but will give me an honest feel for where I'm heading. And without exception, she has always said, I can't wait, sounds terrific, this will be great. Well, almost without exception, because this time, this time she was only too happy to tell me that this made her really uncomfortable. And if it made her uncomfortable, what would it do to the rest of our congregation, and although all of you are my friends, and care about me, am I, on my second day as president of the congregation, about to embark on something that will divide us...

WHAT WAS I THINKING....

But on the other hand.. if you look out the window... all looks well. The skies are filled with birds, our gardens are in bloom, it's by all accounts a beautiful, wonderful day. And it is a long weekend, with fireworks, and hot dogs and baked beans... it is the American Dream. ... unless, of course, you happen to be poor, or in bad health, or a member of the LGBTQIA community, or Black, or a person who is in the US undocumented, or a woman who has to make a hard decision on continuing a pregnancy... or homeless... or hungry....

What was I thinking??

But on the other hand, "From a Distance" is a beautiful and inspiring and makes me cry every time and thank you Merri Beth and Kathy for sharing it with us... and as it says, from a distance, there is harmony.. our big blue marble looks beautiful and in perfect harmony. The composer, Julie Gold has stated that she believes in an [immanent](#) and beneficent God, and also thinks that people have a right to interpret the song any way they want, as with all art, which sounds pretty UU. But, she has also stated that the song is about the difference between how things appear to be and how they really are. And based on the last few weeks, things are much better from a distance.

So wow, I know you're excited you got up and drug yourself to church on this long weekend to get this "inspiring" message... Things are not good in our little corner of paradise.. The vile and ugly tone of things coming out of Washington are sickening.. we had an election here in our neck of the woods, that didn't turn out like many of us hoped... hope...

Hope, is there any left, is all hope lost? Unfortunately as my boss, not my boss, but the BOSS, BOSS always tells us... HOPE is not a plan... Hope is NOT a plan....

As I take over this weekend as president of this congregation, I am torn between running, screaming into the night and burying my head in the sand and pretending none of this is happening. ...

But as I sat back and thought about it... what can we do this year, what is it we can do to fix all that is wrong in Roswell, Georgia and America... and I'm here to tell you... I'VE GOT NOTHING... I can't fix it. I want to, because well, that's what I try to do, is fix it. Even if it's not my job to do. I mean, what was I thinking???

No matter how hard I try, I can't fix the fact that there are single mother's living on the street without a safe place to sleep. I mean think about it, If I could just give them somewhere, a safe place to sleep, even if it was only, let's say, for a week every quarter, and have people serve them dinner and interact with their children and make them feel, if only for a few days, normal... if only I could do that... put their family first but "I" can't do that, can I? I mean, what was I thinking.

I don't have the power to stand up to those who want to sell and subdivide property around a historical landmark. I mean there's nothing I can do to save Mimosa Hall, nothing. I just can't.

Or the epidemic in this country of young black men being killed in frightening disproportionate numbers... there's nothing I can do to let them know I won't tolerate it any more...

Or for transgendered youth, living on the streets because their parents and families, most of whom hold a Bible in the hands while they use their feet to kick them out of their lives. I can't FIX that...

Or what can I do to provide a "sanctuary" for those who are threatened with deportation because they want nothing more for their families than those things promised to us, all of us.. I can't fix it....

I mean, what am I thinking, if I can't fix those things, how can I possibly be president of the congregation and more importantly, how can I fix the division and marginalization that exists in our country. I mean who are we anymore? What do we stand for? What happened to the America I believe in.

Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

The statue of liberty which greeted many of our ancestors, has those exact words to greet them. It doesn't feel like we mean it much any more. I mean what are we thinking?

My relatives didn't see those words, my father's family came at the turn of the last century from Lithuania and Norway but both came in to Boston, not New York.

My grandfather's family were the Lithuanians, fleeing the invading forces from Russia. While there is no actual proof, my good, roman catholic Lithuanian family may have actually been Jewish, having changed their religious affiliation to avoid persecution here and back in Lithuania. His family, like many, migrated to Illinois to work in the coal fields and in the northern Indiana steel mills.

My paternal grandmother's family were tenant farmers, who were initially headed to Minnesota, where all Norwegians went, but ended up in Illinois. They were truly indentured workers. Working the fields for a place to live and a small plot of land to grow their own food. My grandmother was denied the opportunity to finish high school, all though she was an Illinois state scholar, because she had to go to work. So at 13, she was issued a false birth certificate that stated she was 16 and went to work in the cannery and shortly afterwards she met my grandfather at a dance at the Grange Hall in Sycamore, he had just graduated college... barber college that is.... But even though they weren't "rich", there was always food on the table, and everyone was invited.

My mother's side was quite different. The Scott's; Woods and Prescott's are names that predate the revolutionary war. "Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes" were words uttered by Col. William Prescott, my great grandfather generations back on my Grandmother's side.

They settled in Boston and owned people. My grandmother would sternly tell us with finger in our faces that they weren't slaves. But they were servants who received no pay and weren't free to leave to find other work... indentured to my family... Sorry Grandma, by all definition, they were slaves.

By on my maternal grandfather's side, well, they were successful, my great grandmother was a concert pianist. And my great grandfather was the attorney general for the territory of Oklahoma and then the solicitor general for the Sante Fe Railroad. He went before the supreme court and is almost solely responsible for the contracts that acquired land throughout the southwest from the native Americans, forcing them to live on reservations.

So on my dad's side, we had laborers and indentured workers. On my mother's side, well, they owned slaves and stole land from native Americans. But they had the American Dream!

Fly the Flag, what was I thinking?

And me, well, I have a good job, am paid extremely fairly for the work I do, and am comfortable. I have company paid health insurance, more than 1 car, a mortgage with a good interest rate and money in the bank. But a mere 7 years ago, I was out of work, on food stamps, no health insurance, a victim of a predatory loan and a my house was in foreclosure. I've lived both sides. But I was able to survive and get a new job and save my house and eventually get a "good" mortgage. And on that day I was given a gift from my bank, a US Flag, which was presented to me in a pretty box that sat in the corner of my living room, not to be opened.

I mean, don't get me wrong, I always treated the flag with the reverence, stood with my hand over my heart during the playing of the national anthem, but I've really never had one on my house, even as a kid. And now, as a grown up, I hadn't ever done it because, well, I was afraid of what people would think of me. They might mistake me for one of "THEM" and I couldn't have that. I would not be associated from those who

persecute the poor and those of color and steal land from Native Americans. I mean, who would want to be associated with “those people”.

Until... until my son, a good liberal kid, who was raised in a UU church, joined the United States Navy after college. And college, well let's talk about that for a minute. He didn't go to Stanford or MIT or Tech, oh no, he went to the Citadel. So every weekend that I attended events at college, we were in a uncomfortable world, surrounded mostly by people who didn't believe as I did. At a school that didn't allow boys of color to join until the 70's and women weren't allowed until the 90's. And we won't mention how LGBT students were thought of, I mean, what was he thinking?

Then he graduated and was sent off by the Navy to Japan. And my perspective changed. It was Flag day two years ago, that I decided I wanted to support my son, so the flag in the corner came out and has been hanging next to my front door since as a testament to my son and the son's and daughters of others who are serving.

And the people who live in my neighborhood or drive by and see it and make assumptions, well I don't care what they are thinking.

I spent last week, sitting at my computer watching and participating as a delegate representing UUMAN at General Assembly and I won't go into any detail because, well, we're doing that next Sunday and I don't want to divulge any spoilers, but good work was done. And everything that I could see through the several streamed meetings I attended, it was beautiful, our banner and others lined up against the wall. Banners for Black Lives Matter and Black Lives UU. Rainbow Flags in support of our LGBTQIA members, and friends. But what I didn't see was this flag, anywhere. I went back yesterday and looked through photos from the meeting and no American Flag. Now I'm sure it was there somewhere and I haven't gotten confirmation one way or the other from participants, but if it was there, it didn't play a prominent place and got me to wondering why.

So I started looking through more pictures of social justice marches in Atlanta, and again, no American Flags are prominent.

WHAT ARE WE THINKING?

And this is where I expect the tar and feathers to come out...

I think about what people think when they see us doing our roadside witness, which I am so proud to do. What would happen if we stood there with our signs and shirts “standing on the side of love’ proudly holding our banner saying black lives matter waving the American Flag?

I realize this flag has a lot feelings around the American Flat. For some it might represent repression, or false promises. But for some it could represent honor and glory, and maybe hope.

I remember when Reverend Dave was candidating he sometimes he may say things that might make some uncomfortable. But urged us to remember maybe his message wasn't for you.

I challenge us that maybe our message of Black Lives Matter and Standing on the Side of Love is not for us. We know that, we get it, it's second nature. But who are we trying to deliver that message to? Would standing on the side of love, holding our Black Live's Matter banner holding American Flags make a difference? Would it cause those who normally wouldn't pay any attention to think differently?

Would we maybe change more minds? Would those are not us, suddenly start listening to us? And what about us? Would we suddenly divide US? Would there be some who are so offended that they'll stop coming? I just don't know. What I do know is that I'm sick to death of people filled with hate and bigotry wrapping themselves in the American Flag and calling themselves patriots. I'm sick to death of people telling me I'm unpatriotic because I protest way our government treats those less fortunate.

I want to be standard bearer for a country that lives up to the ideals that are written on that plaque that is attached to the Statue of Liberty. I want this country to be about a place where young black men can walk the streets without being worried about being shot by police. I want this country to be about fair and free health care for all that want it. I want this flag to be about holding those who belittle and defile women in public accountable for those actions. I want this flag to be about what we stand for. I know that I will continue to stand with those who need and want me to stand with them, but I will do so with this flag, a flag that is about hope not despair. A flag that is about love and not hate. A flag that is about equality and not discrimination. A flag that is about liberty and justice for all...

And that's what I was thinking....

Amen.

Benediction

Give us your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,

Here you are Welcome.

The wretched refuse of your teeming shore are welcome in this sacred place... .

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to us, We lift our beloved chalice beside this open door!