

On Being Long Haul People

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, March 12, 2017

Reading

“To Be of Use”

- by Marge Piercy

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the black sleek heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

“Ancient wisdom teaches that we who would save the world must first save ourselves. We who would restore the planet must learn to restore the broken structures of the institutions closest to hand; to illuminate the lives of our companions and friends.” (Kendyl Gibbons)

“To illuminate” the lives of others...”to restore the institutions closest at hand”...”we who would save the world must first save ourselves”...

Some of you here this morning may remember [...] that I began last Sunday’s sermon reflection with the very same words...they apply today as well. And those of you present last Sunday will likely remember the story I shared about the cracked pot and will perhaps hear the resonance with Piercy’s poem...particularly in the last two lines

*The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

The cracked pot in our story thought his flaw was a tragic one, an imperfection that prevented him from doing the only work he believed was his to do...the work he thought he was made for.

And before I go on - for those here today that missed all the wonderfulness of last week’s gathering for worship - I will have the texts of both last week’s and today’s message (+ all readings and stories shared) posted in our website sermon archive by this coming Wednesday.

This month we are exploring together varying aspects of brokenness – last week was slanted toward the light that can come through those aspects of our being that we deem flawed, imperfect. In the case of the cracked pot, it was water that came through rather than light – but you catch the meaning, right? The water bearer was able to see the beauty present in the clay pot’s imperfection and helped the pot to see his usefulness, a purpose that transcended his limited view.

But sometimes in life we need more than assistance in **reframing the aspect of brokenness** that is our perceived flaws and imperfections – we need repair and healing from brokenness.

“Ernest Hemingway [once] said, “The world breaks everyone, and some become strong at the broken places.”

[The Rev. Audette Fulbright writes that] The Japanese have an art dedicated to honoring brokenness: **kintsugi**. It is the art of repairing broken pottery with a lacquer resin containing powdered gold. [We will see images of what this looks like in a few moments] [...] Most find

that the pottery is more beautiful after it's been broken and repaired in this way. But **[I want us to]** consider the metaphor: the broken pottery does not get repaired by magic. **It requires attention – someone to notice the brokenness, to collect the pieces, and then to do the painstaking work of repairing. It requires an artist's mind to believe that the piece can both be repaired, and be more beautiful afterwards.**

Kintsugi is the approach I am recommending as our approach to the suffering of our own lives. We may be broken by this world – we may have a mental breakdown. We may lose everything we hold dearest. We may even lose our health, or a relationship we profoundly want. Who among us has not experienced or does not know of someone whose nearest and dearest have betrayed them in some almost unimaginable way? The thing is, that is not the last word. Unless we make the most heartbreaking choice of all, to voluntarily leave this world, then the story is not over. **[share significance of semicolon tattoo]** The question then becomes: how do I get up and write a new page? **How do I mix gold into a mortar to repair my world? How will I grow stronger in the broken bone of my life?"**

Winston Churchill described the first principle of surviving a breaking point in his own inimitable way: **"When you're going through hell, keep going."** Keep waking up. Keep breathing in and out. Keep drinking water, eating a little food. Sometimes, that is all that can be managed. Count it enough for now. And keep in mind what that eternally light-hearted optimist Frederick Nietzsche said: **"[They who have] a why to live, can bear almost any how."**

There's a story told about Thomas Edison. In 1914, his laboratory burned to the ground. Because it had been constructed of cement and therefore was imagined to be largely fireproofed, it was underinsured. He lost almost everything. But the story persists that he called his son and wife to watch the flames, and later, when the fire was over, he is said to have said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start over." He was 67 years old at the time.

This, perhaps, is the metaphorical gold resin: a simple, unshakeable belief that it's not over until it's over; that you can start again; that there is more love somewhere – perhaps most of all, **that you are not alone.** Especially as people of faith – or at least for me, as a woman of UU faith – in the end my most essential belief is that we are in this together, and we have others who will be our companions on even the hardest roads.

[play "[Japanese Bowl](#)" by Peter Mayer here]

Crafting a message that blends the theme of "brokenness" with some reasonable articulation of what stewardship means and why we should all support this place with our time, talent, and treasure (aka money) may seem a little counterintuitive...admittedly, themes like gratitude and generosity are more often the focus during the month of a church's stewardship campaign.

But today, I think **a focus on brokenness and the repair needed to become the "long-haul people"** necessitated by the times we live in is wholly adequate to the task at hand.

In her award-winning sermon on stewardship titled "Caution Church Ahead," Victoria Safford begins with the words of Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel:

"What then is sanctuary? The sanctuary is often something very small. Not a grandiose gesture, but a small gesture toward alleviating human suffering and preventing humiliation. The sanctuary is a human being. Sanctuary is a dream. And that is why you are here and that is why I am here. We are here because of one another. We are in truth each other's shelter."
~ *Elie Wiesel*

Safford goes on to further articulate brilliantly what we ask of each other here. But it all comes down to the simple fact that this place (and others like it) and the ministry it provides are at present rare and precious things in this world...it does not and will not survive on good wishes and fairy dust. The fierce hope required for its survival, thriving, and yes - the expansion of impact of the liberal progressive church in our culture - requires our individual and collective commitment of time, talent and financial resources. It's as simple as that, and as challenging.

I close with a few more words from Victoria Safford:

"Our desires and our decisions may be boundless, but our needs, if we're honest, are really pretty basic. We need shelter and food and clothing.

And beyond this, we need friendship.

We need comrades in the struggle.

We need art. We need a way to hear music often.

We need noble work, paid or unpaid, in the home or out of it; we need, each of us, a calling.

We need trees and grass and water fairly close by.

We need religious grounding. Some of us need a mature and sustaining experience of God.

Some need prayer. Some need glimpses of the transcendent, a sense of something larger than themselves. Some of us need ethical clarity.

We need religious grounding.

We need solitude.

We need community.

We find the sources of these things we need, and then we choose to sustain them, to nurture them, not by willpower, not by some sense of duty or obligation, but because we care passionately about them and find them central to our lives."

And so it is each year we ask you to support with your time, talent, and yes, treasure, this place we care so passionately about and find central to our lives. May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

Sources

'The Breaking Point...and After" by the Rev. Audette Fulbright.

<http://www.uucheyenne.org/multimedia-archive/the-breaking-point-and-after/>

Sermon "Caution Church Ahead" by Victoria Safford.