

The Vision of the Bricklayer

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

Sunday, September 30, 2018

“Once there were three bricklayers. Each one of them was asked what they were doing. The first man answered gruffly, ‘I’m laying bricks.’ The second man replied, ‘I’m putting up a wall.’ But the third man said enthusiastically and with pride, ‘I’m building a cathedral.’”

This short little anonymous story was the original impetus for today’s message, the concluding sermon to our month-long exploration of what it means to be a people of vision. My intention was to take us to a wider view, to examine vision from the perspective of religious community and how a collective vision that we forge together can help guide all aspects of our ministry. I submitted the final copy of the order of service at 9:45 on Thursday morning, feeling fairly clear on the direction my message for this morning was going – it was only in chrysalis form at that point, as it most often is each week...I work on the fleshing-out of the message during the last part of the week. I made sure to have all of my administrative work done as early as possible on Thursday because I had the intention of watching Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. I felt it was important to bear witness to this and to stand in solidarity with her in this process.

My original intention was only to watch her testimony and then return to my work. That is not what happened. I found myself unable to turn away. As I suspect was true for many of us, I found myself down a rabbit hole of disbelief, grief, and rage at the process I was witnessing. When I tried to pull myself away and return to my task of writing about vision, the opening lines of David Whyte’s poem “Sweet Darkness” that I shared with you last Sunday, kept circling through me:

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.

How do I weave together a message about vision with what we have witnessed and experienced this week? And how do I accomplish this when I at my core feel so broken? The hard truth is that I couldn’t get to where I originally intended to go.

So...as I was blessedly reminded earlier this past week when I had the opportunity to speak to several university classes about the power of story and language art to create community, to build bridges across our divides, to help us see differently and yes, even heal wounds - I have decided to fall back to the arts I know best. I bring to you this morning a trio of readings – a story, a poem, and a letter. I won’t explain why I chose them; my hope is that once you hear them, once you experience them, the reasons for these choices in this place and time will be evident.

Reading #1

“A Sin” by Brian Doyle, from *Grace Notes*

Committed a sin yesterday, in the hallway, at noon. I roared at my son, I grabbed him by the shirt collar, I frightened him so badly that he cowered and wept, and when he turned to run I grabbed him by the arm so roughly that he flinched, and it was that flicker of fear and pain across his face, the bright eager holy riveting face I have loved for ten years, that stopped me then and haunts me this morning; for I am the father of his fear, I sent it snarling into his heart, and I can never get it out now, which torments me.

Yes, he was picking on his brother, and yes, he had picked on his brother all morning, and yes, this was the culmination of many edgy incidents already, and no, he hadn't paid the slightest attention to warnings and remonstrations and fulminations, and yes, he had been snide and supercilious all day, and yes, he had deliberately done exactly the thing he had specifically been warned not to do, for murky reasons; but still, I roared at him and grabbed him and terrified him and made him cower, and now there is a dark evil wriggle between us that makes me sit here with my hands over my face, ashamed to the bottom of my bones.

I do not know how sins can be forgiven. I grasp the concept, I admire the genius of the idea, I suspect it to be the seed of all real peace, I savor the Tutus and Gandhis who have had the mad courage to live by it, but I do not understand how foul can be made fair. What is done cannot be undone, and my moment of rage in the hallway is an indelible scar on my son's heart and mine, and while my heart is a ragged old bag after nearly half a century of slings and stings, his is still new, eager, open, suggestible, innocent; he has committed only the small sins of a child, the halting fist lies, the failed test paper hidden in the closet, the window broken in petulance, the stolen candy bar, the silent witness as a classmate is bullied, the insults flung like bitter knives.

Whereas I am a man, and have had many lies squirming in my mouth, and have committed calumny, and far too often evaded the mad ragged Christ, ignored his stink, his rotten teeth, his cloak of soggy newspapers, his voice of broken glass.

No God can forgive what we do to each other; only the injured can summon that extraordinary grace; and where such grace is born we cannot say, for all our fitful genius and miraculous machinery. We use the word *God* so easily, so casually, as if our label for the incomprehensible meant anything at all; and we forget all too easily that the wriggle of the holy is born only through the stammer and stumble of us, who are always children. So we turn again and again to one another, and bow, and ask forgiveness, and mill what mercy we can muster from the muddle of our hearts.

The instant I let go of my son's sinewy arm in the hallway he sprinted away and slammed the door and flew off the porch and ran down the street and I stood there simmering in shame. Then I walked down the hill into the laurel thicket as dense and silent as the dawn of the world and found him there huddled and sobbing. We knelt in the moist green dark for a long time, not saying anything, the branches burly and patient. Finally I asked quietly for his forgiveness and he asked for mine and we walked out of the woods hand in hand, changed men.

Reading #2

“For Strong Women” by Marge Piercy, from *The Moon Is Always Female*

A strong woman is a woman who is straining
A strong woman is a woman standing
on tiptoe and lifting a barbell
while trying to sing Boris Godunov.
A strong woman is a woman at work
cleaning out the cesspool of the ages,
and while she shovels, she talks about
how she doesn't mind crying, it opens
the ducts of the eyes, and throwing up
develops the stomach muscles, and
she goes on shoveling with tears
in her nose.

A strong woman is a woman in whose head
a voice is repeating, I told you so,
ugly, bad girl, bitch, nag, shrill, witch,
ballbuster, nobody will ever love you back,
why aren't you feminine, why aren't
you soft, why aren't you quiet, why
aren't you dead?

A strong woman is a woman determined
to do something others are determined
not to do. She is pushing up on the bottom
of a lead coffin lid. She is trying to raise
a manhole cover with her head, she is trying
to butt her way through a steel wall.
Her head hurts. People waiting for the hole
to be made say, hurry, you're so strong.

A strong woman is a woman bleeding
inside. A strong woman is a woman making
herself strong every morning while her teeth
loosen and her back throbs. Every baby,
a tooth, midwives used to say, and now
every battle a scar. A strong woman
is a mass of scar tissue that aches
when it rains and wounds that bleed
when you bump them and memories that get up
in the night and pace in boots to and fro.

A strong woman is a woman who craves love
like oxygen or she turns blue choking.
A strong woman is a woman who loves
strongly and weeps strongly and is strongly
terrified and has strong needs. A strong woman is strong

in words, in action, in connection, in feeling;
she is not strong as a stone but as a wolf
suckling her young. Strength is not in her, but she
enacts it as the wind fills a sail.

What comforts her is others loving
her equally for the strength and for the weakness
from which it issues, lightning from a cloud.
Lightning stuns. In rain, the clouds disperse.
Only water of connection remains,
flowing through us. Strong is what we make
each other. Until we are all strong together,
a strong woman is a woman strongly afraid.

Reading #3

“Letter to the People of the Future” by John Cummins, from *Bless the Imperfect: Meditations for Congregational Leaders*

My Distant Children:

You will look back on us with astonishment at the truths that stared us in the face, and which we did not see. You will look with wonder at the bright toys we created, and used only for the rape of the planet, and one another.

It will seem strange beyond believing that we reached for the stars, and did not know the simplest principles of living well together.

But know this also, you of the future, you with your libraries and fountains, you in your star cities. Know that even in our slumbers, we dreamed. In our fumbling, shadowed search for mistaken glories, even in our clumsy cruelties, it was for you that we dreamed!

Beneath the piled-up centuries, below the lost and ruined rubble of all our striving, it was you who lay safe, enfolded in the womb of our dreaming. You, the first cause of all our daring! Even now, it brings comfort to know that it shall one day be as the wise among us have foretold.

In that far age, in the chrysalis of time, it will be your source of pride that your ancestors, born into a universe without justice or mercy, bethought themselves of justice and mercy, and put them there!

Remember us for this.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed Be and Amen.