

Courage Is a Heart Word

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

Sunday, October 1, 2017

Opening Words

- by Gretchen Haley

What's going to happen?

Will everything be ok?

What can I do?

In these days we find ourselves, too often,

Stuck with these questions on repeat:

What's going to happen? / Will everything be ok? /What can I do?

We grasp at signs and markers, articles of news and analysis,

Facebook memes and forwarded emails

As if they're a new zodiac

Capable of forecasting all that life may yet bring our way

As if we could prepare

As if life had ever made any promises of making sense, or turning out the way we'd thought

As if we are not also actors in this still unfolding story

For this hour we gather

To surrender to the mystery

To release ourselves from the needing to know

The yearning to have it all already figured out

And also the burden of believing we either have all the control, or none

Here in our song and our silence

Our stories and our sharing

We make space for a new breath, a new healing, a new possibility

To take root
That is courage
forged in the fire of our coming together
and felt in the spirit that comes alive in this act of faith:
that we believe still, a new world is possible
That we are creating it, already, here, and now

Meditation and Prayer

“If We Do Not Venture Out “

~ by Marni Harmony (adapted)

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/if-we-do-not-venture-out>

If, on a starlit night,
with the moon brightly shimmering,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the evening universe remains a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a cloudy day,
with grayness infusing all
and rain dancing rivers in the grass,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the stormy, threatening energy of
the universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, on a frosty morning,
dreading the chilling air before the sunrise,
We stay inside and do not venture out,
the awesome cold, quiet, and stillness of
the dawn universe remains
a part of life we shall not know.

If, throughout these grace-given days of ours,
surrounded as we are by green life and
brown death, hot pink joy and cold gray
pain and miracles—always miracles—

If we stay inside ourselves and do not venture out
then the Fullness of the universe
shall be unknown to us
And our locked hearts shall never feel the rush of worship.

[And so, in the silence we now share, may we listen deeply
for that still and small but brave and bold voice within
that calls us to risk and reach
to open and emerge
to venture out
into the newness waiting to be known.]

Reading

“Inhabiting Vulnerability”

- by David Whyte

Vulnerability is not a weakness, a passing indisposition, or something we can arrange to do without, vulnerability is not a choice, vulnerability is the underlying, ever present and abiding undercurrent of our natural state. To run from vulnerability is to run from the essence of our nature, the attempt to be invulnerable is the vain attempt to become something we are not and most especially, to close off our understanding of the grief of others. More seriously, in refusing our vulnerability we refuse the help needed at every turn of our existence and immobilize the essential, tidal and conversational foundations of our identity...

The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance, our choice is to inhabit vulnerability as generous citizens of loss, robustly and fully, or conversely, as misers and complainers, reluctant and fearful, always at the gates of existence, but never bravely and completely attempting to enter, never wanting to risk ourselves, never walking fully through the door.

<https://onbeing.org/blog/vulnerability/>

Sermon Reflection

What does it mean to be a people of courage? This is the organizing question for our worship services – as well as our religious education program - during the month of October so every week we will be examining, exploring, wresting with a different aspect of this question. While we can't possibly be exhaustive in our exploration of the question and all the varying aspects of courage, I have great hope that we can together deepen our understanding and expand our response both as individuals and as a community of faith.

“Courage is a heart word. The root of the word courage is **cor** - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant "To speak one's mind by telling all one's heart." This definition shifted over time and courage is often depicted in western mythologies and contemporary culture as a form of fearlessness, and equated with near super-human acts of bravery and heroism. But the truth of it, according to renowned social scientist Dr. Brene Brown is that courage is most connected to and arises from our vulnerabilities. She writes in the introduction to her book *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* – that

Vulnerability is not a weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional. Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection.

When we spend our lives waiting until we're perfect or bulletproof before we walk into the arena, we ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recovered, we squander our precious time, and we turn our backs on our gifts, those unique contributions that only we can make.

So...courage begins with vulnerability. Lynn Ungar, director of lifespan learning for the UUA's Church of the Larger Fellowship asks the following questions of us:

What do you choose to do even though it makes you feel vulnerable? Do you speak up in class or in a meeting? How about if you're not entirely sure you have the right answer? Do you tell the truth to a friend or family member when you don't know if they're going to like what you have to say? Do you point out statements that you think are racist or sexist or otherwise unfair? Do you ask questions in situations where everyone else seems to know more than you do?

When you create something special, do you share it with people you care about, or are you too worried that they won't think it's very good? When you've made a mistake—broken something, or hurt someone's feelings—do you go directly to the person you have harmed to name what you have done and ask for forgiveness?

It would be nice to think that all of these were things that everyone did all the time, just in the natural course of events. But it turns out that for far too many of us, **that feeling of being vulnerable and exposed is something that we will do almost anything to avoid.**

What if people laugh at me if I'm wrong? What if they don't like me if I disagree with them? What if they think I'm stupid? What if my mistake means that I'm actually a bad person—or at least means that someone will think I'm a bad person? Often, we don't even get as far as even recognizing that we are asking these questions; we just feel that squirming, sinking feeling inside and then head the other direction.

Which is why the story of Jonah is one of my favorite parts of the Hebrew Bible. Maybe you know it. In this story, God tells Jonah to go to the town of Nineveh to tell the people there to shape up, and stop behaving so badly—or else. God sends Jonah to be a prophet. But Jonah has that squirmy, vulnerable reaction. Why would the people listen to him? Isn't he just going to sound like an idiot running around telling people that God sent him to tell them to mend their ways?

Nope, Jonah doesn't like that vulnerable feeling at all, so he jumps on a ship headed in the opposite direction, toward the town of Tarshish.

Well, God causes a big storm to come up, and the sailors on the boat figure out that Jonah is the source of the problem, so they chuck him overboard. But before he can drown, Jonah is swallowed by a giant fish, and carried around in the fish's slimy, smelly insides for three days and three nights until finally the fish burps him up on the shore—the shore right by Nineveh, the last place that Jonah wants to be.

But there he is, dropped off by a giant fish, so what is he going to do? Reluctantly, unwillingly, feeling squirmy in every last bit of his body, Jonah starts talking with the people of Nineveh, telling them that they are doing wrong and what they need is to get right with God. And to his utter amazement, the people of Nineveh, just like that, repent and change their ways.

Well, you'd think Jonah would be happy, but no. Things didn't turn out the way he feared, but now he's vulnerable in a whole new way. Now he has to think of himself as a prophet, a job

that he most certainly does not feel qualified for. This was not the safe, in-the-background life that Jonah had in mind for himself. So he goes and sulks under the shade of a gourd vine. But then God withers the vine, leaving him vulnerable to the sun as well as his own feelings.

People have understood the story of Jonah as being about a lot of different things, but I think it tells some important truths about vulnerability. **We all are tempted to run away from the hard things, the most meaningful parts of life that take real effort.**

Much of the time we don't want to risk being seen, especially if we're not sure people are going to approve of us. But in running away from our feelings of vulnerability, we run away from our power and our possibilities.

And more than that, running away doesn't actually make us safe anyway. We will always be vulnerable to the wind and the sun, not to mention accidents and illness and all the things that can happen to bodies. There is no place where we are invulnerable, guaranteed safety and comfort.

Better, the story suggests, that we step forward, as uncomfortable as that might be, putting ourselves and our truths out there for all the world to see. **It might just be that we have exactly what other people need.** But more than that, if we attempt to hide from our vulnerability, we end up stuck. Maybe not literally in a smelly, slimy fish gut, but the feeling of hiding from our truth and our power can feel a lot like being squished into some place too small and nasty for us to flourish.

We're never going to be totally safe. Life just doesn't provide for that. So, if we can't be safe, we might as well learn to walk through the squirmy, uncomfortable, vulnerable places in the direction of what most deeply calls us.

<https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/resources-living-october-2017/>

May it be so.

Blessed be and Amen.