

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

May 31, 2020

Andrew Frantz, contract minister

May Nothing Evil Cross This Door

*...though these sheltering walls are thin,
may they be strong to keep hate out
and hold love in.¹*

These are the words of the song we just heard, which is the first hymn in our hymnal. And the title of that hymn is my topic for today: *May nothing evil cross this door*. Throughout the month of May, the worship theme has been “Thresholds.” Two of our lay leaders have delivered morning messages with that theme this month. A couple of weeks ago, Sally Armstrong talked about how we are in a threshold moment between whatever came before the coronavirus and whatever will come after. Now, I dare say that we are also in a threshold moment with the current unrest in our country, when racial injustice has again been thrown into a harsh light. Just last week Brigitte Bechtold, another lay leader here, delivered a morning message reminding us that the opposite of being a racist is not being a non-racist – the opposite of being a racist is being an anti-racist. That is particularly relevant to the moment of crisis in this country, and a theme that I will include in my message here today.

The original meaning of “threshold” comes from our agricultural past, and it comes from the term “threshing.” When you grow grain, such as wheat, and you then want to separate the good part (the grain) from the stalk of the plant, you thresh it. And the threshold was the piece of wood or stone that was across the door of the threshing room to keep the grain in—keep the good stuff and in and get rid of the stuff you don’t want. In my message this morning I want to explore this idea of threshold, of boundaries, of keeping in the “good,” and keeping out what we don’t want, the “evil.” *May nothing evil cross this door*.

I invite you to think about this as well. First of all, what is evil? How do you define it? Secondly, how do you maintain boundaries in your life?

The agricultural meaning of the word threshold is connected in my mind to the simple dwelling described in our second reading today: the house with a tin roof, a dirt floor, and a splintered table² – and one who wants for her home just what I want for mine. I want a hearth that will keep me warm. The second verse of today’s hymn, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door,” says:

*By faith made strong, the rafters will
withstand the battering of the storm.
This hearth, though all the world grow chill,
will keep you warm.*

This is what I want for my home. This is what Juana, the woman in the poem, wants. This is what our neighbors in Midland want also: homes to keep us and our loved ones keep us safe and warm and dry. I was in touch this week with the minister of the UU church in Midland and I’m happy to say that the church building was not damaged, although some of the church members had to evacuate during the flood and some of them have homes that are damaged. That situation is a reminder to us all that we want safe homes for ourselves and for everyone.

This idea of boundaries, and this notion of *May nothing evil cross this door*, what does that look like when the good we want to keep in is health, and the evil we want to keep out is sickness? These days I am conscious, as we all are, of the boundaries around my personal space. I wear a mask and I’m careful of who I mingle with and how close we get to each other. I’m conscious of the boundary between health and sickness at my home. I haven’t had a visitor inside my home for a long time, and when I have visitors outside, we wear our masks and we keep a safe distance. And what does keeping health in and keeping sickness out look like in this Fellowship? There’s a reason why I am the only one in this

room, with 90 empty chairs. Today when the board of trustees meets for a special meeting, they will discuss what it looks like to keep sickness out of this building. Are we going to do this for many months to come? The UUA, the national office, is recommending that all UU churches and fellowships have no in-person meetings for the next 11 months! The board of trustees will decide today what they think is prudent for this congregation, including disinfecting and cleaning when a few people come in and use the space, like I'm doing today. *May nothing evil cross this door* – including the coronavirus.

The whole notion of good and evil is a challenging one for Unitarian Universalists. We are more likely to have a relative notion of good and evil than an absolute one. We don't tend to believe in the sanctity of any scripture or sacred text; we take everything with a grain of salt. We interpret everything. My belief is that people are not either good or evil, but that we have capacity for both. And while people aren't evil, there are evil words, evil deeds, and evil ideas. Since we all have the capacity for both good and evil, we are choosing constantly—and hopefully choosing to be generous and loving, not selfish and greedy.

Take, for example, the difference between wearing masks and not wearing masks in this pandemic. Actions, words, and ideas can be interpreted as “evil” in this context. If you take the action of not wearing a mask; if you speak words discouraging others from wearing a mask; if you promote the idea that we don't need to or that this virus really isn't that bad: these actions, words, and ideas I would say are bad...or harmful...or evil. Because if you don't wear a mask, you put me at greater risk, and my loved ones whose health is more fragile than mine (my father turned 82 yesterday). I'm not usually comfortable with calling things evil, but the term may fit here. *May nothing evil cross this door*. The actions, words, and ideas associated with not wearing a mask are things I want to keep away from me. I want to have a boundary against them.

The third thing I want to talk about in the context of boundaries and good vs. evil today is about Black Lives Matter. I'm outraged by the death of a black man this week at the hands of police in Minneapolis—in broad daylight, in front of witnesses, while fellow officers stood by. I'm sympathetic with the protestors who are demonstrating in cities around the country...and saddened by the minority of protestors whose outrage has turned to violence. This is a Black Lives Matter moment. We have on our house of worship a prominent Black Lives Matter banner, and it may be the only one in town. Yesterday I was standing here, in the sanctuary, with the doors wide open. There are two sets of double doors opening onto University Street, and our rainbow flag was flying (as it is right now) just below our Black Lives Matter banner. And I noticed people passing by. I noticed a pickup truck go by. And then I felt scared, because I was thinking: what if someone who disagrees with the ideology represented by that Black Lives Matter banner, someone with the opposite ideology, is passing by and sees me here and wants to come in and shout at me?

By having that banner on our building we are proclaiming ourselves to be multicultural, anti-oppression, and anti-racist. I will point out the part of my story (in case you didn't catch it) that shows that I've got my own work to do. Just because someone is in a pickup truck doesn't mean that they're racist! So clearly I've got my own stereotypes and my own prejudices that I need to work on.

May nothing evil cross this door. I don't want racist ideology to cross the boundary of this sanctuary. We have proclaimed that we are anti-racist; it is our goal to keep evil ideas out of here – or keep them from taking root. Because racism is embedded in us if we live in this society; it is the water that we swim in. Therefore it is within my mind. So keeping evil ideas out of here is not so easy. But by promoting dialogue, and promoting love, and working for justice, that's how we combat those ideas.

May nothing evil cross this door. This is easiest when it is something physical, like threshing grain. We can keep the grain in and get rid of the stalks with a barrier. It's a lot harder when we're talking about an invisible virus: hard to keep sickness out of our personal space, our homes, and this Fellowship. And it's harder still when the evil we're trying to keep out is an ideology, such as racism.

This makes me think of the poem that we began our service with today, the poem that Ricki read as our call to worship, called “Waiting” by Marta Valentin.

*Step into the center
 come in from the margins
I will hold you here.*

...

*I will hold you
as you tremble.
I will warm you.*

...

*life is in here
 between you and me.*

...

*In this precious tiny space
no words need be whispered
to tell us we are one.³*

These are the words of Marta Valentin. This is how she says we can hold love in and keep hate out. With that embrace – literally or metaphorically. With that vulnerability for one another and with one another in this community where we show one another love, we can be authentic with each other. That’s how we keep hate out and hold love in.

*With laughter drown the raucous shout,
and, though these sheltering walls are thin,
may they be strong to keep hate out
and hold love in.*

¹ Words by Louis Untermeyer, used by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Published in Singing the Living Tradition, Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993.

² Sharon Scholl, “Antigua, Guatemala.” Published in To Wake, To Rise: meditations on justice and resilience, William Sinkford, ed. Skinner House Books, Boston, 2017.

³ Marta Valentin, “Waiting.” Published in Voices from the Margins, an anthology of meditations, Jacqui James and Mark Morrison-Reed, eds. Skinner House Books, Boston, 2012.