

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Sanctuary”
Sunday, October 21, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Worship God by reverencing the human soul as God's chosen sanctuary. Revere it in yourselves, revere it in others, and labor to carry it forward.”
- William Ellery Channing

Reading "Where God Is," Reflection By Kenny Wiley, UU World senior editor from 2015 to 2018 Source: *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood* <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/where-god>

The first time my heart felt broken, I went to church. When my mom died, I went to church. When I failed a class, I went to church. When I failed a friend, I went to church. When I felt like I'd failed at life, I went to church.

I didn't go asking for forgiveness. I didn't go asking for salvation.

I went to church—a Unitarian Universalist church—to be reminded, through hugs from friends, awkward interactions with strangers, and inspired messages from leaders, that no matter how down I feel, I still matter. I still have worth.

My God says, “Whoever you are, you are enough. Whomever you love, you are enough. Whatever your race or ethnicity, you are enough. Whatever your abilities, you are enough. Whatever your economic class, you are enough. Whatever your gender identity, you are enough. Whatever you do for a living, you are enough. If you don't have a job right now, you are enough. You are a human being, and so you are enough!”

My God says this when we come together, worship together, listen deeply to one another, and love one another. This, I believe, is the God of our faith.

My minister in college started the prayer with the same words every Sunday. I don't remember most of it; I do recall that he used the phrase "alone together." We experience life through our own lenses, yet we don't have to go it alone.

I know too well that grieving the loss of a parent is a long, exhausting road. I also know that walking alongside a mourning friend can feel, somehow, even more taxing. Being there for others is plain hard. It can be tough to work up the courage to talk with a newcomer. Yet I believe that it is in those public spaces that God or the Spirit of Life truly resides.

It may go against prevailing American individualism to say that we need other people. We like to believe that we can do everything on our own. I believe that the human spirit truly comes alive when we are challenged, prodded, and uplifted in community.

In the days after my mom's death, I felt like hiding. Doing so would have been perfectly okay. I decided, though, to go to church. My friends went with me, and the community held me up, as well as my family. Being in community was harder than being alone—yet it was what I needed. I needed to sit in that sanctuary with my UU friends. I needed to sing those hymns and hear the voices of others.

We don't have to go to service every Sunday—yet I do think that we need to show up somewhere, to some community. I believe that living out our faith requires interaction beyond our own selves. I believe it calls for community. I

believe that's where God is. Through covenant with others, we reach God, we know we are enough, and we are made better. We strengthen our souls and increase our capacity for love and understanding.

Sermon "Seeking Safety" Rev. Paul Sprecher

My colleague Meg Barnhouse, now minister of our UU Congregation in Austin, Texas, wrote this reflection on the words of Julian of Norwich, a Christian mystic and theologian from the Middle Ages, born around 1340:

"All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." This is one of the mantras used as a Christian meditation tradition. Don't think it comes from a dewy-eyed Pollyanna. The woman to whom it is credited, Dame Julian of Norwich, is the same one who, when her mule got stuck on a mountain road in a rainstorm, dismounted, shook her fist at the sky, and shouted, "God! If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you don't have many!"

Lately I have been experimenting with repeating, "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." I try it out in different situations. Sometimes I feel stupid affirming that all will be well. What about things that aren't well and don't look like they're ever going to be well? It's hard to see the whole picture from where I stand at this moment in my life."¹

Julian of Norwich did not live in a time of great optimism and grand hopes. Plague was rampant around her, a plague from which in some places as much as a third of the population was killed. Julian herself suffered from a very serious

illness when she was 30. She was so near death that her curate administered last rites, and it was then that she experienced a series of visions of Jesus Christ in which she was assured that “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well,” which became her mantra. It was in the face of extremity and suffering that this assurance came to her.

Kenny Wiley speaks of such a time in our reading this morning – he says, “The first time my heart felt broken, I went to church.” It was there, in extremity, that he found that, as he puts it,

My God says, “Whoever you are, you are enough. Whomever you love, you are enough. Whatever your race or ethnicity, you are enough. Whatever your abilities, you are enough. Whatever your economic class, you are enough. Whatever your gender identity, you are enough. Whatever you do for a living, you are enough. If you don’t have a job right now, you are enough. You are a human being, and so you are enough!”

My God says this when we come together, worship together, listen deeply to one another, and love one another. This, I believe, is the God of our faith.²

I think many of us might have an allergic reaction to the use of the word “God” in Kenny Wiley’s formulation of his faith. I certainly have had that reaction from time to time. When we hear someone from another religious tradition whom neighbors and friends have rescued in a time of great need say,

“I’m so grateful that God has given me these gifts,” we might object that it is not God who has given them but rather their friends and neighbors.

It is literally true that it is always our own human hands that provide help in times of need, food to the hungry, clothes for the naked, comfort for those who mourn. And yet there is something about the gathering of souls together in this good work that is greater than the sum of each of us, something that binds us together in love to create something beyond what any of us can do on our own. It was this sense of there being something among us greater than ourselves that led our Universalist forebears to adopt as their central message that “God is Love” and to assert that love is of God. In that sense, God is that which comes into being among us when we gather in the spirit of our great covenant.

Understood in this way, God is no an almighty puppeteer who has fore-ordained all that will happen from the smallest of our own actions to the greatest tragedies and triumphs of humankind. God is rather much smaller and more personal, a spirit which call us to love one another, to tend to the better angels of our nature. When pressed to name my own theology, I call myself a panentheist, by which I mean that the divine, the sacred, is among us, around us, and within us. When we gather as a congregation, it is in particular the love among us and between us that we experience in particular. It is here that we can find safety, sanctuary from the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, as Shakespeare puts

it. There is shelter from sorrows here, and it is here that we may come to learn that “All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

I do not mean to suggest that it is only in this place that shelter and safety are to be found. Congregations of all sorts are bound together by such an orientation toward something greater than each individual in them. In a similar way, “When a person accepts the Buddhist philosophy and wants to make it part of their life, the traditional way is to say ‘I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha [the community of Buddhists].’”³ There is safety, shelter, sanctuary, in the gathering of those seeking to embody love in their lives together.

After Meg Barnhouse wrote her meditation about Julian of Norwich’s mantra, she wrote a song in which she imagines a conversation with Julian about her own doubts that all will be well when man things are clearly NOT well and show little sign of being well during her lifetime. Here’s how her song ends:

[Julian] said, "No one does not know, does not know about loneliness and no one does not know, does not know about disease."

She said, "No one does not know, does not know about cruelty."

She said, "I know, it's too much. It brought me to my knees where I heard:
'All will be well, and all will be well, all manner of things will be well.'

She said, "Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about tenderness and Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about friends?" She said, "Babygirl, do you not know, do you not know about the Spirit?"

She said, "Babygirl, do you not know, it's only love that never ends and so, all will be well, and all will be well, all manner of things will be well." ⁴

We also find safety by allowing ourselves to be awed by the world around us, by the forests and mountains and oceans. These aspects of the creation, of the web of life of which we are only a small part, point us toward the sacred around us and beyond us. My panentheist theology understands that there is that of the divine among us and between us as gathered friends seeking a sacred love, but that there is that of the divine in the manifestations of grandeur all around us as well. We are nestled into the awe-inspiring greatness of this good earth. Nature can be terrifying in hurricanes and earthquakes, but it is also the earth that gives us sustenance and mothers us. We have lost some of the wonder of that reality as we have become more remote from growing our own food, but being present in nature, seeking out and feeling gratitude for that magnificence – these are also ways to find comfort when we mourn, to recover from wounds of the spirit.

Mary Oliver wrote her collection of poems *Thirst* when she was mourning the loss of her beloved partner of many years. She speaks of this in particular in her poem "Heavy:"

That time

I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had his hand in this,

As well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poet said,

Was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
“it’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it —
books, bricks, grief –
It’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.“

So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?

Have you heard
the laughter
comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled —
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply?⁵

In her admiration of the things of this world there is also safety, comfort,
sanctuary.

Finally, there is that of the divine within each of us, which we can seek out in silence, in meditation, in withdrawal from the constant busyness of our daily living. The first chapter of Genesis says that humans were created “in the image of God.” This is one of many metaphors that try to express our sense that there is something within each of us that connects us to a greater wholeness. Some see this embodied in particular in the conscience, the still small voice that tells us when we are on the right path and when we are going astray. Others speak of a soul or a spirit within us that is greater than our physical being, perhaps even

immortal. I find the image of a divine spark meaningful, something that points beyond what is apparent in the here and now and toward something greater than the sum of all of my own actions and aspirations.

So I think there is sacredness, that of the divine, God, among us, around us, and within us. It is in the various manifestations of this “greater than” that we can find safety, sanctuary, healing, the reassurance that “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

Meg Barnhouse concludes her reflections on the mantra of Julian of Norwich this way:

Here is what I do know. I know that I have a choice between hope or despair when viewing the world and my future. Each choice has equal evidence in its favor. Each is affirmed and underscored by my life experience. How do I decide between them? I choose the one that brings the most joy, the most healing, the most compassion to my life and to the world. In despair I’m no good to anyone. I stop functioning well, I drag through the days, I deal with horrors that haven’t even happened yet. I don’t enjoy my children, food, sex, or any of the other dazzling pleasures of my life.

When my mother was dying of cancer, she said to me, “Meggie, everything that happens to me is good.” That was a statement of her faith. I was a cynical 23-year-old seminary student. My mother’s faith sounded

naïve and silly. I was in despair over her suffering, but she was not in despair, and it was her suffering. Suddenly, it seemed presumptuous to be in despair over her suffering when she was choosing not to.

As I experiment with this mantra and risk feeling stupid, which is a feeling I despise, I ask myself, “Which is more stupid: despair my whole life just in case things aren’t going to end well, or live in joy and hope my whole life, whether or not things turn out well?” I’m going to keep singing this mantra to my fears. All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.⁶

May we all find comfort, and inspiration, and safety, in that of the divine among us, around us, and within us.

¹ Meg Barnhouse, *The Rock of Ages at the Taj Mahal: Unquiet Meditations*, Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 1998, p. 7.

² Kenny Wiley, "Where God Is," <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/where-god>

³ “The Three Jewels and Five Precepts,” https://www.buddha101.com/p_jewels.htm

⁴ <https://www.revrobinbartlett.com/sermon-blog/waste-your-heart-on-fear-no-more>

⁵ “Heavy,” Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006, pp. 53-54.

⁶ Barnhouse, p. 8.