

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Memory”
Sunday, November 4, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Time does not heal all wounds but gives us tools to endure them. I have found this to be true in the greatest and smallest of matters.”
~Patti Smith

Reflection

- McKayla Hoffman

When initially pondered, “surrendering” sounds easy. After all, we’re bombarded with the reality of individuals giving into the darkest side of humanity’s nature daily—and what was once a swelling of hatred beneath the surface of America has emerged, emboldened. Does “surrendering” actually mean letting hate win?

In a moving discourse, spiritual master and reformer Sadhguru explored the concept of “surrender.” He described how those spiritual masters before him exemplified what, to him, it means to truly “surrender.” According to Sadhguru, one must be willing to crawl through the most vile filth in this world to fully release their attachments and surrender.

But what filth must we all crawl through in 2018’s America? Whose backs carry the heaviest weight of humanity’s evolutionary crescendo? We should collectively, but many individuals do. Each victim of the Tree of Life Synagogue, every trans individual who’s terrified of November 6th’s outcomes, every person of color every day of their lives—they bear this weight.

Sadhguru also discussed how, in addition to achieving surrender, these spiritual masters reached a higher state of consciousness by falling in love--not in a nice way, or in a safe way. But, in Sadhguru's words, "in an insane way."

What would happen if we fell in love with humanity like this? It would mean denying everything we've been conditioned to believe and think, and denying our most carnal reactions. We would have to love each other from the perspective of a child still in the womb of a mother, woven within the sacred origin, where we can lose the judgments that the eerie, artificial light of learned hate has put into our eyes. We can love with reckless abandon when the love of "othering" and "prejudice" dies instead of Jewish congregants.

To get through this dark time in our history, for myself personally, I have to believe that moving closer to our collective purpose for being is surrendering to our true nature: as stewards of unconditional love. Whether that's god or whatever you want to call it, that's what I'm willing to place my bets on. Like those who commit the most heinous acts against our united family, I love to hate. I've gotten a chance to practice deeply satisfying hate every day in 2018. But somewhere beyond these evil propensities lies what I have to believe is love, our highest nature.

Jewish identities, trans identities, the inherent worth of people of color—none of these realities are up for discussion. The core of our being is not for anyone

but ourselves. We are the authors of our stories and the foundation-layers for our forebears.

But, at the end of it all—at the end of THIS world, the world of 2018—if we are meant to radically love, to crawl through the filth of reaching our highest potential, may we do so together.

*Hiney mah tov umanayeem
Shevetakim gam yachad.*

Sermon

“Never Forget” Rev. Paul Sprecher

The Jewish Bible, known in Christian tradition as the Old Testament, begins with the story of creation. It says that at the very beginning, God created difference – distinction. In the midst of chaos in which no differentiation could be found, the story says that God separated the light from the darkness. Then God separated the earth from the heavens and after that the dry land from the sea. Without these divisions there would be nothing. In modern terms, we might say that before the Big Bang there was no differentiation, and after, all of the distinctions that make the universe and life came into being. Into the midst of this new creation, the story goes on to tell that Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden of Eden and that they were expelled from the Garden because they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Some Christian traditions have interpreted this story to mean that human beings are utterly depraved, ruined by what is termed Original Sin. In contrast, both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions, as well Jewish tradition, have taught that this story is

about how human beings grew up from a simple state of innocence to the complex state of having to choose what is right and what is wrong. We believe that each of us as individual as well as groups of human beings can and must continuously choose between love and hate, between right and wrong, between good and evil. We are given choices.

Immediately after the story of the Garden of Eden is the story of the first murder, the killing of Abel by Cain. It's easy to scoff at the story, to consider it unfair – why should God have preferred the sacrifice of meat that Abel made over the sacrifice of wheat that Cain made? But perhaps there is a deeper level to this story. These different sacrifices also represent different ways of life, of making a living. If Cain is growing wheat, he is a farmer, tilling the land, part of the Agricultural Revolution, which became the foundation of increasingly organized kingdoms and empires, source of great suffering as well as of great wealth. Abel, on the other hand, was a herdsman, tending his cattle, probably nomadic as well. It would seem that God preferred that simpler way of life – but it is Cain, the farmer, who survives and becomes the father of nations.

Here there is another great differentiation, akin to those narrated at the very beginning of creation, and here we see that when human beings are divided by the ways they make a living – or indeed by so many other differences – enmity and jealousy can arise, and can also result in hatred and violence. Differences between modes of living and religions and nations and classes have been with us

since the dawn of civilization and before, and they have often been sources of hatred and violence and killing.

Even Jesus was not free of the prejudice that flows from difference. We like to think of Jesus as all-loving and universally welcoming, but a less flattering story is told in the Gospel of Mark [15:21-28 New American Standard Bible], where it is said that Jesus was approached by a SyroPhoenecian woman – a Canaanite – who begged him to heal her daughter. Jesus replies, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.... It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” The woman replies that “even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” At this point Jesus acknowledges her and her faith and consents to heal her daughter. The Gospels were written to hold Jesus up as a model of goodness, so this less than flattering story has a particular claim to credibility or it would probably not be included. Yet this is the same Jesus who tells the story of the Good Samaritan, in which he illustrates the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves by expanding the circle of neighbors to include the detested outsider. Even Jesus can learn, it seems, that these conflicts arising from difference are indeed very ancient and pose challenges for even the best and most exalted among us.

Nor is Christianity innocent of the sin of Anti-Semitism that was manifested in the murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue a week ago. Passages from the sayings of Jesus have been used for centuries to demonize and persecute the

Jews, and the Holocaust of Hitler was preceded in Germany by the virulent anti-Semitism of Martin Luther four hundred years before, and so many others.

But we have choices. Each of us can choose to focus on differences of many kinds and use them to justify hatred and violence. We are seeing in this election that playing to division and distrust, amplifying supposed threats and denouncing other Americans as evil can be a powerful source of motivation. Those of us who wish to choose for unity over against division, for tolerance over against intolerance, for love over against hate – even we can be tempted to build walls and foment disregard and demean the good sense and even the humanity of others.

And there is hope. Just one day before the killings at the Tree of Life, the remains of Matthew Shepard were interred at the National Cathedral twenty years after he was tortured and killed by people who couldn't bear to accept the humanity of someone whose sexuality was different than their own. A gay priest led the service. Let us grant that this is very little and very late – but it is also a national recognition and coming to terms with the enormous violence done to gays, lesbians and bisexual human beings, a violence that remains a clear and present danger to transgender people and others who are gender non-conforming. That reality is on the ballot on Tuesday in Proposition Three. I don't do politics from the pulpit if I can avoid it, and we don't usually put out yard signs advocating a particular position on referenda, but the protection of fundamental

human rights is basic to our affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and for this exceptions must be made. We must all vote.

We can become discouraged in the face of a tragedy like that at the Tree of Life last Shabbat. We can come to believe that nothing will ever change, that divisions will fester forever and will always be used to create hatred and intolerance. We can despair of our nation and come to believe that these United States were founded in the iniquity of slavery and the slaughter of Native Americans and that it can never change. We can say that at its conception this nation was damned by Original Sin and that only a complete repudiation of everything that has gone before, of our entire history as a people, can possibly change us for the better. But we believe we have choices as individuals and as a nation. We choose to remember both the good and the evil in our history, we choose to bear witness for the good impulses that have been with us as human beings since the dawn of history while acknowledging the temptation to evil and divisiveness and violence.

Barack Obama said as much in his first Inaugural Address when he said:

We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths -- that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and Selma, and Stonewall; just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone; to hear a

King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth.¹

We can show up, we can answer the call of love.

In response to the assassination of Jews at Tree of Life Synagogue on Shabbat a week ago, the Union of Reform Jewish Congregations issued a call to “Show Up for Shabbat,” asking friends and neighbors and people of all faiths to come to Shabbat services this past Friday. I attended the service at Hingham’s Temple Sha’aray Shalom led by my dear friend Rabbi Shira Joseph. Whereas Shira sometimes struggles to get more than fifty people to services, on Friday there were hundreds. The back wall of the sanctuary was opened as is normally done only for High Holy Days in order to accommodate all of the friends and neighbors who showed up to remember, to be in solidarity, to vow never to forget.

I was struck by the fact that two of the readings offered for silent meditation in the order of service are also in our own hymnal. The first is by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.... Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.” In this King is reflecting another ancient teaching, this from the Dhammapada of the Buddha, also in our hymnal: “Never does hatred cease by

hating in return; only through love can hatred come to an end.” We have needed to be reminded of these truths generation after generation, for it is in our nature to forget.

The second silent meditation at the service Friday is also in our hymnal, Judy Chicago’s “And then.” I’ll close with her words:

And then all that has divided us will merge

And then compassion will be wedded to power

And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind

And then both men and women will be gentle

And then both women and men will be strong

And then no person will be subject to another’s will

And then all will be rich and free and varied

And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many

And then all will share equally in the Earth’s abundance

And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old

And then all will nourish the young

And then all will cherish life’s creatures

And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth

And then everywhere will be called Eden once again²

UNTIL THEN, we remember. We show up. We find ways to break down differences that don’t matter. We answer the call of love. We never forget.

AMEN

¹ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>

² *Singing the Living Tradition #464 - “And Then” ~ Judy Chicago*