

Readings – Divinity in the Unexpected

Reading:

Our first reading is a quote from Unitarian Universalist minister Dawn Fortune:

“I see the divine in the generosity of those who often have the least to give, in kindness offered by those who would arguably have the most reason to be bitter. The divine is like love in this regard: irrational, unexpected, and beautiful.”

Reading:

Our second reading is an excerpt from Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*:

“Listen, God love everything you love- and a mess of stuff you don’t. But more than anything else, God love admiration.

You saying God vain? I ast.

Naw, she say. Not vain, just wanted to share a good thing. I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it

What it do when it pissed off?

Oh, it make something else. People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

Yeah? I say.

Yeah, she say. It always making little surprises and springing them on use when we least expect.

You mean it want to be loved, just like the Bible say.

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk?”

Sermon – Divinity in the Unexpected

Two women - Celie and Shug - sat together, discussing life, hardships, anger, and God

“God ain’t a he or a she, but a It”

“But what do it look like?” I ast.

“Don’t look like nothing, she say. It ain’t a picture show. It ain’t something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel it, you’ve found it”

Shug’s idea that God is everything. Everything that is or ever will be.

This short conversation preceded our second reading. Celie and Shug are two characters from Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. Celie and Shug are two African American women living in the poor, rural south in the early 1900s. Two women who lived hard lives – especially Celie, who had suffered much abuse throughout her life. These two women, sitting, talking about God – about “it”. What they have to say is simply remarkable.

“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it”

Seeing the unexpected in a color – the color purple. Seeing that beauty, that unexpected beauty, and attributing it to God. Women who struggled – who lived hard lives. And to notice! To notice this. Living in awe – in wonder – of that unexpected beauty that is all around us. Shug says, “It always making little surprises and springing them on use when we least expect.” The

unexpected sprung upon us when we least expect it. How about that idea of God trying to please us? “It” loves us, just as we love “it.” Admiration brings us closer to God, to “it” – this encourages us to take a moment to celebrate in the unexpected that God creates. From where does the unexpected come? To Celie and Shug, the unexpected comes from God. The unexpected comes from “it.”

This idea of paying attention to the beauty. Of living life in wonder. In always anticipating a sacred moment.

From where does the unexpected come? The unexpected can be so entirely beautiful, and entirely unfounded. A robin’s nest in the midst of a city, a crocus’s bright petals pushing through the crust of the frost; the smile of a baby for no apparent reason.

From where does the unexpected come? How can we expect joy and love from one who is struggling with life’s unanswerable questions, a kind gesture from someone experiencing profound loss, the smile and laugh of the unhoused.

Rev. Dawn Fortune writes, “I see the divine in the generosity of those who often have the least to give, in kindness offered by those who would arguably have the most reason to be bitter.

The divine is like love in this regard: irrational, unexpected, and beautiful.”

Irrational, unexpected, and beautiful.

There is no way to define “divine,” and no need to come to a universal understanding. In our faith, divinity is a concept as unique as each individual who tries to grapple with an

understanding of this elusive idea. Perhaps “ultimate truth,” “spirit of love,” “God,” “Allah,” “spirit of the earth,” or, as demonstrate in our reading from Alice Walker, “it.”

But we see this divinity every day- That beauty that can happen when the unexpected happens – perhaps just when we need that unexpected good to happen!

All one has to do is experience nature! A beautiful culmination of an unexpected rose bud, hair tossed around by a surprise breeze, the mystery of a thunderclap that signifies the coming rain storm, the awe produced as a pond reflects the trees around it.

Or music – jazz! Improvisation – when what is offered is but a musical chord and yet what is produced is musical harmony between artists, a culmination of nearly unexpected notes from a saxophone, guitar, drum set, piano – all working together to create perfect harmony, working off of, not a knowledge of what to expect, but an intuition of the beautiful

Or art – the beauty that comes when an artist sits down with nothing but artistic tools and an idea. The chunk of wood that is crafted into a bowl; the painting created brush stroke by brush stroke.

Or- notice the struggling, single mom singing songs of hope to her baby. Or, really, anyone who is struggling simply surviving

That which is ultimate, unknowable, divine, true – that spirit of life is found in what is unexpected. From where does this come?

So many have grappled with this very concept – have struggled and searched and meditated on this holy truth that is the unexpected; have crafted theologies and novels and questioned the presence of the holy, no matter how they define this.

There are those who call themselves Process Theists – those who believe that God is the source of novelty; who believe that God is persuasive rather than controlling – Who believe that God tries to persuade the universe towards good. Who believe that whenever something new happens, that is God- God's divine touch persuading us, working with us. The nature of God is this novelty in our lives, helping us to realize new possibilities once the status quo is no longer sufficient. From where does the unexpected come? Those events that lead creation towards good. The drug addict that found sobriety, that spends nights in Narcotics Anonymous- that is God's touch. Original thinking – that which propels science, philosophy, art, governments – this comes from God urging us towards good. That philosopher, buried in a cave of books, scraps of paper, pencils, balls of scribbled notes. That sculptor, poised with a scapula, finding the right angle to shave their wooden statue – that is God's touch. All of this creative transformation.

Dw

To these Process Theists, Where does the unexpected come? From God creating novel events on this earth, events that urge humanity towards good.

This is a theology – idea – concept, tucked away in a sacred, holy space with so many other theologies, ideas, concepts, musings. From where does a leaf spring from a fallen tree? From where do the feelings of intimate love arise?

There is a belief in Zen Buddhism that some great sense of awakening can happen at any moment. Any moment. Living in that expectation. While to some Buddhists awakening is remote or nearly unobtainable, Zen Buddhism is different, and finds that awakening constantly possible in day to day life. From where does the unexpected come? It is constant. The joy in the color purple. The smile on a struggling parent.

Or in Judaism. Perhaps the Messiah is among us. Some live and navigate lives with the expectation that the Messiah may arrive at any time – that God wants this arrival to be a mystery; that we are in a state of the unexpected – not knowing when the Messiah will come or who the Messiah will be – that the Messiah is among us today and will reveal itself when we are worthy. This understanding calls us not to anticipate a grand entrance, but to anticipate miracles but to expect that the Messiah will arrive when we are not paying attention. Embrace with unexpected, for the unexpected stranger may be the Messiah.

All of these great thinkers – theologians – believers – followers – scientists – grappling with this ever elusive concept – from where does the unexpected come? Is the Messiah behind the smile of a friendly stranger?

What is the unexpected in our lives?

How does faith, how does religion, play into this?

Humanism is not absent from this idea of the divinely unexpected, the ultimate truth! For what is science? What is innovation? What is human progress but the ultimate truth? To many humanists, this divine unknown comes from human agency. Both as a collective, and as individuals. This is the unexpected power of critical thinking.

Or Christianity. Take a moment to reflect on the Gospel of Thomas, an early collection of sayings of Jesus, some of which did not make it to the Bible. The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what the kingdom of heaven is like" He said to them, "It is like a mustard seed. It is the smallest of all seeds. But when it falls on tilled soil, it produces a great plant and becomes shelter for birds of the sky." Heaven as a mustard seed. Heaven as small; not grand; not at all grandiose; not towering white pillars and thrones of angels, but a mustard seed; something that may commonly be ignored, unseen, unrecognized. "His disciples said to him, 'when will the kingdom come?' Jesus said, 'it will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'here it is' or 'there it is.' Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it.'" The kingdom of heaven is already here! We are living in heaven. That which is unexpected, that may be Heaven. From where does the unexpected come?

I wonder the power of living life with innocence, with wonder, with joy, with an awareness for the unexpected; I wonder the power of living with an awareness of what we don't know - that this is beautiful; this novelty is divine and is found in the unexpected. I wonder the power of always being aware of the unexpected. What might happen as you are simply walking down the sidewalk – beauty may be just around the corner!

The process theologian or process theist, see that each new event is God's touch! In this way, seeing God every day – seeing God in the little things, like the painting of a child, or the big things – the cure to diseases. Seeing God in this.

The Zen Buddhist, living with a belief that a sudden awakening is possible at any time, or the Humanist, gathering on Sunday mornings to hear sermons perhaps more like lectures nevertheless grasping at the idea of the ultimate – how does the unexpected happen?

Those of the Jewish faith who sees the Messiah among us, waiting to surprise us – to arrive unexpectedly and thus to live every moment in that state of being aware of the unexpected!

The Christian who sees the Kingdom of God already among us – in something as unexpected as a mustard seed. Heaven in a mustard seed.

The unexpected beauty we see can be something simple – can be a rose or a smile or a new love or a novel or perhaps a scientific fact. Or- it can be grand. It can be a force to change society, institutions, worldviews – to overcome oppression – that is divine.

I want to lift up selections of Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise"

"You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies.

You may trod me in the very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise

...

You may shoot me with your words,

You may cut me with your eyes

You may kill me with your hatefulness,

But still, like air, I'll rise

...

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear,

I rise

Into a day break that wonderously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the hope of the slave

I rise

I rise

I rise

What can be more divine than overcoming oppression. What can be more divine than Rising – rising after generations of oppression. This speaks of a people overcoming generations of oppression, of abuse, of dehumanization, and rising. Rising. Is this unexpected? I would say it is remarkable. We have seen this rising throughout history – we will continue to see this rising – we need to be that source of good that helps groups of all kinds rise. The divine nature of social justice – of our first principle of our inherent worth and dignity, of our 7th principle, the interdependent web of all life. Rising, as a society. Urging towards good and working towards change that so many do not expect.

Whether overcoming oppression or living life in wonder, we need grasp on to the unexpected – grasp on to the divine. To a deep appreciation for beauty. An opportunity to live life in awe, in a state of expecting the unexpected, and in doing so, seeing the beauty that is around us, seeing the divine, connecting with the divine – whatever that word may mean to you. To live in awareness and anticipation for that divine, unexpected event. To remind ourselves of this holy unknown, this anticipatory surprise, every day. Remember the words of Shug when you see a rainbow amongst the storm or hear the call of a bird during the hustle and bustle of city life: “It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect it.”

May it be so, and Amen.