

Listen, and Speak Righteously
By Stephen Deininger, Music Director
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Reading 1 - Adapted from The Three Fish, by Rumi

A certain man caught a bird in a trap.

The bird says, "Sir, you have eaten many cows and sheep in your life, and you're still hungry. The little bit of meat on my bones won't satisfy you either. If you let me go, I'll give you three pieces of wisdom.

One I'll say standing on your hand. One on your roof.

And one I'll speak from the limb of that tree."

The man was interested. He freed the bird and let it stand on his hand.

"Number One: Do not believe an absurdity, no matter who says it."

The bird flew and lit on the man's roof.

"Number Two: Do not grieve over what is past. It's over.

Never regret what has happened."

"By the way," the bird continued, "in my body there's a huge pearl weighing as much as ten copper coins. It was meant to be the inheritance of you and your children, but now you've lost it. You could have owned the largest pearl in existence, but evidently it was not meant to be."

The man started wailing.

The bird said: "Didn't I just say, Don't grieve for what's in the past? And also: Don't believe an absurdity? My entire body doesn't weigh as much as ten copper coins. How could I have a pearl that heavy inside me?"

The man came to his senses. "All right. Tell me Number Three."

"Yes. You've made such good use of the first two!"

Don't give advice to someone who's groggy and falling asleep.

Don't throw seeds on the sand.

Some torn places cannot be patched.

Reading 2 - Sappho Fragment 137

I want to say something but shame
prevents me.....

.....

yet if you had a desire for good or beautiful things

and your tongue were not concocting some evil to say,
shame would not hold down your eyes
but rather you would speak about what is just

Introduction

We live in a time where people are speaking, crying, or shouting for justice. Some of us speak of justice for ourselves, but most of us here are currently demanding justice for others. Most of us here use the word “ally” to describe our activism. I can only speak for my own experience, and even in that I won’t have time today to mention everything that I should. Take this as one person, saying what they can.

A few days ago, a friend, someone I mentored professionally for some time, asked me if I would join him for an evening bike ride before he leaves for service overseas. I don’t see many people nowadays but this was an exception. During our ride, he asked my opinion on the Black Lives Matter movement, and confessed that he was a bit unclear on what his place is at this point in history. Given as I was in the process of speaking to friends and collecting thoughts for this service, I was fortunately in the rare state of semi-coherence to help him sort through his thoughts on a complex subject. Some background on my friend, he is an outstanding writer of the journalistic style, and his love of language often leads to pedantry, his word, not mine, when it comes to language and the meaning of words. He expressed some concern about reducing what he saw as an important conversation about equality to the competition between two statements that, when divorced from events, passions, and history, are on their face true when only words are considered. This of course is the conflict between those who say Black Lives Matter, and All Lives Matter. I’ll share what I said to him a bit later.

The fact is, the conversation we had, while complicated, is fairly common or at least more common nowadays. In essence he, and many people, are saying that they have complex feelings on social justice that they are willing to attempt to work through, but in working out their complex feelings they are left with questions: “what does this all mean,” and “what can I do to help?”, or restated, “how can I be a better ally”.

Were I perfect, I would have an easy answer to those questions. As I am imperfect, I have a difficult admonition instead. Listen, and having listened, then speak passionately.

Listening

Listening. It sounds easy, but it is so very hard for many. To listen, not to hear, but to truly listen, requires at first an admission that we do not know. Who was expecting us to know everything? I don't think anyone was, but so many are afraid of this simple first admission, to say "I don't know" and that is just the difficulty of a first step.

During the story in our time for all ages, we heard of a bird say to a man "I will reveal to you three pieces of wisdom." The bird asks the man to listen, and the man wants to listen. How do I know that? Well, if he didn't want to listen he would have simply eaten the bird. So, this man who is trying to listen hears point one: "Do not believe an absurdity, no matter who says it". My friends, if people simply did not believe things that are absurd they would be doing so much good for the world. People who seek to divide us often rely upon absolute absurdity to do so. This bird surely speaks wisdom.

The bird gives us a second piece of wisdom, and I differ on the translation here. The poem as translated says "Do not grieve over what is past. It's over. Never regret what has happened." I would never ask you not to grieve, particularly loved ones who have passed. Grieve is not the correct word here, this is a statement about regret. All of us at times can feel shame for things we have done, but ultimately we have all of us grown, and all of us are growing. The bird asks us to remember that fact. This is truly wise.

Then of course, the bird tests the man with an absurdity, that he is full of gold, and the man regrets his past, and reveals that he wasn't listening. He reveals that he did not value the wisdom, and robs himself, and us actually, from hearing the third piece of wisdom the bird had, which goes unsaid.

We should observe the way this man listened. To truly listen we have to listen deeply, we have to accept what is said and bring it into our hearts. I want to introduce or reintroduce you to one of my favorite words. Robert Heinlein in his science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* introduced a term, to grok, spelled G-R-O-K. It means to know a concept completely by using your empathy to open yourself to knowledge. This is the way we must listen.

Being married to an African American woman, I saw an interesting thing happen over the past months. She was having awkward conversations, with friends, theater

groups I have directed for, even animal rights groups. For a time I felt she was bombarded with people saying "what do I say?" Most of them already had something they wanted to say, and were actually looking for validation. Not all of them listened, many just spoke, it wasn't great but it also wasn't necessarily bad. I'll be specific with my wording here, "wanting to try to listen" is a start. If everyone "wanted to try to listen", they would be doing so much good for the world. To be fair, I have seen some amazing things happen as a result of these conversations, some people truly listened and changed their thinking. They grokked.

There is also study. I have some recommendations of sources I found useful, but for the sake of time I'll make one specific recommendation, the documentary the 13th, which is always available on Netflix. I'll be clear, this film was hard to watch. I watched it this week, and came out of it with a primer on the current state of the justice system, a topic that I actually hold a degree in. I came out of that film with an understanding of just how much I didn't know, and how much more is out there I don't understand.

In an attempt to "grok" another's experience, I asked some good friends "what do you want an ally to know"? They asked people to back them up, not allow racism to go unchallenged, to provide aid, to do soul searching, to love, and they had expressions of love for friends who are there to aid them. A theme came out of it. This is real, we are not ok, and we want to be taken seriously. Ask yourself, how long has a people been saying this thing, "this is real, we are not ok, and we want, no need, to be taken seriously."

To Speak Righteously

Listening is only half of what I ask people to do, the other is speak out righteously for justice

I want to read to you again Sappho fragment 137, it isn't long, but it is worth reading slowly and carefully. Let's take the first sentence. Slide 3 "I want to say something, but shame prevents me". Right from the first word Slide 4, we know who is speaking, it is Sappho herself. She has something she is compelled to say but Slide 5 "shame" prevents her. As poetic as it is, there is a bit of a mistranslation here, or rather a problem where there is no one word in our language to make a good translation possible. Here is the term in Greek Slide 6 (Αἰδώς), pronounced Aidos. In Greek culture Aidos is both a concept, and a proper noun. Some myths call her a close companion of the god of vengeance Nemesis, some say she is the daughter of Prometheus who brought us fire, but none of those stories matter too much in this topic. She is a

Goddess associated with a quality, a feeling of reverence or shame which restrains men from wrong. To the ancient Greeks it also encompassed the emotion that a rich person might feel in the presence of the impoverished, that their disparity of wealth, whether a matter of luck or merit, was ultimately undeserved. Most students of mythology call her a personification more than something that myths ask us to accept as a living breathing deity. In this poem, it is the concept that Aidos represents that stops Sappho's tongue. It is the concept of aidos that stops Sappho from speaking, defined as understanding the boundaries of another person using empathy, and to change behavior based on sensitivity to their feelings. Sounds similar to our new word from earlier, to grok. Think of Aidos as making a kind and respectful choice after grokking.

Next in this poem is, sadly, damaged. Studying Sappho is difficult, as her poems are from parchment, and they are heavily damaged. But those who spend time with her work know that in contemplating the lost sections, she tends to reveal herself. When the poem started, the noun was "I". Sappho was speaking, but here, after the damaged section, the nouns are "you". Someone else is now teaching Sappho, instructing her, we can assume that the missing section introduces a new character who brings some enlightenment. They are saying that, when you, inside yourself, are filled with good and beautiful things, there will be no need for Aidos to hold your tongue, and you would speak openly and proudly (I'm adding some concepts like pride to the poem) and would speak for justice. My friends, that is where I want to be, I think that is where we need to be.

Back from ancient Greece to the modern day. Slides off I want to tell you about another friend of mine, Dr. Michelle Guyton, who currently serves in the Maryland House of Delegates in District 42B. She is speaking out in a District that will likely vote her out for doing so, and she is doubling down in speaking up for justice. This week she appeared on WYPR to discuss her effort to ban swastikas and confederate flags from Baltimore County Schools. She was contacted by a Black Lives Matter group in the Hereford Zone, and in particular a white student who is a member of this group who was speaking out against the prevalence of symbols of hatred where he goes to school. The article states: "A 14-year-old rising Hereford High School freshman said during his time at Hereford Middle School, the confederate flag was everywhere. The student, who asked to remain anonymous fearing for his safety, told WYPR that the flag - a divisive symbol of renewed national debate - was visible everywhere on T-shirts and stickers." What stood out to me is that the student is not named in the current online version of the article, but was named when it originally ran. Dr. Guyton publicly stated that the article was edited out of concern for safety for the student. I asked her if they were

being proactive out of concern for potential threats, and she told me no, this student had absolutely received threats for stating that hate symbols were present in his school.

I know that there are some who believe that peace and dignity can be achieved through positivity, and I want to believe that. I really do. I want to sing for love and have that passion and love catch fire. But in reality, the only ethical thing to do when a child is faced with threats for saying that what is wrong is wrong is to speak out against it. That is unacceptable, and those threats must have consequences. Kindness is not the answer here, as much as that hurts to say. Ethical behavior is. We are faced with the tolerance paradox as written by Philosopher Karl Popper: "Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them.—In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. ...We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant."

During my conversation with Dr. Guyton she shared many ways for people to make their voices heard, but on an ethical level we discussed some views on what is right to do. To be silent in the face of injustice is wrong. To lead as an ally is also wrong, we give those whose fight it is the right to lead while we aid. What we agreed on is that we must carefully examine the systems that we have stewardship over, to make sure that they align with the principles of social justice, and fix the areas where they are lacking. The Unitarian Universalist church has the chance to do that by adopting the 8th Principal, but it is my deepest hope that doing so is viewed as the start of hard work, not the final success of it.

I will close now with the statement I made to my admittedly pedantic friend I mentioned earlier, who was concerned with the conflict between two phrase "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter," both statements that on their face he believes to be true. This was a time for kindness, we give honest people room to work through change. He was open to listening, he was open to learning to speak, as Sappho said, about what is just. So I asked him to consider what the word "All" means, and I'll leave you with the same thought.

We know what "ALL" should mean, it should mean "all, everyone, every last person." Historically in our country, that is simply not the case. From the birth of our

nation a slave-owning man wrote "All men are created equal," hoping those words would be enough, but, as much as he wanted it to, "All" did not mean "All." In practice it meant "All, except for...", in voting rights "All, except for...", even in abolishing slavery, it abolished it for "all, except for," and this is a direct quote from our constitution, except for "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted". Our country has been saying "all, except for..." at every step of our history. It is time to, with voice and with action, in every place we have the ability to speak and to act, to ensure that in our future generations "ALL means ALL." It doesn't mean it today, it didn't mean it yesterday, but, with hard work...love...morality...and the intolerance of intolerance, maybe, just maybe, we can realize the dream of those who made their national anthem "Lift EVERY Voice and Sing", and by EVERY, they meant EVERY single voice.

May it be so

Reading References Recommended by the Author

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