

## **In Each of Our Days**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 11, 2024**

When we pause to center in spirituality, when we pause to connect with all we hold sacred and holy, all that cultivates our spiritual growth, all that fosters hope and love and compassion and an ever-deepening faith, we may imagine one poised in silence and stillness, meditating on the breath, the heart, compassion. We may imagine one in the humble act of prayer, conversing with their sacred and welcoming the holy into their hearts. And yet I invite us today into a different spiritual practice – a different way to connect with the sacred, with hope and love, and deepen one’s own faith – the practices of justice and equity interwoven into the very fabric of our lives. We unfold the beauty of life and faith as we fulfill our role as children of the great universe, healing all that is broken one act at a time. Justice and equity are implemented, not solely from those actions of monumental impact, not solely from those deeds that quite clearly offer profound influence and change – though these are necessary and sacred as well. But it is what we do and what we carry within throughout the mundane, everyday living. It is, as we heard in our Story for All Ages, those small, intentional acts of giving from the heart, so that our gift of the heart might intimately reach another’s with a tender, compassionate impact.<sup>1</sup> This daily work takes awareness, courage, and radical empathy. This daily work means small offerings of equity, one act at a time. It means using our gifts to change the world. It makes life even more beautiful as we become closer to God and foster our own spiritual growth initiated through acts of love, faith, and equity. I speak in this sermon of God. To me, God is but one metaphor for the great, eternal mystery – the metaphor that rings true to me. Throughout these reflections, I invite you to substitute a name of your own sacred – goddess, nature, spirit of life, Allah.

When I think of awareness, courage, and radical empathy, I think of how these three abstract ideas must be interwoven into each of our days if we are to fully immerse ourselves in the

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<sup>1</sup> “What is Given From the Heart” written by Patricia C. McKissack and illustrated by April Harrison

world around us and shape those intimate pieces of our daily lives. I think of what can draw us closely to our sacred as we serve the divine will in the world.

It is awareness when we open ourselves to the world around us – the beautiful world, the grieving world, the hopeful world, the broken world. Noticing – each day – not just the awe of a sunset or the delicate petals on a rose but the plight of the unhoused in the streets, the Black men in handcuffs, that which impacts our hearts if we do not allow ourselves to disconnect from the pain around us. An awareness that there is suffering in this world. We breathe the same wind of the impoverished, the undocumented workers. We drink the common water of the detained, the drug addicts.<sup>2</sup> We weave this into each of our days – awareness of suffering and inequity is sacred and brings us closer to God because it keeps us engaged with the hardships and pain of every child of the infinite universe, pulling us away from the indifference and inaction fostered when we find ourselves in hell.

It is to engage each day with courage – even in small ways. Maureen Killoran writes of “the courage to be humble in face of inequity.” The unassuming awareness that we have been granted the power to make change, to make a difference, and yet that it will not be enough to put an end to all suffering. Do not languish in discontent but engage with a humble courage to persevere. It takes courage to have gentle endurance. To keep acting amidst despair, to keep trying amidst failure, to keep hoping amidst the emptiness. Courage is held as a spiritual practice, cultivating deep growth as we hold fast to that persistent love and spark of the divine within – acting, trying, hoping.<sup>3</sup>

It is to welcome into one’s daily living radical empathy. How do the privileged engage with and view the marginalized – how do we interact each day? It is not, as author Isabel Wilkerson writes, sympathy – looking at someone and feeling sorrow. It is not pity – looking “down from above” with a distant sadness at another’s misfortune. It is not what is typically understood as

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<sup>2</sup> “The Common Good” Kathleen McTigue

<sup>3</sup> “This Day I Pray for the Courage to Be...” by Maureen Killoran

empathy – imagining how one would feel in another’s place. It means engaging with another to hear their own experience, their own woes and trials with a humble heart. It is in no way about us and how we think we would feel in a situation we may never experience. Instead, it is, Wilkerson writes, “the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.” This is how we engage in sacred and holy ways with all the blessed beings in our midst.<sup>4</sup>

With this in mind, centering in those practices that foster justice and equity, let us hear the words of Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale:

I am only one, but still I am one.  
I cannot do everything, but still I can do something.  
And because I cannot do everything,  
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.<sup>5</sup>

This poem touches my heart in particular because it speaks to my own theology. That of an intimate connection with God, a purposeful connection with God, and an intention to listen to God’s sacred guidance in each of my days – God’s power of persuasion. Perhaps you find this in the trees, or the ancestors, or within your very being – something calling you to enact love in this world - to do that one thing that we can do. How can we listen to the spark of the divine? That holy guidance – that profound persuasion? I invite us to live each moment as if we are guided by all we hold divine and holy.

We cannot do everything, but we can still do something – it is that humble life we explored earlier. Each of us. We can change the world one moment, one word, one interaction at a time. Remember the words of author Clarissa Pinkola Estés, “Any small, calm thing that one soul can do to help another soul, to assist some portion of this poor suffering world, will help

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<sup>4</sup> *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson pgs. 386-388

<sup>5</sup> From “Soul Matters Worship Resources February 2024”

immensely.” One of these acts will create a critical mass to tip the world towards enduring good.<sup>6</sup> It is like a final snowflake that breaks a branch. It starts within our own communities – our own families – an awareness of who is suffering unjustly. Each simple act helps break a cycle of injustice and inequity. How can we weave this into the very fabric of our existence? We begin to entwine our lives with unexpected relationships – with those folks we may not have even noticed before. We engage with each person we encounter with compassion and love and radical empathy – even if through a simple smile or act of acknowledgement – embracing diversity. That breaks the pattern, one action at a time, of the racial divide, the class divide. It is to bring our full, vulnerable, compassionate selves everywhere we go, ready for open and truthful interactions both with those on the edges and with those who perpetuate harm. Why the perpetrators? Because we are called to speak and act towards what is right, just, and equitable. To challenge ideas that perpetuate hate, violence, and fear; we are called to speak against this. There are more tangible practices that can be incorporated into daily living as well: donating to a cause, volunteering one’s time, contacting politicians. Each simple act helps break a cycle of injustice and inequity. We spoke about this last week: listening to what the oppressed, the vulnerable, the marginalized need and getting to work. All of these can become routine, spiritual practices that change the nation, fostering a deeper faith, connecting to that which matters most in the world, listening to divine guidance leading towards love and compassion and friendship and equity for each aching soul, one action at a time. When will the world be tipped toward enduring good?

May we use our gifts and talents and passions to change the world. Whatever grounds us in our spiritual beings can be offered as a gift of the heart to the world, ready to be received as such. What can a woodworker do with her wood, an artist with his paints, a gardener with her spade, a beloved in a 12-step group with his sobriety, a musician with her voice? How can each of these people change the world, one practice – one day – at a time, engaging with that which intimately shapes their own faith and joy and spiritual wellbeing? I think of an artist depicting the circumstances of the marginalized – I have seen exhibitions lined with portraits of slaves,

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<sup>6</sup> From “Soul Matters Worship Resources February 2024”

bringing an abstract history to life. A woodworker raising her hammer to nail together a humble house for Habitat for Humanity – creating affordable housing. A gardener gently placing her seeds below the earth in a community garden, a sober beloved organizing a 12-step group amidst a community of addicts and alcoholics. A rap artist lifting up the hardships of single mothers on welfare, or the great potential of children in the inner city. Spiritual practices that depict suffering and hope alike as real. Likewise, spiritual practices that have a direct impact on feeding the hungry, of offering shelter, of healing the broken minds and souls of those who are addicted. The abstractions of art are just as monumental as those tangible acts of healing – bringing awareness to the world.

May these practices bring us closer to God. Integrating justice and equity into our spiritual practices, into the very fabric of our lives, means we care for all of God’s creations. We care for the children of the universe, of the goddess, of the spirit of life – the offspring of whatever we hold sacred. The beauty around us is amplified each time the world becomes a more just and equitable place – when more people are able to engage with awe, beauty, and love. When we know the ability to pause and enjoy the wonder of nature is shared by more of our beloved siblings, our appreciation of the deep, night sky filled with distant stars grows deeper still. When less and less of our siblings live in fear of violence and hate, love is amplified in our own lives because we know it is rippling out until it is felt and treasured by all. Through the work of justice, the beauty of life unfolds – for each and every soul in the web of creation. That is the wonder and beauty of a web healed by justice and equity – the world tipping toward enduring good and awe. The beauty of life awakens. Love grows. Faith grows.

We are called. We are called in one direction by the bottle, the needle, the pain, the desires. We are called in the opposite direction towards love, hope, and dreams. Which one will we choose? Asks Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenemore. How do we answer? The minister writes, we are “called by the Spirit of Love and Hope, and visions of God’s purpose for our lives.” In many theologies, God has preferential treatment for the poor and the marginalized. What would this God’s purpose for us be? To heal the wounded, to feed the hungry, to free the enslaved, to

liberate the marginalized from their cages of oppression. That becomes our purpose. We chose love, not the bottle. Hope, not the needle. Dreams, not the pain.<sup>7</sup> And with love, hope and dreams we fulfill the call of the liberating God – who created each being with a purpose – a purpose I believe to be love as we liberate the world. So may we love. May we love this aching world. May we love the stranger, the downtrodden, unconditionally and eternally. We cannot do everything – but we can still do something. So may we choose to do that something. Let the beauty of life unfold for “what is given from the heart reaches the heart.”<sup>8</sup> Through our awareness and our courage and our radical empathy we work to heal the wounded web of life so it may be made whole. May we, in each of our days, center in our hearts as we weave justice and equity into the fabric of our lives. May we choose to do that something.

May it be so, and amen.

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<sup>7</sup> “We Are Called” by Natalie Fenemore

<sup>8</sup> “What Is Given from the Heart” by Patricia C. McKissack, illus. by April Harrison