

Together in Hope

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 12, 2023

Decades ago, musician Carolyn McDade composed a hymn held beloved by many Unitarian Universalists to this day, entitled “Come, Sing a Song with Me.” Sound familiar? And yet within all of the love, care, and compassion the song elicits among those voices joining together as one, at the time the composer found it empty and lacking in meaning and substance. “It’s so, so sweet,” she noted. “And I don’t like sweet songs. So, I left it beside the side of the road to languish.” And so it was, a song left to perish and die. Yet years later, McDade was asked to lead a music program at a woman’s state prison – leading in song the destitute. She brought this song solely for its simplicity and easy to learn melody. As the prisoners raised their voices in unison, they recited the well-known lyrics, ‘I’ll give you hope when hope is hard to find.’ As the incarcerated sang this song of music, dreams, and companionship, the song was placed in a much different context than of joyous voices rising from the pews. Simple and profound words of hope sung by those who are imprisoned, lives torn apart, left on the solitary and devastating edges of society. The song took on new meaning.¹

We find hope, too, in the aftermath of 9/11 – a terrorist attack that shook our nation to the core and still does as the unimaginable became a reality. Yet we have words of love and compassion held eternal on the cornerstones of the places of worship representing many of the world’s religions located in that devastated city. Myriad faith traditions joined together to share universal faith, care and solidarity amidst hate, death, and terror. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” wrote the Jews on their cornerstone. “Practice compassion,” the Buddhists shared. “Everything begins in Beauty. We are all children of one life,” offered the indigenous peoples. The world is ultimately a kind, loving, generous place. “Offer justice, equity, and compassion,” perhaps we could inscribe on our cornerstone. Perhaps the sentiment, “You are loved.”²

¹ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/carolyn-mcdade-spirit-life>

² *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 62

Last week we reflected upon unconditional generosity – of agape love, of tending to souls of others through the sentiments of our own hearts, of offering tangible goods to those in need, of sharing, not out of guilt or of pity, but of the callings of our hearts – of generosity as the first step in a life of faith. Today we reflect that as we genuinely share from our hearts and spirits, we are called to offer hope. What does this mean as a people of a liberal, living faith? “The hope is this,” writes Unitarian Universalist minister Rebecca Ann Parker, that “love, in its myriad forms, can recall us to life.”³

Poetry is a profound way to share, name, and bring beauty to the musings of our souls. “Hope is the thing with feathers,” wrote Emily Dickinson. The sentiments that follow are those tender thoughts we need to tend to when facing personal distress. Hope is that which sings a continuous song in our hearts, always present and held within, that which is sweetest amidst the harshest of times, that which is present in the direst of circumstances, that which asks nothing of us in return.⁴ This, to me, is that still, small voice within calling for us to never give up. It intertwines with love as we offer kindness and compassion to everyone in our midst, working towards a future for each suffering soul as of now only imagined. It overlaps with strength, for moving towards the unknown can be a difficult and tumultuous journey, and yet we are held in infinite love. This is what keeps us from despair because it rests in all that can be.

In the face of injustice, it means remaining and not turning away from suffering and violence. It means, held within these boundaries of deceit, anger, and hate, that we savor and find rejuvenation in the sweetness that is likewise present. The sweetness of love, of rest, of prayer, of engaging with our senses, of welcoming into our very hearts renewal and grace that we can bring to society in return.⁵ What we engage with is not fantasy, wishful thinking, or certainty.⁶ It is possibility, uncertainty, and perseverance towards a world that can, in fact, be. “Do all the

³ *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 15

⁴ “Hope” is the thing with feathers...” By Emily Dickinson

⁵ *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 24

⁶ *The God of Hope and the End of the World* by John Polkinghorne pg. 29

good you can,” wrote the Methodists on their cornerstone. “If you want peace work for justice,” offered the Catholics.⁷

I think of the spiritual practices and theologies stemming from a deep faith that allows us to interact with hope, cultivating deep, purposeful relationships with faith that can guide us, inspire us, to connect with the hope we hold within. Perhaps prayer, as we petition to the unknowable for something possible but currently held, only, in our imaginations – asking for and mediating upon what could be. Is this not hope? Perhaps meditating in nature, where we can reflect on natural beauty that does not discriminate, that gives expecting nothing in return, that offers unending cycles of life and death synonymous with joy and sorrow – three tenets we hold within as we work with hope. I think of our relationship and our faith in a God of many names as hope – traveling through life and into the future with the unknowable, putting our faith in the ineffable, offering love and trust towards that which we will never fully understand. Godself becomes intimate love, a source of unceasing light, a consistent presence among all of life’s ills, whether an entity in the sky, a pervasive force of mystery and wonder, or the awe of nature – all of these, a beacon of all of that of which we aspire to. This leads us towards faith, faith that there is something greater than ourselves that connects us to love and the people of this world, both our treasured beloveds and all of humanity. Faith guides us in these connections and this love as an intimate and unbreakable hope.

“Is [hope] enough to change the world?” Unitarian Universalist minister Rebecca Ann Parker asks herself. “I believe it is,” she replies. And yet the changes, the healing Parker offers, this does not often stem from monumental acts, from feats of tremendous impact. It happens, she notes, one small act at a time. We grasp hands through horror, we remain together in companionship and faith, we offer an “unbreakable fidelity that counters the infidelity of violence” – each small act reaching beyond pervasive terror.⁸ In my own prayers I offer this – that each harmful person can remove their cloak of hate, fear, and violence and instead

⁷ *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 62

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 61

connect to that inherent dignity and worthiness held within. That one at a time, people will turn away from the evils that have been taught and indoctrinated and the horrific acts that stem from this and instead turn towards that intrinsic love, kindness, and compassion. These are the prayers of my heart.

“Can hope create heaven on earth?” this wise minister reflects. “Yes,” she offers. We do this through love, for “love of one another is our only security.” We do this through solidarity, for faithful solidarity held between the siblings of this world is, she offers, “the only power that is stronger than violence and terror.”⁹ So may we hold on to each other and support one another as an expansive network of siblings and familial bonds. Grasping each other’s hands, linking arms, and embracing one another – this creates beauty – this creates heaven. In this mindset of creating heaven now, here, we work towards a future we hope for but cannot see – a heaven growing from hell crafted by one act of faith, one act of love, and one act of solidarity at a time. We move, together, towards what we dream to be.

And so we have hope – both for a just society and an equitable world, and for our own, personal trials and tribulations. I reflect, for a moment, on the second. Years ago, my maternal grandmother and my stepfather were dying at the same time. My grandmother deteriorating from the various ills of old age, my stepfather from an aggressive form of dementia. It was my mother who cared for both – in the confines of her own home. She tended to aching souls and deteriorating bodies, herself filled with generosity of the heart and spirit, offering herself as a caretaker of two ailing adults. What was she hoping for in this time of hardship? For them, comfort. For them to know they were loved. For contentment. For the two of them to let go of both physical and psychological pain. For friends and family to say their final goodbyes. For a peaceful death. She no longer wished for life, but solace. Her hopes changed with the flux of life, yet they sustained her in her caretaking role, and, by extension, supported them. I saw my mother’s strength and compassion reflected in the broken and deteriorating eyes, faces, and bodies of my stepfather and grandmother as they transitioned into a calm, into a distanced

⁹ *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 61

tranquility. Two souls that ultimately slipped away from this realm in the peace of deep sleep, eight months apart. All that my mother held within guided them through these final months, weeks, and days.

In our final musings I return us to the words of Rebecca Ann Parker “The hope is this: Love, in its myriad forms, can recall us to life.”¹⁰ With these sentiments echoing in our ears, I offer a poem by Carl Sandburg adapted for length:

Give me hunger, pain and want,
Shut me out with shame and failure
From your doors of gold and fame,
Give me your shabbiest, weariest hunger!
...
But leave me a little love,
A voice to speak to me in the days end,
A hand to touch me in the dark room
...
One little wandering, western star
Thrust out from the changing shores of shadow.
...
Let me ... wait and know the coming
Of a little love.¹¹

Love recalling us to life – this poetry a hopeful plea from the imminently wounded – a call for love, for companionship, for human touch, for a guiding light amidst the shadows. A person, able to survive, as long as accompanied by hope and love. For these we can lose, yes, and that is where we encounter despondency and deaths of despair. But we cannot force someone to

¹⁰ *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now?* By Rebecca Ann Parker pg. 15

¹¹ “At a Window” by Carl Sandburg

relinquish their hope, their love. It persists – invariably – within us. Within the incarcerated. Within those suffering from the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Held within our very bodies and the tenets of our faith. We can each find that wandering, western star – that light illuminating our path as we traverse the hardships of this life – of death and of loss, of illness and pain. We live in a generous world of peace, compassion, fidelity, and solidarity that serves, one act at a time, to overcome violence, hate, and oppression. We live and we act for a future we cannot yet know, a narrative that has not yet been written, but that of which we know is possible. That sweet song hummed in the confines of our souls, held there always to guide us, and comfort us. So may we lift our voices in song, “May I bring you hope, when hope is hard to find.”¹²

May it be so, and Amen.

¹² “Come, Come Whoever You Are” Carolyn McDade