

Prayerful Living
November 27, 2016 - May Memorial UU Society
December 4, 2016 - First UU Society Syracuse, NY
Bethany Russell-Lowe

Hymns 391- Voice Still and Small
123 – Spirit of Life
1008 – When Our Heart is in a Holy Place

Reading “That Which Holds All” by Rev. Nancy Shaffer

Because she wanted everyone to feel included in her prayer,
she said right at the beginning
several names for the Holy:
Spirit, she said, *Holy One*, *Mystery*, *God*
But then thinking these weren't enough ways of addressing that which cannot fully be addressed,
she added particularities, saying, *Spirit of Life*, *Spirit of Love*,
Ancient Holy One, *Mystery We Will Not Ever Fully Know*, *Gracious God*, and also *Spirit of this Earth*,
God of Sarah, *Gaia*, *Thou*
And then, tongue loosened, she fell to naming superlatives as well: *Most Creative One*, *Greatest Source*, *Closest Hope* –
even though superlatives for the Sacred seemed to her probably redundant, but then she couldn't stop:
One who Made the Stars, she said, although she knew technically a number of those present didn't believe the stars had been made by anyone or thing but just luckily happened.
One Who Is an Entire Ocean of Compassion,
she said, and no one laughed.
That Which Has Been Present Since Before the Beginning,
she said, and the room was silent.
Then, although she hadn't imagined it this way, others began to offer names.
Peace, said one.
One My Mother Knew, said another. *Ancestor*, said a third.
Wind.
Rain.
Breath, said one near the back. *Refuge*.
That Which Holds All.
A child said, *Water*.
Someone said, *Kuan Yin*.
Then: *Womb*.
Witness.
Great Kindness. *Great Eagle*. *Eternal Stillness*.

And then, there wasn't any need to say the things she'd thought would be important to say, and everyone sat hushed, until someone said

Amen.

Sermon

The day after Thanksgiving, I was in a pizza shop. I looked up and saw a familiar poem written on the wall above the pizza oven. It's one of my favorites by American poet Wendell Berry. It reads:

“When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”¹

Sitting in that pizza shop, the day after a large family meal which was filled with political discussions and arguments, Wendell Berry's words spoke to me like a prayer.

They reminded me of the beauty in our world, despite all the ugliness.

They reminded me of the adaptability in our world, despite all our human rigidity.

They reminded me of the love in our world, despite all the hatred.

And for a moment, among the chaos of swirling voices and the roar of a fire from a pizza oven, I was with Wendell Berry on that still water. I was free.

~*~*~

We don't always use the word “prayer” in Unitarian Universalist circles. Sometimes we use meditation, contemplation, silence. But no matter the word we use, we do pray, each in our own way.

Modern American blogger Andrew W.K. says prayer can be as simple as saying “I'm sorry for

¹ Wendell Berry, *The Peace of Wild Things*.

your loss. I'm thinking of you."²

Over 700 years ago, German philosopher Meister Eckhart said, "If the only prayer you say in your life is thank you, that would suffice."

As you heard in Nancy Shaffer's poem today, prayer can be as simple as invoking the name of that which is most sacred to you.

Across time, people agree – prayer is simple. It is we humans who complicate it.

~*~*~

There is a Unitarian Universalist affirmation recited weekly in many of our congregations. I recited it weekly in the church I grew up in. It starts off like this:

Love is the doctrine of this church
The quest for truth it's sacrament
And service is its prayer...³

"Service is our prayer."

Even after reciting this affirmation hundreds of times, this line continues to expand my understandings of both service and prayer.

Most simply, service is compassion showed to others. We do service by serving on committees and groups within this institution. We do service when we go to soup kitchens and protest for the rights of all people to be free. We do service when we sit by the hospital bed of a friend. We do service each time we act out our own compassion for person.

Service is something we Unitarian Universalists talk about a lot.

But prayer is a more contentious topic.

Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, a Unitarian Universalist religious educator, says this of prayer:

We all, children and adults, need practice being in touch with the spiritual energies within and around us, practice recognizing the presence of the holy in our lives. We can

² Andrew W.K., "Ask Andrew W.K.: Prayer is Stupid, Right?" Village Voice, <http://www.villagevoice.com/music/ask-andrew-wk-prayer-is-stupid-right-6634570>.

³ James Vila Blake.

understand prayer as a time of reaching for that connection. Whether practiced through spoken words, silence, movement, song, or service, prayer is opening and extending ourselves to feel the deep love and power of the spirit. A common saying maintains, “Prayer doesn’t change things. Prayer changes people and people change things.”⁴

If we can accept this definition of prayer, knowing that “spirit” will be different for each of us, our understanding of service changes.

If service is our prayer, we do not do service for others, or even for ourselves. We do service to remind ourselves that the relationship between two people is a sacred bond. Service is our prayer because it is in the human exchange of ideas and stories and smiles that we see our connection to that which is of ultimate concern: humanity, each other. Service reminds us of how small we are. And also what difference we can make in this world.

~*~*~

While preparing for this sermon over the last few weeks, I have also been following the work of the water protectors in the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. I have continually been stuck by how the Standing Rock Sioux are protecting their lands and the water.

They are not protesting, they are protecting.

They are not marching, they are praying.

They are praying for the safe keeping of land. Land which they have considered sacred for generations upon generations.

They are praying to redirect the minds of the oil companies overseeing the building of the pipeline.

They are praying that someone in power might hear them and do something to halt or redirect construction of the pipeline.

They are praying for safety for their own people, and the generations to come.

These acts of prayer are keeping the protectors focused on a mission – to peacefully protect the land so that generations from now will be able to call that land sacred. This is their service, to the land and society and our world. Praying in order to protect the land is keeping alive the sacred relationship between people and land in the Standing Rock Sioux Nation.

⁴ Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language* (Kindle Locations 1513-1518). Skinner House Books. Kindle Edition.

I saw a picture a few days ago of a woman holding a baby at one of the Standing Rock camps. The woman's name is Sky Bird Black Owl, and she is holding her baby, wrapped tightly in a sky blue blanket with cartoon monkeys on it.⁵ This baby was the first baby born at the camp since the water protectors began protecting last April. The new baby's name is "Mni Waconi," Sioux for "Water is Life," which has become one of the slogans of the Standing Rock Sioux camp.

I hear the phrase "Water is Life" as a prayer. Do you?

The phrase itself is so simple at face value, but profound in its realness. And so necessary to say and hear today.

Each time that child's name is said or thought, a prayer will be invoked. That is fierce love for this earth, for her child, and for the generations of children to come.

~*~*~

This morning, the Standing Rock Sioux are holding an Interfaith Day of Prayer. They have invited people of faith from around the country to join with them in prayer today. For this occasion, Rev. Florence Caplow has written this prayer. Rev. Caplow has offered solidarity to the water protectors this summer and fall. I ask that you direct your hearts and minds to the water protectors and all those who are in solidarity with them in the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, as I read this:

We call out to the four directions
and to the power of life that flows through all things
to protect the lives of those at Standing Rock
to soften the hearts of the police so that violence is renounced
to awaken in our government officials the force of conscience
and to answer the prayers of people everywhere
and particularly the prayers of the traditional protectors of the Missouri River,
the Hunkpapa Lakota of Standing Rock,
that the black snake pipeline dies forever
on the plains of North Dakota
never to be revived.

Just as we are gathering now, thousands have gathered at the Standing Rock Sioux Nation to tell their local and federal governments: enough. They have gathered to tell the oil companies, which place profits over people, pipelines over clean water: enough.

And native people here in Syracuse have been gathering and marching in solidarity. There is a

⁵ Photo by Tomas, Karmelo, Amaya, <https://www.facebook.com/tomaskarmelo/photos/a.208923875838117.54885.172248036172368/1309022115828282/?type=3&theater>.

solidarity rally for Standing Rock at Syracuse University tomorrow at 11:30 a.m. Come see me after worship if you would like more information.

~*~*~

Since learning about the work of the water protectors this summer, I have been awed by their fierce love for their sacred land, the earth, and all earths' inhabitants. I have wondered what I could protect with such fierce love.

And with all that has happened this fall, this year, I am realizing that our fierce love is needed more than ever.

When I say "fierce love," I imagine this as that type of love which influences how I act in this world, which helps me show up for those who have requested my presence, and to defend those who are facing discrimination.

Fierce love is what we do when we embody the idea that service is our prayer.

Because services doesn't just happen in soup kitchens and clothing banks, service happens when one human looks into the eyes of another human and says, "I see you."

So many of us, I think, are searching for that fierce love within us these days. Know that little things you do matter. Simply looking into another person's eyes and telling them you see them, is sometimes enough. And there will be other times in the coming months, when we as individuals and as a community are asked to say "I see you" in bigger ways. We'll need to do this by listening for the sake of understanding. We'll need to do this by seeking connection with people who are different from us. We'll need to do this by saying loudly and boldly that discrimination is not acceptable in our communities.

Now, I know that not all of us show our fierce love in the same way. Some of us go to protests. Others writer articles. Still others make coffee and bake cookies. Others of us offers hugs or a listening ear. Some of us offers smiles to grocery store attendants. All of this matters. No matter how you show you fierce love, it matters.

Because I think what our country needs most right now is people who are attentive and engaged in our world. It is so easy to check out and disengage from the chaos swirling around us. But that won't help us live out service as our prayer. We need to watch. Listen. And respond in new ways.

In the weeks and years to come, prayerful living will mean being attentive to the world around us. It will mean beings attentive to those things we can see and also to that which we hear about second-hand. It will mean seeking more connection every day. It will mean being willing to be transformed by the world around us. It will mean finding prayers of hope on the walls of pizza shops. We are the ones we have been waiting for. Let us go forth, with our hearts tuned to service

as our prayer, remembering that prayer can be so simple. It is we humans who complicate it.

And let us always remember prayer changes people, and people change the world.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.