

If someone had asked me four years ago if I thought I would ever preach on a text from the Hebrew Bible in a Unitarian Universalist worship service, I would have said “no.” If you had asked me the same question two years ago, when I was halfway through seminary, I would have said “probably not.”

But sacred text is a big chunk of seminary. If you attend one of the Unitarian Universalist seminaries, Meadville-Lombard or Starr King, or even that third unofficial one – uh – oh Harvard Divinity School – you may have more choices of which sacred texts you study. But at most schools, a Master of Divinity degree – a core requirement to become a UU minister – is going to require classes in Christian and Jewish scripture. Usually at least four classes – two of each.

And because I wanted to earn a certificate in Interfaith Leadership, I ended up taking six scripture classes, four of them on the Hebrew Bible, the sacred text I knew as the Old Testament when I was growing up. And there are good reasons for requiring these classes. Knowing where we came from is important, if only to help us avoid repeating our mistakes.

But it can still be difficult to relate to scripture if most of your life experience with the writings has been in communion with people who take them literally when you don't. I sometimes wondered if I was ever going to be able to use this information – not unlike the way I felt in algebra class.

But in some of these classes, the professor helped us learn to engage the text not as something divine, but as writing intended to help people negotiate their lives right here on earth, often in very harsh and oppressive times and places, recognizing that, in both the Christian and Hebrew bibles as well as the sacred writing of many other faith traditions, the authors often

framed their work as having been written long before it actually was, both because that was an acceptable literary practice then and because they were trying to make sense and a coherent story out of what had already happened to people. I gradually began to recognize questions and challenges in these writings which we still encounter today and began to see these texts as relevant to Unitarian Universalism.

I want to share one of them today but before I read it, I ask you to take a moment and consider two questions:

Who do we care about? Where do we belong?

Isaiah 56:1-8

This is what the Lord says: “Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.

² Blessed is the one who does this— the person who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps their hands from doing any evil.”

³ Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.” And let no eunuch complain, “I am only a dry tree.”

⁴ For this is what the Lord says: “To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—⁵ to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever.

⁶ And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant—⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be

called a house of prayer for all nations.”

⁸The Sovereign Lord declares— he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered.”

Even though Isaiah appears in the Hebrew Bible as a single book, the 56th chapter begins what most scholars now consider the third distinctive book of Isaiah, each of which was written at different times by different people with likely additions at multiple later dates to tie passages to subsequent events.

The preceding or second book of Isaiah had been a rallying cry for a people who had been in exile in Babylon and were finally being set free. Their community had changed while they were away from their homeland. In order to preserve their culture in captivity their leaders had emphasized behavior that would set them apart from their captors. Observance of the Sabbath became much more important than it had been before because it was a socially visible difference, unlike circumcision which was hidden by clothing, and because it identified women as well as men as belonging to this community.

After an entire century, they were released from captivity. The second book of Isaiah encouraged them to return to their homeland, where it said they would flourish, and live happily ever after. But not every Israelite had been forced into exile in the first place. The Babylonians focused on the wealthy, educated, influential people. So, this newly freed coherent community returned to their ancient homeland to find people who called themselves by the same name but who had not evolved in the same way. Who were different. Inevitably, the question arose – who belongs in this community? Who do we care about?

These eight verses mark a seismic shift in the answer to that question in the history of the Jewish people. In the book of Deuteronomy, there was a clear demarcation of who *cannot* be part

of God's chosen nation. This included foreigners and men whose genitals are mutilated, whether from birth, by accident, or castration. We can imagine reasons for excluding these groups. Those who cannot beget children cannot increase the size of the community and this was an era when sheer numbers could decide who controlled a territory. Excluding foreigners, essentially people of other tribes rather than citizens of other countries as we think of it today, may have been about ideas of racial purity or simply the ancient and still currently ongoing practice of understanding who we are by focusing on who we are not. We call it tribalism now.

These verses are the first time that an author representing themselves as God said that previously excluded people could belong because of what they believed and because of how they lived.

Nationality and the ability to reproduce were replaced by covenant, by relationship, as the key to belonging. And in verse 8, there is a promise of gathering even more people into the fold in the future, of making the tent even bigger.

In a time of great change and social upheaval, this community wrestled with the question of inclusivity versus exclusivity. The author of this passage said the community's long-term success lay in bringing more people into the fold rather than focusing on who did not belong.

And it worked. They opened their minds and their hearts and their hands and the community grew stronger and survived. And let's not forget that this was written long after the changes actually happened. We can imagine that the real-time process was slow and contentious. Some people in the community probably thought that their tribe was hunky dory just the way it was. Some may have had different ideas about who they might bring in if the leaders were determined to bring in more people.

They were asking questions we still ask today. Who do we care about? Where do we belong? How do our answers to these questions change future possibilities?

What is our answer today? Where is the border of our community? Those of us who are part of First Unitarian Universalist Society?

Well, it isn't based on traditional ideas of gender identity or performativity. We've been leaders in inclusivity regarding gender and sexuality for many years. We have no such border.

Clearly it isn't based being a United States citizen. We support humane treatment and honoring the human and legal rights of everyone who aspires to come to this country, and we welcome them into our midst. We have no such border.

What about all people who are simply near us geographically? We talk about interdependence, but do we perceive ourselves as belonging to the same *community* as them? Do we care about them? I don't mean intellectually, but in a way that makes us want to interact with them? To care with them?

Historian Lerone Bennett Jr. said: "a nation is a choice." We can choose to extend care, compassion, and concern to everyone. We can choose to treat them like one of "us." While the community we read about in Isaiah did not extend care, compassion, and concern to everyone in their immediate vicinity, they did demonstrate that we do *choose* who belongs, that we can change those choices, and that we manifest our choices by our actions.

Who do we care about?

There are plenty of problems and plenty of people to care about right here in Syracuse. It has been identified as one of poorest cities in this country. Especially for Latinos. Especially for children. These children face challenges in education beginning with inadequate funding of urban schools. Their widespread exposure to lead paint due to the age of the housing stock

undercuts their educational potential. The public transportation system inhibits their parents' opportunities for employment. They often have to walk in the streets because property owners or the city do not adequately clear the sidewalks. Their childhoods are very different than most of ours were.

And while there is work being done to address all of these issues, violence has erased all hope for some.

Last year, in Syracuse, there were 21 murders for every 100,000 people, four times the national average.

17% of those homicides were people under the age of 18. Another 13% were 18 and 19, people who may be legally adults but are not developmentally fully adult yet.

The young people who died are:

Niko Santana

Daquarius Powell

Loindale Johnson

Christopher Hickey

James Springer III

Antonio Gullotto

Janya Thomas

Our hearts hurt when we read or hear about them in the news. None of us is untouched by any child dying.

But where is the boundary of caring, of belonging, that marks the difference between compassion and action?

Are these our children?

If we want this to change, we need to do something different than what we are doing now.

If we want this to change, we need to change our relationship with the problem, our relationship with the people involved, our relationship with the children of Syracuse. There are many different ways to help but they all involve relationship.

We have a Community Outreach Ministry here at First Unitarian Universalist ready to help connect anyone in our congregation who is willing, to a role and a relationship with the potential to effect change. The Community Outreach Ministry is currently working on helping our congregation identify a clear social justice focus for next year, not to replace important work people are already doing as individuals, but to help us, as a group, identify local needs, determine goals which would show progress, and be able to assess at the end of the year whether anything has changed, whether we are making a difference.

We are also members of the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse which is, in turn, affiliated with a national organization - Faith in Action – that supports grassroots organizing which enables people of faith to build power to reshape their lives and their communities. We have *partners*, ready to utilize us, to support and enhance whatever we have to offer. The work may span a wide range. It may involve supporting congregations trying to make a difference in their own neighborhoods devastated by poverty and violence or being present in schools and community centers to provide support in whatever form they need at the times they need it. But first we need to be willing to build relationships. If we try to affect change where we have no relationships, we are simply invaders.

We are facing the same kinds of questions that were asked by the community depicted in Isaiah:

Who do we care about?

If we truly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the answer should include people who have never entered, and may never enter, these doors.

Where do we belong?

If we truly believe in justice, equity and compassion in all human relations, then the answer should include the neighborhoods where the children whose names I recited lived and died.

Are we content with our community as it exists today?

If the answer is no, when are we going to start changing it?

Changing it will include reaching out beyond these walls, being physically present with people we may not be familiar or even comfortable with and investing time and energy building relationships.

In the Mary Oliver poem, *When Death Comes*, the last line reads “I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.” That is a good expression of my hope for us as a faith community. I hope for us to not be visitors but to belong to this city in this time and I hope for that belonging to make a difference so that our house might be called a house of hope and love for all peoples.

May it be so and Amen.