

The Fire of Commitment

First Unitarian Church of St. Louis

Nov. 4, 2018

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The darkening days...All Souls

Day...thoughts of dank Transylvanian castles...all of these make this the perfect

time of year to light a candle or build a fire. And these are dark days indeed. As I

sat to write this sermon, my heart was heavy as I listened to the news about the

slaughter of 11 innocent worshippers at the Tree of Life congregation in

Pittsburgh. I *thought* I was going to be writing a sermon about the historic Edict of

Torda and the flowering of religious tolerance. Just over 450 years ago, a brave

young Unitarian King, John Sigismund, thanks to the influence of his mother

Queen Isabella, signed into law a grand idea. A bold and radical idea. A dangerous

idea, that dared to say that we could have different religious beliefs from one

another—and that no one would have to go to prison or die for having a different

interpretation of God, and the meaning of the Kingdom of God. I wish we were

talking here about ancient history. But the events of October 27 are a painful and

tragic reminder that the ability of humankind to love our neighbor and to embrace

religious pluralism is still only an aspiration.

As Francis David, head of King Sigismund's Unitarian Church once wrote, "we need not think alike to love alike." It was a glorious idea, but one that was—like the message of Jesus himself—threatening the religious order of his day. Once the brief reign of the Unitarian King came to an end, Francis David found himself languishing in a damp and dark prison cell on a lonely hill in Deva, a prison cell that would be his tomb. Contrary to the spirit of the Edict of Torda, he was convicted of the sin of religious innovation. On this 450th anniversary of the Edict of Torda, we're here to rekindle that precious light that is still sputtering and fragile in this age of renewed intolerance and bitter divisiveness.

The ministry of Francis David and other early Unitarians was prophetic. Along with Unitarian-Universalist minister Meg Riley, I claim the title of prophetic, though not everyone in our UU circles would find that label comfortable. Riley writes, "Many Unitarian Universalists would abandon the idea of the prophetic entirely. I have heard UUs speak instead of congregations that are bold, or visionary, or relevant, or vital, or justice-seeking....But I like *prophetic* more, because of its relationship to time and possibility; it draws from a place deep in our past and casts our vision around the corner into an unknown future." (end quote)

Let's not embrace the old doom and gloom of wild-eyed prophets shouting "the end is near!" she says. Let us instead declare "the beginning is near!" For the work of establishing tolerance and religious pluralism is far, far from complete.

On this day, which is both All Souls Sunday and our celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Religious Tolerance, we recognize and celebrate our historical values of reason and tolerance. While we embrace the free and responsible search for truth and meaning for people of all faith traditions and those with no faith tradition, let us not forget the inherent diversity within our own Unitarian family. Kimberly Perry wasn't simply taking in the sites and tromping around castle ruins while traveling a few weeks ago to our partner village in Transylvania. She was doing her homework! She talked with our partner church minister, the Rev. Tokes Lorant, about the differences between American and Transylvanian Unitarianism. Who wants to know what the differences are? (hands?) Well...then you'd better come to the Partner Church dinner on Saturday night, where Kimberly is going to lay it all out for you. Because I'm a seminary student, the key difference I'm going to focus on this morning is that Transylvanian Unitarian churches have preserved their protestant Christian traditions, including a liturgy based on Biblical scripture.

This inspired me to select the parable of the “10 Bridesmaids,” which is from the Gospel of Matthew and relates to Jesus’ coaching of his disciples about how to prepare for the Kingdom of God. Our co-religionists in Transylvania would be familiar with this parable.

The specific meaning of this parable to a first-century Jewish-Christian audience would have been one of preparation for the end times. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning to make sure you are always ready to receive the kingdom, which was understood at that time to be imminent. Be ready. Be watchful. Don’t fall asleep, or you might miss it and have the gates of heaven slammed in your face. For many people in more recent times, however, the message of this parable was not so much one of dire warning but one of hope. For enslaved African people on this continent, the coming of the kingdom was the coming of their *liberation* when they had known only *bondage*. It was the coming of *justice* when they had known only *injustice*. And it was for them a kingdom of *inclusion* when they had known only *exclusion*. “Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, The time is drawing nigh. ”

For UUs today, I believe this parable of Matthew’s Gospel still has great prophetic power. For us today, it offers three lessons.

The first lesson is that faith is a group effort. The story of the keeping of the lamps reminds us that there is more than one light, just as there is more than one path to spirituality. What we do well, we do as a community—but as a community of individuals, with a common set of principles, including an enduring commitment to supporting each other in our beautiful diversity of religious belief and expression.

Second, the members of the wedding party didn't each sit in their own houses tending a private fire to warm their own hearths and light their own living rooms. Their lamps were portable. The light was made to be carried by human hands and brought to where it was needed most. The vigil of the wedding party was not passive, nor was it private or self-focused. They actively went forth to meet their guests and light their path.

But the third and final lesson we can draw from this parable is the most important of all. Keeping our lamps trimmed and burning is not simply a matter of faith or commitment, though it is that. It's about stewardship of resources—a stewardship of the spirit. What does the parable and the old spiritual call us to do? Does it say to sit and wait, passively? No. It says keep your lamps trimmed and burning. It is a positive action—a constant stewardship of the flame that must be tended carefully and faithfully.

And most important, what is the flame's source? This parable was no miracle story. The "wise" stewards of the lamps made sure they brought enough *oil* to fuel their flame during the long and dark night. Even the "foolish" members of the party were fully committed to the task. They showed up. They waited the night. But they spent all their fuel too quickly and their flame burned out.

Make no mistake, the prophetic mission of this church is a long-distance relay, not a sprint. What is the oil that keeps our lamps alight? For the partner church movement, yes, one of the key resources is clearly money — funds that support scholarships for village students and the infrastructure of the historical village church, built in 1798. But so much more valuable is the caring work of creating and maintaining human relationships on both sides of the Atlantic. Beyond the partner church movement, there is so much other work to be done right here in our own communities. Sometimes it can seem there is so much hate that our love can never overpower it. It can seem that such a great divide exists between red America and blue America that our best bridges will always fall short of reaching the other side. The kingdom we wish to build asks so much of us. And it can seem so far away, so out of reach.

But... But. We look back to 1568—four and a half centuries ago—and recall that *first brief spark* of religious liberty. But then we have to acknowledge the ugly fact of religious repression that Unitarians later suffered in Romania, where Unitarian ministers were jailed as enemies of state. We think of the bold if imperfect American experiment that also enshrined religious freedom in law. It's lasted a bit longer than the Edict of Torda. And we wonder, did *we here* finally achieve the dream of Queen Isabella? Has the torch been passed to us? Yet today we're forced to confront the vicious, religiously-based hate crime of just a few days ago. We can only come to one conclusion—that the work of liberal religion is a *long-term commitment*. A long, slow trudge. A journey that may never end. 450 years and counting, and we're still not there. We'll need an endless supply of oil.

What is the oil that fuels your lamp, and can you keep it trimmed and burning steadily year after year?

The answer, ultimately, is that we must learn practices that support resiliency. How do we stay strong for the long nights of watching and waiting and marching for justice? adrienne maree brown is a social justice warrior, healer and doula in Detroit, Michigan, and she has written a beautiful book about leading social change movements, titled *Emergent Strategy*.

She begins her chapter on resiliency with a classic dictionary definition.

“Resilience: The ability to become strong, healthy or successful again after something bad happens. The ability of something to return to its original shape after it has been pulled, stretched or bent. An ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” When I think of the immense suffering in our world, this is the most poignant dictionary definition I have ever read. How can our human communities ever return to their original shape again? Have we all been pulled, stretched or bent over with grief for so long that we forget how to stand up straight? Will we lose forever the ability to recover? Will our lamps, and our very souls, burn out?

Brown offers a boldly original set of practices that have helped her stay strong for the fight—the ways she refuels her lamp. As I set out to share these practices with you, I soon realized that they are simply new language to talk about the kinds of things we have always done in this religious community. The first is what she calls “Co-evolution through friendship.” She maintains a close set of constructive friendships—people she surrounds herself with who know what she’s made of, and who help her become her best self. This is exactly what we do in our committees and our covenant groups and even casual conversations. We keep each other challenged, loved and growing.

Second is “visionary fiction,” which is Brown’s art form of choice. “All organizing is science fiction,” she writes. “If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist.” For me this can also represent an embrace of all kinds of socially conscious art forms, including beautiful or even challenging music that speaks to us in ways that words alone cannot. Art helps us to truly see—to see the kind of world we want to create and to know exactly what it *feels* like.

A third practice is meditation, which is Brown’s preferred form of spiritual self-care. She puts her finger on the source of discomfort for many of us about the idea of praying or meditating. Why, we may ask ourselves, should we waste this precious time in such a non-productive, self-centered activity? “Setting aside time from our work can feel violently selfish,” she writes. “And yet! If we haven’t cultivated mindfulness in our attention,...how will we ever put our attention onto solutions, ... onto the new practices we need?” It’s the same here in our corporate worship—it’s our opportunity to cultivate mindfulness and focus, to feed our spirits, and perhaps most important, to pause from our busy lives long enough to hear the cries and the longings of a suffering world.

A fourth and final strategy for resilience is what Brown calls *Somatics*, which “is the study of the *soma*, a Greek word that means the living organism in its wholeness.” Among other things, this approach includes a focus on systems, the wholeness of human communities. In short, it’s a lesson in what we UUs call the *interdependent web of all existence*. And nothing could illustrate this concern for wholeness more beautifully than our partner church movement. We love, learn, and draw inspiration from each other. For example, the Women’s Alliance of our church has consistently funded scholarships for children in our partner church village, and one of them, Babette Szombatfalvi, is now attending Unitarian seminary in Transylvania. As a minister and a part of the international Partner Church movement, she will someday be partnered with a North American congregation and may one day find herself as visiting clergy, bringing the love back to us from this very pulpit. It’s things like that that fuel the fire of my commitment.

So, in closing, as the old gospel tune implores, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, my friends. All the resources that we need to inspire us and sustain us for the journey out into the world are at hand. They are right here in this room. They are right here in this community of light and hope. Right here inside of us.

Let us go out together, not as isolated beings but as a community of seekers. Let us not light cozy fires in our own hearths, but let us carry our lights outward on pilgrimages that traverse barriers of every kind. And let us be among those wise souls who bring fuel for the fire, through human covenant, through art that speaks truth, through prayer and meditation, and through careful attention to the interdependent web of existence that sustains us all.