

NOVEMBER'S THEME: COURAGE
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS ~ Kirk D. Loadman-Copeland

We are called to gather in worship as a beloved community.

We are called to set aside distractions and anxieties, that we might touch deeper springs and be renewed.

We are called to seek and to share comfort for the hurts that afflict.

We are called to desire more love, more justice, and life more abundant.

We are called to truth, to mercy, to humility, and to courage.

Let us answer the call with the yes of our lives.

Come, let us answer the call in this sacred gathering.

STORY FOR ALL AGES *The Dandelion Seed* ~ Joseph Anthony

(story of one little seed that clings to the dandelion, but once it has let to, it discovers both a whole big world, and it's purpose.)

READING *The Art of Facing Things* ~ Mark Nepo

"What people have forgotten is what every salmon knows. Salmon have much to teach us about the art of facing things. In swimming up waterfalls, these remarkable creatures seem to defy gravity. It is an amazing thing to behold. A closer look reveals a wisdom for all beings who want to thrive.

What the salmon somehow know, is how to turn their underside – from centre to tail – into the powerful current coming at them, which hits them squarely, and the impact then launches them out and further out and up the waterfall; to which their reaction is, again, to turn their underside back into the powerful current that, of course, again hits them squarely; and this successive impact launches them further out and up the waterfall. Their leaning into what they face, bounces them further and further along their unlikely journey.

From a distance, it seems magical, as if these mighty fish are flying, conquering their element. In actuality, they are deeply at one with their element, vibrantly and thoroughly engaged in a compelling dance of turning-toward-and-being-hit-squarely that moves them through water and air to the very source of their nature.

In terms useful to the life of the spirit, the salmon are constantly faithful in exposing their underside to the current coming at them. Mysteriously, it is the physics of this courage that enables them to move through life, as they know it, so directly. We can learn from this very active paradox; for we, too, must be as faithful to living in the open if we are to stay real in the face of our daily experience. In order not to be swept away by what the day brings, we too, must find a way to lean into the forces that hit us so squarely.

The salmon offer us a way to face truth without shutting down. They show us how leaning into our experience, though we don't like the hit, moves us on. Time and again, though we'd rather turn away, it is the impact of being revealed, through our willingness to be vulnerable; that enables us to experience both mystery and grace."

MESSAGE

Courage: Together

~ Rev. Stoneberg

Did you know that when you entered the building today, you crossed into the Red Sea? That's the symbolism captured in the red iron gates into the courtyard...the reeds of the Red Sea, referencing one of the most dramatic and exciting stories from the Hebrew Bible.¹ But might it also be important symbolism for us?

As the story goes, the Israelites escape from Pharaoh's cruel slavery, leaving Egypt in a hurry, fleeing to the desert without even taking the time to let their bread rise. And then, as they set up camp on the banks of the Red Sea, Pharaoh changes his mind about letting them go, and his charioteers come charging across the desert in pursuit.

The Israelites find themselves trapped; the impassable sea on one side, the charging army of Pharaoh on the other. They cry bitterly to their leader Moses, who raises his eyes to God in prayer, but God admonishes him: "This is not the time for prayer. Command the people to move forward. Lift up your staff and hold out your arm over the sea and the sea will split, so that the Israelites may cross on dry ground".

According to the Torah, Moses did exactly that. The people crossed in safety. And when Pharaoh's troops followed them, the sea returned and drowned them. Thus Israel was freed from the cruelty of Pharaoh.

But the rabbis of a later generation were, apparently, disturbed that in the story, God does all the work while the Israelites passively watch. God sends Moses and tells him what to say. God brings the plagues and hardens the heart of Pharaoh. God leads the Israelites out of Egypt and then saves them at the Red Sea. Where are the people in the story? What is the human role in bringing about needed change? To answer those questions, the rabbis, as they often did, inserted a different story between the lines.

According to the rabbis' telling in this midrash, it all goes the same until Moses raises his staff to part the sea. Except in their version, he does that, exactly as commanded – but the sea doesn't split. He tries again, but the waters still do not part. He becomes nervous. He tries to recall God's exact instructions. Once again he holds the staff over the waters. And once again they do not part. Moses panics. The people panic. Everyone is frozen in fear. And no one knows what to do.

No one, that is, except one man by the name of Nachshon. Nachshon understood that God expected the people to take a role in their own future. Nachshon knew that the sea would not part until someone moved – until someone trusted, and moved toward freedom, until someone was ready to risk their life.

And so Nachshon waded into the waters of the Red Sea. At first everyone thought he was crazy. "What are you doing?" his family shouted. But Nachshon waded out farther, until the water covered his knees. His family screamed and begged him to return, but he went farther still, until water reached his waist. Now everyone stood in silence and watched as Nachshon

¹ Story as told by Jim Magaw found at <http://uupf.org/speakers/Jim-Magaw-sermon-Be-Not-Afraid--June-2013.pdf>

went in even farther, until water covered his shoulders. And only when the water had covered his mouth and nose - only then did the sea split so Israelites could cross to the other side in safety.

The people stood in silence and watched. Only one made the choice to step into the water. Each of you 'stepped into the water' today...coming through the reeds of the Red Sea to enter into spiritual community. I don't expect you did so as an act of extraordinary courage, or that you even gave it a moment's thought. And yet, I would challenge you to consider this: that intentionally and wholeheartedly being part of a spiritual community, particularly in these times, takes a whole lot of courage.

And, it takes a whole lot of courage for us, a group of dedicated and diverse seekers, to live into all that we can be as a spiritual community. And that's what I want to talk to you about today...about what it might take for us to be a people of courage. How can we, as a group, working together, take the risks necessary to boldly live out our purpose, to live more fully into our vision of who we are to be in the world? How can a congregation be courageous?

In the story just told, the Israelites were escaping from slavery and from plagues. They had very good reasons to be on the run, and to be on the run together. Yet when, in those moments on the banks of the Red Sea, they were trapped in a life-threatening squeeze play, courage eluded them.

We as a people, as Unitarians in Canada and in Peterborough, living in this modern era, in this free country, are not faced with a life-threatening dilemma. We are here together not out of desperation or self-defense (except of the existential variety.) Rather, we come here with a desire to live lives of meaning, to matter in the world, to be the best people we can be...and surely, we can go on living 'just fine' without putting ourselves into any great danger, without taking any risks, without putting ourselves out too much.

Or...can we? Could it be that, in reality, we face a very similar plight to that of the Israelites? We long ago escaped much of religious intolerance and the dominant theology of depravity, a victory won by many brave Nachshons in this faith. We have settled into a comfortable spot along the sea. And while new armies are breathing down on us...armies of consumerism, of rampant purposelessness, of intolerance for difference of any kind...armies of immense inequalities and environmental destruction...we continue to be 'comfortable.' What might inspire us to 'jump into the sea?'

The Exodus story tells of a successful escape by means of putting a great distance between the Israelites and their oppressors. But in our predicament, 'escape' is not the answer. I mean, many have tried 'escape' of all kinds... by communing with nature, by going off the grid, by dialing down consumption, and even by numbing ourselves to it all, and 'escape' may well be a useful strategy for individuals as a means of dealing with modern day stresses.

But that's not the job of a spiritual community. This is not a place where we can insulate ourselves and shut out the world...a world where human connection is increasingly illusive, where self-loathing and its partner, disrespect for others, is increasingly pervasive, where the distance between us and our food sources along with our connection to the earth is growing greater. See, I believe that all of this calls, not for escape, but for leaping into the fray.

Jumping in, with both feet, and with our whole selves, with the intent of loving the heck out of the world.

Consider the salmon. They face into the stream, in fact, they face into it with their tender underbelly, with the conviction that doing so will save them. They take a huge risk in order to make something unlikely happen...that is, that by being hit with the force of the stream, they will be propelled upward and forward. Do they have a fear of being hurt? Are they afraid of being tossed and turned? Might it be that they are able to do this because they do it together? Do they hold hands, or fins, and leap?

I know that many of you come here to be inspired, to be touched, to be moved. You come on Sunday to receive nourishment and encouragement ... empowerment and strength so you can go on with your life and your work. That's a valuable and powerful thing that we do for one another, and I don't in the slightest disparage its importance.

But the congregation...all of us together...is something different. This spiritual community doesn't exist in order to simply support itself. We are self-sustaining, but we do not exist just to sustain ourselves.

You see, I believe that we're a bit too comfortable. It may be that we require too little of one another. It's easy to excuse folks from the demands of building the community we envision. It's easy to take this beautiful space for granted, especially since it hasn't cost us too much to be here. It's easy to rely on our financial investments to bridge the gap between what we spend and what we give. It's even easy to dissuade ourselves from taking any risks by cowering behind our annual budget deficit, saying that we can't possibly swim upstream until we've balanced the budget (as if saying that would make our deficit go away; it hasn't.)

On the other hand, maybe it's so easy to settle into our comfort because we don't see, or we choose to ignore, who the world needs us to be. Maybe it's too easy, by virtue of our privilege of place and/or economics, to distance ourselves...from intolerance, from injustice, from inequity, from environmental mayhem. And maybe we're not convinced that we have anything to say, or to do, of any value, in the face of these forces and powers.

Our 'too-comfortable-ness' reminds me of the little dandelion seed in our story. Hanging on. Afraid to let go. Clinging. Not seeing the possibilities in the big wide world. It had little vision for what the future would bring, and what its role might be in assuring the survival of the dandelion species. What can one little seed do, after all?

The salmon, on the other hand, 'let go' with abandon, confronting rapids and waterfalls for the sole purpose of getting to their spawning pools....so that 'salmon-ness' will survive. Sure, they have the advantage of having this 'drive to survive' imprinted in their DNA. They work as a group for the survival of all salmons because that's what salmons do.

So, what do Unitarians do? What is imprinted in our DNA? In a couple of weeks, I'm going to talk about our history as rebels and heretics, in order that we might understand a bit of our DNA. Today, I simply pose the question. What would it take for us to have a salmon's drive to survive? What would compel us to risk our significance enough to swim against the societal stream with every ounce of courage we can muster?

Next Sunday is our Celebration Sunday; it's a matter of courage. Next Sunday, you will be asked to make a commitment to the work of this congregation, to take a risk, to choose courage over apathy or disinterest. Next Sunday, you'll be asked to turn your underside upstream and 'take one in the wallet' for this congregation. Why would you do that?

I hope that you would do that because you see that we gather in order to create and build the community that ought to be...a community that is inclusive and respectful. A community that embraces our beautiful common humanity while holding onto a vision to go further. A community that seeks to forgive and be forgiven. A community that helps us each to open our minds, and our hearts, and our hands.

I hope that you would do that so that we can continue to create a space and times where all are welcome to come for nourishment...to drink deeply and to be refreshed. A space and time where our values of inclusion, openness, respect for truth, humility, reverence, gratitude, and generosity are lifted up as keys to the living of ethical and responsible lives.

I hope that you would do that so that we can continue to create a space and times where you will be challenged to look at yourself, and encouraged to change....creating a learning community where we experiment with better ways to be in right relationship with each other, and with our planet.

I hope that you would do that because you believe that we have something important to offer the greater community...a place, and a group of people, who choose to swim against the cultural stream, who are willing to put themselves out there in support of progressive values, a place that will not let us forget that we have an important role to play in ensuring that there is freedom, and respect, and love aplenty, for everyone.

I hope you would do that because you believe this congregation can be a courageous group of people...a congregation full of salmons, and Nachshons, and even dandelion seeds...a congregation who wants to shine the light of Unitarian Universalism into the world and is willing to take some risks in order to do that.

That little dandelion seed reminds me of a beautiful poem by Dawn Markova. Her original poem was written in the first person; I share it with you in the third person.

We will not die unlived lives.
We will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
We choose to inhabit our days,
to allow our living to open us,
to make us less afraid,
more accessible;
to loosen our hearts
until they become wings,
torches, promises.
We choose to risk our significance,
to live, so that which came to us as seed
goes to the next as blossom,

and that which came to us as blossom,
goes on as fruit.”

May we know when we enter this spiritual community that we will be called upon to be courageous, and may we be a people of courage. May we recognize the power of the seeds we hold...seeds that can grow peace, and love, and justice. May we choose to swim upstream, together, even when it seems an insurmountable task. May we jump in with both feet. May we let go and trust. And we will see. We will see all that will be.

So be it.

Amen.

READING *Choose to Bless the World* ~ Rebecca Parker

Your gifts – whatever you discover them to be –
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,
The strength of the hands,
The reaches of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice
Or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door,
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will,
A moving forward into the world
With the Intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition, a confession of surprise, a grateful acknowledgment
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.
And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
There moves
A holy disturbance,

A benevolent rage,
A revolutionary love,
Protesting, urging, insisting
That which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks
For this beauty
And this rage.

The choice to bless the world can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.

None of us alone can save the world.
Together – that is another possibility waiting.

CLOSING WORDS ~ *Eric Williams*

The world is too beautiful to be praised by only one voice.
May you have the courage to sing your part.
The world is too broken to be healed by only one set of hands.
May you have the courage to use your gifts.
And may we, together, have the courage to let go and be taken out into the world.