“No Other Desire: The Theology of Kahlil Gibran”

19 June 2005
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
Worship Associate: Tom Merritt

Reading: The Prince of Love — William Blake

How sweet I roamed from field to field,
   And tasted all the summer’s pride,
‘Till I the prince of love beheld,
   Who in the sunny beams did glide!

He showed me lilies for my hair,
   And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
   Where all his golden pleasures grow.

With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
   And Phoebus fired my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net,
And shut me in his golden cage.

He loves to sit and hear me sing,
   Then, laughing sports and plays with me;
Then stretches out my golden wing,
   And mocks my loss of liberty.

Reading: A Collage taken from the sayings of Gibran

Friendship is always a sweet responsibility, never an opportunity.

> In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.

There are those who give with joy, and that joy is their reward.

> Generosity is giving more than you can, and pride is taking less than you need.

The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.

> Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.

I have learned silence from the talkative, toleration from the intolerant, and kindness from the unkind; yet, strange, I am ungrateful to those teachers.

> Poetry is a deal of joy and pain and wonder, with a dash of the dictionary.

Keep me away from the wisdom which does not cry, the philosophy which does not laugh and the greatness which does not bow before children.

> I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the spirit.

If the grandfather of the grandfather of Jesus had known what was hidden within him, he would have stood humble and awe-struck before his soul.

> And ever has it been known that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.

If you love somebody, let them go, for if they return, they were always yours. And if they don't, they never were.

> Safeguarding the rights of others is the most noble and beautiful end of a human being.

Life without liberty is like a body without spirit. Life without love is like a tree without blossoms or fruit.

Reading: The Lake Isle of Innisfree — William Butler Yeats

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the heart's deep core.

Sermon: "No Other Desire: The Theology of Kahlil Gibran"
— Rob Eller-Isaacs

In June of each year after the spring celebrations — after Coming of Age, and Bridging, after Flower Communion and the Annual Meeting of the Congregation, after Memorial Day when the weather invites us to worship outdoors in the glow and glory of these exquisite days — each minister takes a Sunday to offer a service which centers on the life and theology of someone one might call a world-shaper.

This year Bill Neely began the series with "Planting Peace" the story of Wangari Maathai, the recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Janne continued last week by recounting the life and work of Unitarian activist and catalyst, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. And this week I have the privilege to remind some and introduce others to the Lebanese exile poet, painter, organizer and sage, Kahlil Gibran.

Two years ago I spoke about Walt Whitman, the one whom Allen Ginsberg called the "courage teacher." Then last year I delved into the life and work of the great Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore. And now my task is to weave a portrait of Kahlil Gibran. Whitman, Tagore and Gibran. I begin to see a pattern here. Each is a poet whose work has dimensions of prophecy. Each testifies to the wholeness concealed in the fragmentary; each was spurned as popular, by critics even as their readers found abiding inspiration in their work. I'm drawn to these three men and to so many others like them because my experience and my faith combine to point me toward the unity, the interconnectedness of life, the undying radiance, which is the subject of their work and of ours. For what is the purpose of a church if not to be a place that helps us all to consider radiance, feel the connections and experience the unity of God.

Gibran Kahlil Gibran was born in the far north of Lebanon in the village of Bisharri close by the Wadi Quadisha known as the sacred valley. There in the foothills of Mount Lebanon grow the cedars of which the psalmist sang. His family was Maronite Christian. Kahlil was early on smitten by books. Even as a child he showed promise as a poet and a painter. His mother was the daughter of a Maronite priest. His father, the local tax collector, drank and gambled to excess. He was a difficult man to live with. When Kahlil was 12, he, his mother, two sisters and a brother left Lebanon for the United States where they settled among the Syrian community in Boston. But before he left Kahlil tore paper into little pieces and planted the pieces of paper like seeds in the soil of his homeland.

Van Wyck Brooks, the great scholar of Victorian New England says of Boston in the 1890s that it was "congested with learning … hypercritical, concerned, self-conscious … filled with a sad sterility, the fruit of emotional desiccation." It was a dried-up place. Emerson was in his dotage. Much of the hope and passion of the generation of the Transcendentalists had seeped away to be replaced by a certain polite intellectual arrogance. Garrison Keillor might have characterized Boston at the turn of the last century as a place succumbing to the stranglehold of the chronically overeducated.

The brilliant young Arab so handsome and so skillful already with both brush and pen appealed to Boston society. Having been noticed in a drawing class at the local settlement house, Gibran was taken in by the first of many patrons who would help to further his work. He ventured from his home in the squalid South End over to the parlors of the elegant Back Bay. Evidently more than one of his admirers sought more from the boy than his creative effort. His mother quickly arranged for him to be enrolled in a Maronite boarding

school back in Beirut. A vignette from that time gives us a glimpse into this soulful young man.

Father Yusef Haddad was a well-respected senior member of the boarding school staff. Their first meeting "left a vivid impression on his teacher, who remembered his meeting with the young man with the 'sleepy eyes,' the 'dropping eyelids,' and the long hair which 'almost covered his ears.' Gibran told Haddad that he had completed his studies in English and had come to Lebanon to study 'the literature and language of my country and to be able to express my thoughts about these subjects' before complaining about being 'relegated' to the elementary class. Haddad explained that learning was like climbing a ladder: one must climb each rung, one at a time. The young man's subsequent response gave Haddad 'goose-pimples': 'Does not the teacher know that the bird does not ascend a ladder in its flight?'

Gibran spent three years studying in Beirut before returning to his family in Boston. Soon thereafter Mary Haskell, the heiress and educator who would become his primary patron, sent him to study in Paris. There he met and communed with Rodin who introduced him to his poetic and spiritual ancestor, William Blake, and with Gertrude Stein, whose infectious intellect and *joi de vivre* must surely have made a lasting impression. He studied painting and soon found himself a member of a group of exiled writers from the Middle East, radical democrats all. Gibran was especially drawn to the great Ameen Raihani who shared with his young protégé a deep commitment to the reconciliation of Christianity and Islam.

I need to turn now from attempting to sketch Gibran's life and try instead to give you a sense of why you and I should read him and remember him. I see a wealth of images in Gibran's life and work, which indicate a close alignment with religious liberalism. His

insistence on the common source and ultimate unity of religious experience mirrors our own as does his fierce and joyful embrace of multiculturalism.

Let's begin with Lebanon, the home of his heart. Lebanon — like Transylvania, the homeland of Unitarianism — is at the crossroads. And just as in Transylvania during the 16th century, it provided safe haven to those of differing religious commitments. Under the rule of Druze leader Fakhr al Din, Lebanon declared religious toleration and became the most cosmopolitan, enlightened nation in that part of the world. It was to that old dream, that old image of unity in diversity, that momentary reign of mutual respect that Gibran turned repeatedly for inspiration.

From Paris, Gibran made his way back to America. But Boston was too confining for so large a soul and so he settled in New York, in Greenwich Village. There, with the help of Mary Haskell he rented a studio and established his "hermitage." It was a place to work but as his reputation grew it also became a stop along the pilgrim way for a growing number of young Americans unsatisfied with materialism and dismayed by social niceties masquerading as religion.

The activist poet dressed in his long dervish robe, stained with ink and paint, lived, according to Bushrui and Jenkins in their recent biography Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet, "in an America that was the land of Henry Ford and Alphonse Capone; of jazz, electrification, the fox-trot, Gershwin's *Rapsody in Blue*, psychoanalysis, and Prohibition." Is it any wonder there were those who longed to hear the ancient truths made new?

Gibran's work draws from two cultural traditions, English and Arab, and is bound by the prejudices and restrictions of neither one. His early work, though translated into English, was originally written in

Arabic. From Arabic he drew the majesty of his language. His unabashed echoing of both the Bible and the Koran reflects his commitment to religious reconciliation. And from English, from the Romantic poets and especially from Emerson he drew his reliance on personal experience as the benchmark of spiritual transformation. He wrote "To think about oneself is terrifying. But it is the only honest thing: to think about myself as I am, my ugly features, my beautiful features and wonder at them … Self is not where one begins it is a place where one arrives after the years of ego absorption."

Gibran's masterpiece The Prophet appeared in September of 1923. It is a collection of brief parables interspersed with drawings from the author's hand. In the wake of World War I when American intellectuals were busy positing the death of God, this Lebanese exile drawing from the spiritual, artistic, and poetic traditions of both East and West insisted that we look beyond the horror and destruction and see there shining an irreducible vision of harmony and peace. Some critics viewed The Prophet as yet another popular, derivative exercise but it's rings with the rhythm of the Psalms. It sounds the depths of prophecy.

> *Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.*
> *But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:*
> *To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melodies to the night.*
> *To know the pain of too much tenderness.*
> *To be wounded by your own understanding of love;*
> *And to bleed willingly and joyfully.*
> *To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;*
> *To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy.*
> *To return home at eventide with gratitude;*
> *And then to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.*

The book the critics spurned became, in time, the second most widely read book of the 20th century. Only the Bible itself surpassed it in sales. The yearning that propelled it, the millions of people drawn to its positive, flesh affirming message of human unity is the best news I can offer you this morning.

By spring of 1931 it was clear Gibran was dying. On his deathbed he was asked, "Are you a Catholic?" Gruffly he refused Last Rites and fell into a coma. Bishop Francis Wakim, the pastor of St. Joseph's the Maronite Church in New York arrived and tried to rouse him but Gibran did not respond.

Bushrui and Jenkins imagine his life passing before his eyes: "the towering cedars; the dreaming ruins of the temple of Astarte; the whispering pond in Quadisha valley; horsemen bearing a summons to his father; his first sight of Leonardo's St. Anna; a steamboat at Ellis Island, the seething streets of Chinatown, Boutros's store; Sultanah's almond eyes; Kamileh's back bent double by heavy packs; the swirling cloaks and whirling cameras of Fred Holland Day, Micheline, Josephine, afternoons with Dr. Jung, the madman, Zarathustra, the grave–digger and the war; Rodin's studio; *Spirits Rebellious*, Yeats, Ryder, Garibaldi; Mary's meteorite; the *Caesar* setting sail for Syria, 'Abdu'l- Baha, *The Prophet, Jesus Son of Man,* Marianna, Mary and May. "For Mercy has a human face…and love the human dress"

His mortal remains were returned to the home of his heart, to Lebanon. "Along the route people lined the roads and at every village the procession, now more akin to a triumphal march than a funeral, stopped while village leaders read their eulogies. Following the cortege, men chanted songs while women wailed and beat their breasts. Near the ancient city of Byblos ceremonies evoking

traditional rites to the local goddess were enacted as young men in native dress brandished swords, and dancing women scattered flowers before the hearse." Kahlil Gibran exile, poet, painter and prophet had finally come home.

I close with these lines from a Lebanese poet of our day, a man inspired by the creativity and courage of his predecessor. These words of the poet Adonis appear at the end of his "Elegy for the Time at Hand."

> *Because the earth survives beneath my feet,*
> *the pale god of my despair rejoices.*
> *A new voice speaks my words.*
> *My poems bloom naked as roses.*
>
> *Find me some paper,*
> *some ink.*
> *Despair is still my star,*
> *and evil is always being born.*
> *Silence rises on the sand.*
> *There are hearts to touch.*
> *Some ink…*
> *Some paper…*
>
> *"Where is your home?*
> *What camp without a name?"*
>
> *"My country is abandoned.*
> *My soul has left me.*
> *I have no home."*

As Gibran made the ancient truths accessible to his own generation, we — though despair is still our star — know there are hearts yet to

be touched, yours and mine among them. So we once again take up the work to which he and so many others like him gave their lives and pray that you and I might have the strength, tenacity and wisdom in the valley of our exile to find ourselves at home.

May it be so and amen.