

“Practicing Gratitude”

Unity Church
November 16th, 2008

There are times in our lives when the bottom falls out of the world. One minute the ground seems solid. Seconds later it all gives way and we're falling. Dizzy and nauseous we find ourselves spiraling down through the darkness. You know what I'm talking about. You've been alive long enough to know. It usually comes without warning; a love you thought would last forever comes apart at the seams, a job that felt like true vocation vanishes like smoke, or someone we love dies without warning. And then the ground gives way. A storm of grief sweeps in and ends life as we've known it.

Theologian, Paul Tillich, spoke of God as “the ground of being.” The basis, the touchstone, the one thing we can count on. And when the ground gives way, when life pushes us over the edge into freefall we can't help but wonder why. Those who believe that God is intimately involved with the details of their lives ask themselves, “What they I do wrong?” They frame their pain as punishment. They believe the catastrophe they've suffered is retribution for some unnamed sin. Others see their suffering as karmic return, an unavoidable reversal which reflects some prior blessing and portends good things to come. Still others, shudder, bow before the mystery and ask where is the blessing in this?

I count myself among those who shudder and bow. I don't believe God cares. I think caring is our job. I don't believe in retribution. The evidence is everywhere. There are sinners all over the place running around scot-free. And we know for certain retribution fosters far more destructive behavior than it helps to prevent. So despite our nostalgia and regret let's set aside the notion that “His eye is on the sparrow.”

The Law of Karma has an appealing symmetry. When viewed from high above our lives may well seem balanced in that way. But close at hand; down here in what our beloved Baptist colleague J. Alfred Smith is want to call “the nasty now and now,” karma doesn't cut it. Karma neither comforts us nor does it call us to task. I want to be called to task. I want our theology to ask us to step up. I want to be both comforted and called.

Late last April our son, Jonah, was diagnosed with melanoma. The cancer had broken through into the lymph system. We were terrified. The bottom fell out of our world. For a few days we were in free fall. Once we found our sea legs we started to ask why. We wondered about sun exposure and genetic predisposition. We looked for behavioral causes like diet or drinking or staying up late. After all our years of counseling and consoling people living with cancer, we immediately fell into the very same trap we always warn others against. It's not you fault and even if your bad habits or procrastination helped to bring it on that doesn't matter now. Now what matters isn't why. What matters now is how; how to fight it, how to stay hopeful in the midst of the struggle, how to live well in the face of the fear.

Suffering can be transformed. We can discipline our minds to that end. When the ground gives way, when grief sweeps in, we can shudder, we can feel it, feel it fully, let it grab hold of us, let it shake us till the tears take over and we think we'll never laugh again. And then, and then we can bow and let go and go on. “Then said my friend Daniel (brave even among lions), “It's not the weight you carry but how you carry it-books, bricks, grief- it's all in the way you embrace it, balance it, carry it when you cannot and would not put it down.”

Embrace it, balance it, carry it, books, bricks and grief, it all adds up to practice. Last week Janne preached bravely on the struggle, which makes it possible to transform suffering.

She spoke of Jonah's illness and how despite our pain and fear, the love surrounding him and us as well has opened up a place inside us where ever greater gratitude can dwell. My job is to build on what she has begun by suggesting some specific ways that you and I can learn to transform suffering by practicing gratitude.

New Jersey poet, Stephen Dunn in a poem dedicated to his brother wrote: "Our parents died at least twice, the second time when we forgot their stories...What is the past if not unfinished work, swampy fecund, infinitely revisable? Our parents, meanwhile, must have wanted something back from us. We know what it is, don't we? We've been alive long enough." Yes, we do know what they wanted. They wanted us to understand. They wanted us to know that they were human beings flawed and gifted as we are flawed and gifted. They wanted us to forgive the damage done and to remember well the gifts they gave. They wanted us to remember their stories that their lives might serve to warn and yes, to inspire us.

I suggest we take up the unfinished work of the past. It will help to shape the future. When we think of spiritual practice we usually picture things like yoga, meditation, contemplative prayer or martial arts. Such disciplines are ways to summon the quality of attention we hope to bring to those who matter most to us. But they are only the beginning. Once we learn how to live in affectionate company with emptiness the time comes to disciple our minds. I want to suggest we broaden our understanding of spiritual practice to include narrative authority. Narrative authority is a concept found in both literary criticism and in theology. It basically means stories really matter.

When I tell you a story about my prayer life, when I tell you that I get up before dawn almost everyday and stretch out and meditate and bring you and God to mind, I deepen my commitment to the practice in the telling. When I say, this is who I am, this is what I do, this is why I do it, it helps me stay committed to becoming the person I most want to be, it helps me do what matters most. Let's try another example of how narrative authority can help to shape our lives.

Many people see themselves as victims of poor parenting. Many are. That said we all know how easily we can get trapped in prisons cages that we build around ourselves. My mother and I had a difficult relationship. The details are not important. For many years the story that I told myself and others about my mother and me centered on the struggle between us. When I spoke of her I would recount her childhood wounds and how her wounds played out in my life. In the years since her death I've learned to tell a different story. I've asked myself, what were her gifts? How did she bless the world? How do her gifts live on in me? The discipline is in crafting a litany of gratitude. Now the story I tell is less about struggle than it is about the work and the people she loved. Do you see how this works?

Do you see how much it matters who we say we are. We are people who care enough about ourselves, each other and the world, to get up early and bow to greet the day. We are people who are able to recognize our parents as both flawed and gifted, to break the patterns of abuse and to cultivate the gifts they gave. And we are people called and compelled to step up now to the obligations of genuine engagement. By taking up the unfinished work of the past, by getting clear about what matters most, we become more capable partners in providing what in many ways the world needs most, a vision for tomorrow.

What story shall we tell about our church? Shall we be a saving remnant, an intellectual elite seeking refuge from world? Or shall we be a generous people, willing to confess our own impoverishment; eager to give and to receive the gifts of neighbors we are

yet to know. And what story shall we tell about our city and especially about that stretch of sacred ground we call the central corridor. Shall we say it is a wasteland, cut off by a freeway, undermined by economic dislocation? Or shall we say it is a place where America is coming true? I want us to find ways to engage our neighbors. I want us to learn to listen carefully enough, to connect deeply enough, to come to understand the complex challenges and possibilities before us well enough that we will be able to craft a litany of gratitude for the gifts beyond measure we surely will find there. Then, together we will tell a story of what Beloved Community can be. What will it look like? How will it feel? What do love and justice ask of us? If we can tell the story we can make it real. If we can make it real then we will actually live the life we love to sing about.

“It’s not the weight you carry
but how you carry it-
books, bricks, grief-
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it
when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”

I would make any sacrifice to save our son. I would “approach God with whole-offerings or yearling calves...thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil. But sacrifice is not what God asks of us. Instead of sacrifice God asks us in the words of the Prophet Micah only to “do justice, love mercy and walk humbly” on the earth. I think that is how most, if not all of us hope to be remembered. That is the story we hope our descendants will tell; that we tried to make justice, that we sought to be merciful (which is very much like kindness) and that we learned to walk humbly, grateful for all that sustains and upholds us.

So when the bottom falls of your world, when the ground gives way and that storm of grief sweeps in, I pray of you, shudder and bow. “Embrace it, balance it, carry it.” Let fear and suffering carve out a place in you for deeper gratitude. Gives thanks we have the courage and the strength to help to tell the story of faith requires us to tell. For without a vision the people perish but with one all the world will be made new. Yes my beloved, even you.

May it be so and amen.

Readings for 11/16/08

Call to Worship

Amy Stenson Kujawski

I am grateful for the wisdom of seventh graders. Last week, one of my students reflected on this moment in our country in her daily journal.

She was grateful for a new beginning. She was grateful to be a young kid in this country.

She was grateful for all of the people who worked hard for something in which they really believed.

In the end, she said she was hopeful. If hope was a building, she wrote, it would be a church.

Come let us worship together.

“Our Parents”

for my brother

Our parents died at least twice,
the second time when we forgot their stories,
or couldn't imagine how often they craved love,
or felt useless, or yearned for some justice
in this world. In their graves, our parent's need
for us is pure, they're lost without us.
Their honeymoon in Havana does or does not
exist. That late August in the Catskills-
we can decide to make them happy.

What is the past if not unfinished work,
swampy, fecund, seductively revisable?
One of us has spent his life developing respect
for the weakness of words, the other for what
must be held on to; there may be a chance for us.

We try to say what happened in that first house
where we were, like most children, the only
needy people on earth. We remember
what we were forbidden, who got the biggest slice.
Our parents, meanwhile, must have wanted something
back from us. We know what it is, don't we?
We've been alive long enough.

Stephen Dunn

Micah 6:6-8

How shall I bow before God on high?
Should I approach God with whole-offerings or yearling calves?
Will the Lord accept thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of oil? What shall I bring
when I approach the Lord?

Shall I offer my eldest son for my own wrongdoing, my children for my own sin?

God has told you what is good; what does the Lord ask of thee
but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

“Heavy”

That time
I thought I could not
go any close to grief
without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God
had His hand in this,

as well as friends.
Still I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.
Then said my friends Daniel
(brave even among lions),
“It’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it-
books, bricks, grief-
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”
So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?

Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger
to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled-
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love
to which there is no reply.

Mary Oliver