“Raising the Dead”

Ordination Sermon for H. Daniel Gregoire
Sunday, November 9, 2014
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The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

“In this refulgent… [Autumn] it [is] … a luxury to draw the breath of life.” (R. W. Emerson’ Divinity School Address)

In this refulgent company of kindred spirits here and in our congregations, it is a luxury to grow a soul. To grow a soul:

- to serve Life, God,
- to seek beauty,
- to enter the struggle for justice,
- to give thanks for the graciousness of creation,
- to labor and strive and fall short and to succeed, and
- always to seek soul, evermore soul….

It is an honor to have been asked by Daniel to share this moment with you, and it is my pleasure to welcome all our guests…

- Daniel’s family,
- members of various congregations,
- colleagues,
- participants in this sacred celebration, and
- guests.

I welcome especially members of the Unitarian Society of Germantown, along with their Senior Minister and my colleague Rev. Kent Matthies – whose grace, caring, integrity, wisdom, leadership, and commitment bless…. And, of course, the members of the Germantown Society deserve some credit as well.

Also, I want to indulge in welcoming back the Rev. Dr. Frederic Muir, Senior Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis whose extraordinary ministry has blessed our Association and the wider community and world, mentoring those like Kent and Daniel and many others, offering leadership as a scholar, parish minister, anti-oppression and justice activist, and more… a friend and colleague with a servant spirit, shaking and strengthening our foundations as a free faith with his witness to building the Beloved Community….

One of the cool things about Fred is that he is an alum of The Community Church of NY, once serving as a student minister and ordained here 39 years ago!
Thinking about this occasion, I shall come to the dry bones, that peculiar text from Ezekiel, selected by Daniel, which has rattled and blessed me from the early days of my first ministry.

But first,

- if original sin is forgetfulness as Islam teaches (and thus we need constant reminders of the important things),

- if this is a tiny bit like a graduation, (and as Community members know for our graduating high school seniors, I offer Life Texts),

- if sometimes wisdom/words/thoughts crack open with astonishing clarity and supercharge our bodies and souls...

In view of such realities, the Temptation is to offer some Life Texts… and … I yield to the temptation… for a moment.

Like many, I was marked in high school when first reading Emerson’s "Self Reliance," and then in seminary even more deeply in his Divinity School address with Emerson's invitation and summons to live with authenticity, clarity… with “first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul....” To these, I add that Emerson in an anti-slavery speech in 1844, commented with irony as he enumerated the horrors of southern slave-owners: “The sugar they raised was excellent. Nobody tasted blood in it.” (Emerson – The Mind on Fire, R. D. Richardson, Jr., p. 397)

Side by side, I embrace Alice Walker who observes, “Activism is my rent for living on this planet.”

Two more: Howard Thurman, gracious mystic, minister, and teacher, reminds us, “Everything is sustenance.” And what about the hard things, the heartaches? Again, “Everything is sustenance.”

Also, Harvard Divinity School social ethicist and Unitarian Universalist minister, James Luther Adams: “The meaning of life is fulfilled only by those who enter into the struggle for justice in history and in community.”

Only??...!!

All these inform my curious wrestling with Life… healthy reminders… sources of healing, hope and courage… cor ad cor loquitur… heart speaking to heart…. soul & spirit!

Returning to the text about the Dry Bones from Ezekiel, I confess that it is a weird, unused favorite of mine. I was serving our congregation in Roanoke, Virginia, and
Rev. James Forbes, then teaching in Virginia, now Minister Emeritus of The Riverside Church, was the invited guest for the local clergy association. It was 37 years ago.

Forbes' topic was "Raising the Dead." His text was the passage in Ezekiel about the valley of the dry bones.

"Can these bones live?" … Behold, I will cause breath [spirit] to enter you, and you shall live.... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...." (Ezekiel 37: 3, 6, 14a)

In the course of his presentation, truly the Spirit descended upon him, or us, or everywhere, and Jim Forbes, as I have now heard often, spoke with a passion and a truth that enveloped and blessed. It was a spirit-filled and moving incarnation of his theme – that we exist, are called, invited, and commanded to breathe Life into whatever is in need of new life and to do so wherever we can.

He named the mundane truth that we are surrounded by death. Life, our lives, the world is like that.

It is filled with wounds, heartache, and despair. It is filled with death.

The preacher's task quite simply, though not so simple, is to raise the dead and the dying. To breathe spirit into that which contains death, transform it, and give it new life, yea, resurrect it.

What an audacious commandment that is, and some years ago, I also heard the same message, not just for preachers, but for all of us in words of Ramakrishna; “The winds of God's grace, [the winds of Life], are always blowing, and we have to raise our sails.”

Incarnating spirit... sharing it... all of us, each of us... surrounded as we are by society’s inequities and oppressions and by the wounds, known and unknown to others.

As a minister, I have received a 3 a. m. phone call from a former church member, then in Toronto, contemplating killing herself.... As we talked 15, 20, 30...45 minutes, her spirit moved toward life rather than death from a grace emergent.

I conducted the funeral for a four-day-old infant child of a young couple, the father someone I had first known years before when I was a student minister for his church youth group. And my heart felt as if it were breaking... as were theirs.

A friend of many years has had family members with various serious accidents or diseases, each weathering their broken bodies now healed, and he wonders aloud with some honest fear if God keeps aiming at him and keeps missing him, and he – as one personally spared from similar incidents – does not know why God has spared him so far.
I hear tales, as do so many of us, of illness, cancer, families disrupted or shattered, and a particular gentle man, Billy – who is living with many challenges and with simple gratitude – blesses me with his affirmation that “we have more strength than we know.”

So, we too try to live with spirit… and bless others…. And we have more strength than we know.

The hazards we face of preoccupation and forgetfulness yet remain, and the late Max Coots, a colleague in Canton, N.Y., wrote,

It’s the little deaths before the final time I fear.
The blasé shrug…
The cynic-sneer…
The soft-sweet odor of success that overcomes the sense of sympathy,
The self-betrayals…
The ridicule of vision, the barren blindness to what was once our sense of beauty.
These are deaths that come so quietly that we do not know when it was we died. (Seasons of the Self, p. 63)

Affirming our own creativity and beauty, affirming one another, with fire and tenderness,… the task is to be agents of the Spirit of Life, to incarnate the Spirit… “incarnate” – from the Latin, “to make flesh.” Truly, the Spirit blows where it will, and not one of us can command the barely describable moments when spirit appears, but that does not diminish our calling to be agents of Life: to witness to the Spirit of Creativity and to the new life that is always open to us.

What do you do when you are tired and beaten down, when there is nothing fresh to your life, when spirit-killing daily routine has kept you away from living your life and experiencing the grace amid the tumble of the world?

What do you do? What do we do?

How are you doing with forgiveness, generosity, courage? Who is dying before having lived (including perhaps you?) and how might a word from the heart (or you silent presence) comfort, inspire, provoke or touch another?

Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer, poet and essayist, counsels us, “Practice resurrection….” And adds, “Be joyful although you have considered all the facts.”

Agents of Life… soul, evermore soul….

On the afternoon of that horrific day, 9/11, as I sat on the stoop of one of our buildings, amid my own weary sadness and dismay, a church member arrived with
various food items and supplies for our homeless guests in our nightly shelter… her normal day to do so…. Her servant spirit alive and witnessing to the beauty we carry and can share…. And across the city…

On my way home, late in the afternoon of that day, I passed St. Vartan’s Park and saw some young children playing with their parents – running, laughing, filled with joy… as they should be, filled with innocence of youth; the parents filled with love to make things normal for them on a tragic day.

After the grieving, sometimes amidst the most tragic of days, we realize that life goes on; Love continues. The hope for the future remains in us and in our children and in all we give them.

On that tragic day, I glimpsed something sacred and trustworthy. God. Spirit. Life. Something trustworthy showing up. Good news…

Good news, simple, trustworthy, holy… daily.

The ancient story, the anthropomorphism of God’s breath and the supernaturalism of the dry bones coming alive, those symbols remain far, far away from my own language and poetry of faith.

Yet, as a partner with the Spirit of Life and Love and justice, new life appears. I’ve seen it and so have you.

Our life-giving ways are a matter of resistance to all that kills and overwhelms the spirit and a summons to our best, our creative, caring deeds.

Also, I think on this day of celebration about insight from theologian Ada Isasi-Diaz, expanding upon Augustine who said, “Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.”

To anger and courage, Isasi-Diaz adds, fiesta!

And today we especially celebrate, sacred joy!

With spirit, we live, and we raise the dead, and our lives bless one another and the world…. Amid the wounds, sorrows, and joy.

The choice, of course, is ours; we can die before we live.

You can live in expectation of some future day when you will be braver, when you will be stronger, when you will be smarter, when you will be more forgiving, or more free, or more lovable. Put it off, you can wait. And die before you live.
And we can walk past beauty, without seeing. And you will never be speechless and feel the sad sweetness – or the sweet sadness – of your own living and dying.

What do you expect? Is the world a safe place?

Of course not. It is dangerous and debilitating and heart-rending.

But it is a good place. Here we are the eyes and ears of the universe alive! This place is something more

- a place where the way of Life is growth and change,
- a place where some dreams can truly come true,
- where experiments lead to discoveries,
- where autumn leaves in their death throes beguile us with beauty,
- where everything is sustenance,
- where on the other side of pain is resurrection, new life….
- where we may live now, this day, servants of Life dedicated to building the Beloved Community.

This is the day that is given to us, and let us be glad and rejoice in it!

And because Daniel gets the final word, this day I will close with the words of Benediction that I most always offer each Sunday.

Whatever we can do, or dream we can do, let us begin it this day. Boldness has Genius, Power, and Magic in it. May we be Bold in our Living and in our Loving, in our Giving and in our Forgiving, so that the world awaited becomes more nearly the world attained. Amen.