“Saints and Symbols”

Sunday, January 27, 2013
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Readings

(1) On his 25th anniversary with our church in 1932, Rev. John Haynes Holmes (1879-1964) reaffirmed:

I would have The Community Church the model of my ideal society. I would see all sorts and conditions . . . in relations one with another of respect and reverence. I would have courtesy and forbearance the habit of its members, kindness their speech, and love their life. When sweet accord prevails among us, I feel light flooding from our hearts into the world; if discord come, I feel that light grow dim, and leave the world in darkness.

As we seek truth, cherish freedom, exalt justice, and always practice peace, we prove our dreams a reality for... (humanity). Our earth can yet be paradise, since we have made our varied faiths and fates one fellowship.

(2) Nelson Mandela, in his 1994 autobiography, Long Walk To Freedom, wrote:

I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

(3) So many saints, and another one is embedded in our very being as a congregation. Reverend William Ellery Channing proclaimed religious freedom and a new identity for Unitarians in 1819. He affirmed the Principle of the Free Mind, which honors the gift of reason in religious life and underscores individual freedom of belief. At the dedication of our first building in 1826 at Prince and Mercer Streets, Channing was the preacher.
In his preaching, Channing included an open-eyed and abiding faith in humankind this way in 1828 in his sermon “Likeness to God.”

I do and I must reverence human nature. Neither the sneers of a worldly skepticism, nor the groans of a gloomy theology, disturb my faith in its godlike powers and tendencies. … I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes…. But, injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. … I bless it for its kind affections, for its strong and tender love. I honor it for its struggles against oppression, for its growth and progress under the weight of so many chains and prejudices, for its achievements in science and art, and still more for its examples of heroic and saintly virtue. These are marks of a divine origin and the pledges of a celestial inheritance; and I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race.

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Next to our Flaming Chalice this morning is a replica of Margaret Fuller, who usually graces our Chapel of Peace downstairs. It was a gift a couple of years ago to the church with the blessing of the Women’s Association.

Personally, I knew a Margaret Fuller in my Unitarian Sunday School once upon a time… a relative of the Transcendentalist feminist of the mid-1800s.

However, before an exploration of some of the “Saints and Symbols” of our gorgeous religious journey toward freedom, another brief weapons report. Last week’s report was about the Remington Game Master Model 760 that killed Dr. King in Memphis in 1968. This past week I have learned about the semi-automatic assault weapon used to kill 20 children and six adults last month in Newtown, CT.

The murderer used a Bushmaster AR-15, which is the civilian equivalent of the Army’s M-16. It is even more popular than the Remington Game Master, with more than 2 million sold in the past ten years. It is a true assault weapon, and it was of interest to me that, in product reviews, one inquirer was pleased to learn that the Bushmaster would still be effective with knock-down power, at not just 200 yards, but 300 yards. That would be from about 35th Street up to just beyond 39th Street along Park Avenue.
This weapon used in Newtown was equipped for a 30 round magazine of bullets, and the murderer had "multiple clips" – hundreds of bullets were fired. A typical version weighs 6.5 pounds and costs as little as over $600 with many, many accessories available. The 1994 Federal ban on this weapon expired in 2004.

A USA Today reporter notes, “The gun, weapon analysts say, has a reputation for easy handling and deadly accuracy.” (Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY, 5:15 a.m. EST, December 17, 2012)

This kind of weapon was also used in the Washington, DC area sniper shootings that killed 10 in 2002.

It was also used in the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shootings early last summer that killed 12 and wounded 58.

It was also was used to kill two people and then the shooter himself at an Oregon shopping mall 3 days before the Newtown shooting.

[A police chief in Chaska, Minnesota adds, “There is an allure to this weapon that makes it unusually attractive. The way it looks, the way it handles — it screams assault weapon.” He “said the gun’s practical application is little more than ‘a combat weapon.’” Connecticut State Police Lt. Paul Vance said Sunday that the shooter used ‘multiple’ 30-round rifle magazines in the attack. The weapon... [according to the medical examiner] delivers bullets "designed in such a fashion (that) the energy is deposited in the tissue so the bullets stay in."]

Bush Master, the rifle maker, offers a “Discreet Carrying Case for Carbines.... When low profile is needed, and personal protection has to be readily available... this ... case does the job.” Price: $89.00.

Guns, of all sizes, varieties, and deadliness, once a symbol of the Wild West, remain – now with much enhanced kill-power – as a symbol of American violence in these wild days of the 21st century.

Saints

Symbols... so many, so varied... symbols are important. They help define and reflect for each of us the lives we lead. This morning I turn especially to those we embrace along the sacred journey that guides our days through mystery, wonder, heartache and hope.
Our symbols include the stories of the saints/the exemplars of faith whom we admire. For us, there are many saints whom we embrace as representatives of our freedom loving tradition, and I turn back to Margaret Fuller.

America’s foremost feminist of the 1830s and 40s, Margaret Fuller was a colleague of Ralph Waldo Emerson and was a leading Transcendentalist... that reform movement that liberated our faith from allegiance to Christianity alone. She was also a journalist writing about urban slums, poverty and working conditions in New York in the 1840s and then a foreign war correspondent, the first woman to fill that role. She once observed,

All around us lies what we neither understand nor use. Our capacities, our instincts for this our present sphere are but half developed. Let us confine ourselves to that till the lesson be learned; let us be completely natural; before we trouble ourselves with the supernatural. I never see any of these things but I long to get away and lie under a green tree and let the wind blow on me. There is marvel and charm enough in that for me.

She embraces natural religion, this world, this life, this arena for growing our souls. She welcomes human freedom. She encourages us to study and learn and to embrace beauty of nature and awe before creation. This inward journey of Spirit also flowed into the outward commitment and journey to bless the world by our deeds.

Margaret Fuller – symbolic of Natural Religion and practical religion – integrity, activism, honor, and principle, and so much more.

Of the saints that surround us in our worship space, I turn to the one facing us as we enter... the photo of Nelson Mandela when he spoke here in 1990 to a conference of anti-apartheid activists on his first trip to the United States. I had met Mr. Mandela two months earlier, on a clergy trip – almost all black ministers – set up by the American Committee on Africa. We were stunned to be invited to his home in Soweto where we visited with him in his backyard. Then I welcomed him here in this worship space, then met him again four years later as an election observer in Soweto in 1994.

For almost 50 years, ministers and members here at Community, with others, had been deeply engaged as allies against apartheid, and it was a humbling privilege to join a group who could meet with him less than two months after his release from Robben Island.

His life has been, as he described, a Long Road to Freedom... politically and spiritually with his commitment to a free South Africa, his ongoing witness and leadership over 26 years of imprisonment, and his leadership for a non-violent transition to a free, inclusive, multi-racial, democratic South Africa have been part of,
A spiritual giant greets us each time we enter.

The photograph of Mandela taken here at Community is a symbol, a witness, a reminder, and a challenge that
- freedom and justice are our human/divine calling,
- the struggle may be long, almost 100 years for the African National Congress, and
- success is possible.

We are surrounded by other witnesses, in addition to Margaret Fuller, Nelson Mandela, John Haynes Holmes, and William Ellery Channing, plus each other, of course.

On either side of the Mandela photograph, we have a bust – one of Abraham Lincoln, and the other Ralph Waldo Emerson.

From Emerson, just two thoughts, about the human journey, pilgrimage, trek, adventure into freedom and fullness of Life, Emerson who opened us to religions of the world and the divine within:

Do not be too timid and squeamish about your actions. All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make the better. What if they are a little coarse and you may get your coat soiled or torn? What if you do fail, and get fairly rolled in the dirt once or twice? Up again, you shall never be so afraid of a tumble.

Emerson is sometimes portrayed, I think unfairly, as excessively individualistic, and I was deeply struck by a cunning, prophetic critique of tea drinking and Boston Brahmins whose wealth often came from trading with the South (whose slave-produced goods included sugar, rum, and cotton). In 1844 in a public address, Emerson observed, “The sugar they raised was excellent: nobody tasted blood in it.”

Economic convenience and material gain from slavery obscured the exploitation and oppressions of other humans…. A critique still applicable today.

In the far back corner is the poet Walt Whitman… just a word, a few words from Leaves of Grass:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,… And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels….
I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)
…Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, 
You must travel it for yourself.
Dr. King, here near at hand, keeps an eye on all of us, and I spoke about him last week.

Margaret Sanger, pioneering feminist in the birth control movement, is over there. (And yes, women are insufficiently present.)

Albert Schweitzer, musician, physician, theologian, music scholar, and humanitarian, invites us to consider his insight that our calling is to show “reverence for life.” Reverence for Life…

Gandhi… the visionary of non-violent transformation of society…

So many exemplars, witnesses, imperfect saints, oh so human – brilliant and at times weak – have expanded our faith, understanding, and justice-making…. Each adding to our journeys toward freedom, toward radical hospitality, and toward Universal Religion.

Symbols

Along with the Saints, who invite us to find our own radiance, we have a host of symbols of our free faith.

In 1982, I introduced the Flaming Chalice to our worship as a symbol of our Unitarian Universalist identity and faith tradition. In the late 1970s, lighting a chalice was emerging as a ritual, but no one seems to know when and where the first physical chalice was lit.

The symbol itself of the chalice goes back to World War II relief efforts in Europe by the Unitarian Service Committee. It was akin to the Red Cross symbol, which was used to denote non-partisan non-combatants. The print image of the Flaming Chalice in the 1950s and 1960s began to take hold, and in a Coming of Age program, I received a small chalice pin from my congregation with other high schoolers.

It is a rich symbol of the power of Light, the fire of Truth and Justice, and the warmth of Love.

Our Unison Affirmation, which begins, “Unto the Church Universal,” first appeared in our worship on September 29, 1929, 83 years ago. Keshub Chandra Sen was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, a progressive reform movement within Hinduism in the 1800s. Our then Senior Minister adapted his words for use each Sunday. Keshub Chandra Sen was fighting against the caste system in India, as well as advocating for women’s rights, and that unifying vision is one that resonated with our Minister John Haynes Holmes.
It was ten years earlier in 1919 that we as a congregation had changed our name from the Church of the Messiah to The Community Church of New York and affirmed our goal, “Knowing not sect, class, nation or race, welcomes each to the service of all” – still inscribed above our terrace.

Naming, as we know, is powerful. The name Community and its vision were to move us away from the confines of traditional Unitarian white, upper middle class, Anglo exclusivity, which still lingers in our larger Association, AND to welcome those or many colors and class.

The Community Church ideal also gave voice to the Social Gospel and social justice as integral to religious life. It continues to guide us and sustain us today – to serve the widest community possible, none of which was evident in the name Church of the Messiah, nor the reality of our congregation 100 years ago, which was a chapel for the contented and privileged.

Another symbol is the Isaiah statue. In 1959, Isaiah became our widely known emblem, symbol. The sculpture represents the prophet Isaiah beating swords into plowshares. The text with its vision of peace-making reads:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (2:4)

So often in approaching our building, I am reminded how fitting a symbol it is for us: to challenge us to put faith into action, to seek peace, to care for those in need – a fitting symbol, despite his rather stern visage.

I should add that the sculptor Moissaye Marans created it in 1939, and it won honorable mention at the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair in the National Competition for a statue symbolizing “Peace.” Installation in 1959 was made possible through the generosity of the sculptor and a bequest of David Pantiel.

Next, we have our Banners of World Faiths, which we added in 1987. They reflect our celebrations of different faith traditions from around the world, which began in the 1940s. (It is wonderful how welcoming they are to so many, especially to interfaith couples.)

By way of quick review, we have

- Taoism’s Ying-Yang,
- Islam’s Crescent moon and Star,
- A Roman Cross from Christianity
Hinduism’s Sanskrit for Om,
Buddhism’s Eight-spoked Wheel for the Eight-fold Path, and
Judaism’s Star of David.

To those, we have included a Whole Earth flag that recognizes Earth-centered spirituality and honors our spiritual journey as “Riders on the Earth” (MacLeish): cosmic voyagers bound together in a single garment of destiny.

And once again, the Flaming Chalice on the brick wall.

Our banners reflect only a portion of our conviction that the sacred has appeared to many peoples, at many times throughout human history, in many cultures, and that we can deepen our lives spiritually from them.

I remember well the now deceased long-time church member who upon coming here knew she was home. She had left the religion of her childhood for us because the ceiling there was too low, cramped, and stifling. This large tent fed her spirit and soul.

One last symbol for today (and there are many others)... And when was it? About 30 years ago when I inaugurated a Gay Pride Sunday, we then added a Welcoming Rainbow Flag by our door on the street.

So, here we are – with a variety of symbols, and these Saints – and you – and me – with our sacred possibilities – oh so human who sometimes (not often of course) act less than saintly, as we try each day to narrow the gap between our potential and deeds. Here we are trying to grow our souls and to make a better world, to make a difference to ourselves and to others.

Here we are: celebrating spiritual freedom and faith in action... so odd, embracing radical hospitality, affirming human dignity and worth of all, and religious freedom....

Surrounded and challenged by symbols, markers, that lure us toward our best selves:

- **The Flaming Chalice** symbolizing Spiritual Freedom and the Light of Truth and Justice; and the Dignity of each person.
- Our **Unison Affirmation** of Universal Religion and the **Banners** of religious exploration and inclusion;
- The **Isaiah statue** that reminds us that faith without works is dead; “deeds not creeds” define our holiness;
- And all this shaping and reflected in our radical, inclusive name – Community, which we seek to honor and exemplify.
All this we embrace is at times profoundly counter-cultural in our narcissistic and individualistic society. All these are so much a living part of the Community Church Ideal— all this given to us, and all this we contribute to, as we meet the challenges of our days.

Such Saints and Symbols point to this bigger thing, this larger Ideal of the Beloved Community... audacious, humbling, challenging, comforting, affirming, inspiring—anchoring courage and hope even in hard times. We are spiritually rich in so many ways, consciously and subliminally, with these.

The Community Church Ideal... The Beloved Community.... And how do we make it concrete each day? This vision lives daily in our kindness, integrity and deeds.

And these days I keep returning to the prescription and invocation included in 1919, adorning this building since 1948. “Knowing not sect, class, nation or race, welcomes each to the service of all.”

It tells us what we need to do... To Welcome and to Serve.... Welcome all and serve all.

The details, what each of us may do may at times be unclear, but in our freedom to use our particular gifts is our fulfillment.

Do you remember Stacy King? Some years ago, he was a member of the Chicago Bulls basketball team, and after one game, a remarkable evening, he commented, “in an interview ... 'It's a night I will always remember as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined to score 70 points.'” Newsweek magazine reported these comments and went on to note more precisely what Stacy King did not say. Michael Jordan scored 69 of those 70 points. Stacy King? He only scored one point that night.

The parable of Stacy King offers much. It says to me that we all have different gifts and talents, and we each can contribute. Also, each of us, I do believe, has days like Stacy King, and each of us can also have grander days like Michael Jordan, if not every day. The deeper wisdom is that we are connected to one another, and rather than looking skeptically at Stacy King and his contribution that night, I want to celebrate his pride and his vision.

Everybody has a part to play in this creation, in offering our best selves, and every one of us is precious.

It is equally true here, where we are, in the middle of this wonderful adventure of Life, and in our writing a chapter of this Community: Everyone has a part to play.
What do we do on our shared journey to freedom?

“Knowing not sect, class, nation or race we welcome each to the service of all.”

We ask each other to Welcome and to Serve: To Welcome All and to Serve All with gratitude and joy,

Welcome and serve, and your gifts shall bless this world and your own days of hardship and hope.

Welcome and Serve.