

Blessed, Not Burdened

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

June 17, 2018

STORY FOR ALL AGES adapted from an old Chinese tale

Once upon a time long, long time ago in China there lived a man who was not very rich, but he was very wise. This man didn't have much, but he had a son that he loved dearly. And, aside from his son, the man's most prized possession was a beautiful white horse.

One day the horse broke free from his stable and ran off into the hills. This had never happened before. It was a little shocking!

The man's neighbors came to him with their sympathies.

"We are so sorry," they said, "that your beautiful horse has run away. What an awful thing to happen to such a good person."

The man was quiet a moment before saying, "Yes, and we shall see".

Three days later the beautiful white horse came back leading a herd of 12 equally beautiful horses. No one expected that! Now the man would be one of the wealthiest people in the village.

"How lucky you are," said his neighbors with just a touch of jealousy in their eyes. "What a blessing has befallen your family."

"Yes, and we shall see," said the man.

A few days later, while the man's son was training one of the new horses, he was thrown to the ground breaking both of his legs. "How horrible," his neighbors said. "Your son may never walk again!"

"Yes, and we shall see," said the man.

Later that week, the emperor's army came through town requiring that all the young, healthy men join them to fight in the emperor's war. They passed over the man's son, as his two broken legs would not heal in time for him to be able to fight.

"How wonderful," said his neighbors. "Another blessing!" And the man nodded, smiling to himself.

Maybe life is never quite as simple as we imagine!

May this story unfold in your hearts until we meet again.

READING **“Choose to Bless the World,”** by 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.

SERMON

Blessed, Not Burdened
The Rev. Anne Bancroft

First, to those who are celebrating it – Happy Father’s Day. The many layers of this relationship might be enough to keep us busy in thought all day – may there be moments, at least, of simple appreciation for both the burden and the blessing (since that’s what we’re talking about today) that is fatherhood in its myriad varieties.

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For historic and intriguing reasons, this is the last Sunday morning service we will celebrate together until September. Ever since Harvard College adopted Unitarianism in the very early 19th century, our tradition has been linked with the academic calendar and the particulars of New England weather that make it nicer to be almost anywhere on Sunday morning than in an un-air-conditioned historic sanctuary. About the time we get around to air conditioning this building, we will have a quandary on our hands!

Someone asked me a few weeks back what I was imagining for this service – what message I might send us all off with to ponder over the summer. I can only hope you take ANY message from this pulpit and ponder it for a time – the entire summer seems a big ask!

But the truth is, I HAVE been thinking about it all, and what might be useful: Where do we find ourselves at this point in time, each of us on our own, but also as a faith community? Ends of seasons are the times of reflection and, sometimes, opportunities to imagine forward. I have been thinking a fair amount, actually, about the legacy that this church carries, and how we have been engaging with it more actively over the last three or four years – Parker’s legacy, that is. When this church named itself for the minister most closely associated with the work of social justice, they burdened themselves and future generations – which is you, of course – with an expectation. You are not just another First-Parish-this, or Second-Parish-that, names that are in nearly every city or small town in New England. There is a very tall bronze man standing in front of this building, representing not just your history but your aspirations. It feels like quite a responsibility, doesn’t it? We might even call it a burden.

Yes, said the old Chinese farmer ... and we shall see.

I wonder about that old farmer. It seems to me he must have had an amazing capacity for the long view: the patience to imagine that what seemed a burden might actually turn out to be not such a bad thing, because, to be honest, if MY horse ran away – the one that helped me with my livelihood and that I thought I had a great relationship with and I cared a whole lot about – I imagine I’d be pretty upset. I’m not sure I’d have the presence of mind to think, you know ... we shall see. He was a farmer, after all – his horse would have been pretty important to him.

And then, by some amazing twist of fate his horse returns with other wild horses in tow ... amazing!
But then, of course, the son falls and breaks both legs. Some of you know we've had some recent experience with an injured son. I know others of you have, as well, and if not a son then a family member or dear friend – I have certainly struggled as I imagine you have to locate the blessing in this burden, and it's not even my burden, exactly.

Most, if not all of us, have challenges of our own, or of those we love, that we didn't anticipate. It's a little like the Buddhist story of the woman whose child has died. She asks the master to bring him back to her and he says, yes, he will, only she must find a mustard seed from the house with no loss, and try as she might, she can't find it. Each of our households has struggle within it.

It begs the question as to what our expectations are to begin with, doesn't it? What is our role in challenge, or in change? How long do we expect things to stay the same in our lives? And how much do we trust that if they do change, everything will still be ok, that we will still be ok? Do we ever imagine they might even be better somehow?

Michael Johnson: (*singing "May I Suggest," by Susan Werner, verse 1*)

May I suggest
May I suggest to you
May I suggest this is the best part of your life
May I suggest
This time is blessed for you
This time is blessed and shining almost blinding bright
Just turn your head
And you'll begin to see
The thousand reasons that were just beyond your sight
The reasons why
Why I suggest to you
Why I suggest this is the best part of your life

• • •

My colleague, Robbie Walsh, wrote a story called "Feeding and Being Fed."¹ *In my mid-50's, he wrote, I became a single adult for the first time, wholly responsible for feeding myself.*

¹ Walsh, Robert. **Stone Blessings**. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2010. p. 38.

We can imagine the perspective of burden for someone who had never experienced that burden before! Mid-50's, white, male – sounds pretty privileged, doesn't it? And yet, all of a sudden on his own, learning about food, about shopping, about preparation ... *it was* (he decided) *a journey of exploration and discovery* (That approach, that perspective, in and of itself, is a clue to the outcome.) *It was* (he decided) *a journey of exploration and discovery*

(And) after some time spent developing the skills necessary to feed myself, I began to actually invite people into my home and serve them food that I had prepared ... [and] I discovered that to do this for someone [chop, measure, mix, cook, and serve] – to feed them – is to give life. The food gives life, and the person who prepares and serves the food gives life. I was a life-giver.

From the burden of no experience, to the gift of life giving.

The horse ran away, and came back multiplied.

By now you may see the question for this congregation. How is our burden, here at Theodore Parker Church, a blessing in disguise? How is our expectation of engagement with the social ills of our era something we might experience as a blessing more than a burden?

In truth, my question goes beyond the expectations of this community to each and every burden we imagine falls in our laps **BECAUSE our response to adversity, to expectation or burden defines us.**

Michael: *(verse 2)*

There is a world
That's been addressed to you
Addressed to you, intended only for your eyes
A secret world
Like a treasure chest to you
Of private scenes and brilliant dreams that mesmerize
A lover's trusting smile
A tiny baby's hands
The million stars that fill the turning sky at night
Oh I suggest
Oh I suggest to you
Oh I suggest this is the best part of your life

• • •

I mentioned in a newsletter article a few months back the words of the Buddhist teacher, angel Kyodo williams: *for people who are not monastic, the world is our field of practice*, which is to say, if you have not withdrawn yourself entirely from daily life, if you have not secluded yourself by way of an abbey or a monastery or a house you never walk out of, then the world around you in its wild and abundant imperfections is where you practice the art of living, and there is ample opportunity to engage with burden and there are infinite moments to imagine as blessing.

What do you need? Really, what do you need?

Because often what you think you need is not what is being offered, and the blessing is in your capacity to rise to the challenge of what IS offered.

Church, for example – this church – like life – is not necessarily or always what you think you need. Church, oh, I suggest to you – like life – is often where people need YOU.

My friend Robbie continued, *Feeding the body is not all there is to giving life. We who gather in religious community give life, whether or not we have ever sliced a pepper. We transform ordinary entities – a bell, a flame, a touch of a hand, musical notes, a smile, a tear, words, a coffee cup – into spiritual sustenance. We serve it up, and we eat. We are the feeders, and we are those who are fed.*

Michael: (verse 3)

There is a hope
That's been expressed in you
The hope of seven generations, maybe more
And this is the faith
That they invest in you
It's that you'll do one better than was done before
Inside you know
Inside you understand
Inside you know what's yours to finally set right
And I suggest
And I suggest to you
And I suggest this is the best part of your life

• • •

In this world that is our field of practice, the truth is, you are needed. And church is simply and abundantly your reminder. And this church is your particular reminder, and being here at Theodore

Parker Church means your legacy has been chosen for you, and isn't that a blessing?! Seriously, how better to remember our need for each other, and our capacity to respond. It is what turns burden into blessing.

You know this. All of you who join together each week; who accompany our guest in sanctuary; all of you who sit outside on the weekend chatting with neighbors and walkers-by; all of you who sell plants on Memorial Day weekend; all of you who teach our children, who greet each other, who sing in the choir; all of you who bring petitions to be signed, who mow the lawn; all of you who start conversations about difficult topics; all of you are needed here and the world needs you to be here to be reminded.

Oh, by the way ... does the roof need repair? Yes, and we shall see. It's not that the burdens disappear.

But we are the feeders, and we are the fed. Think on that over the course of this summer. Imagine how it will be so going forward, to know that as we care for this world and all its creatures, as we side with love, as our hearts are opened by all we know is required of us, we are not burdened. We are blessed. We dare not allow ourselves the luxury of imagining it is not so.

Michael: *(verse 4)*

This is a song
Comes from the west to you
Comes from the west, comes from the slowly setting sun
With a request
With a request of you
To see how very short the endless days will run
And when they're gone
And when the dark descends
Oh we'd give anything for one more hour of light
And I suggest this is the best part of your life

Amen, my friends – until September.

Hymn 128 "For All That Is Our Life"