

Universal Welcome
Theodore Parker Church
January 12, 2020

Opening Words

And Yet You Persist

Rev Gretchen Haley

Though you have been warned
And given plenty of explanations
Reasons to do otherwise
You have persisted
To claim a life of joy, and justice
To carve out this time
This space for the renewal
Of your own heart
Despite all the reasons, the resistance
Fighting for your attention, luring you towards fear
You persist
To practice gratitude
For this day, this life
That has been given
This chance to begin again
And so let us gather
That we might
Offer one another courage, strength
Healing, hope
And this promise to
Persist in kindness,
Persevere in compassion
And
Prevail in a life that is for more than ourselves
Come, let us worship together

Reading TEARS, by Robbie Walsh

Sometimes tears come to my eyes.
Is it about the war?
Is it from getting older?
Or is it just autumn?

I'm self-conscious about it,
afraid people will think I'm grieving,

or that I'm a sentimental old fool.
I guess they'd be right if they thought those things.

It happened when I had lunch with a friend I hadn't seen in a long time.
It happened when I saw a bright orange maple tree outside my office window.
It happened when I saw a bride, whom I have known since she was six, kiss the groom.
It happened when one of my granddaughters held out her arms to me.

It happened when I heard a song about a lost dream.
It happened when I recalled a promise I had broken, and a thank-you I had not spoken.
It happened when I thought of a friend who died in autumn.
It's happening now, as I write these words.

I wipe the tears away
and go on as if everything was normal.

But it's not normal, it's *intense*, full of joy and sorrow,
And the joy and the sorrow are together
in the same moments.

This is the life, and the world, I have been given
for this short time, this blink of an eye.

Thank you.

Sermon

Universal Welcome The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Well, good morning – I'm glad to see so many of you back again today. Last week's sermon may have felt a bit challenging to many of you – filled with what is not quite right in our world these days and less humor than I usually muster, which is why I chose our opening words this morning – And Yet You Persist! "Though you have been given plenty of reasons to do otherwise you have persisted to carve out this time for the renewal of your own heart. . ." and I am glad you are here, and I am glad we are here together because it is what saves us. It's hard to hold the truths that our world is often not what we would have it be and that sometimes we are at a loss as to how to mend it, or how to mend ourselves in the face of it. Sometimes it's just hard and we have to acknowledge that while we muster the strength and courage to carry on with love and hope in our hearts.

I found a Buddhist story recently about two friends standing together. One is searching his pockets, of which he has many. "What are you looking for?" the other inquires. "Hope," said the searcher. "I'm sure it's in one of my pockets but I've looked in almost all of them and had

no luck finding it.” “Well, why don’t you look in that last one, here on your chest, you haven’t searched there yet.” “Oh, no, I’m leaving that one alone. If it’s empty, what have I left?”

Some days, our pockets are filled, and other days, it feels less so. So yes, we persist. And maybe some days I reach deep in my pockets and share my hope with you, and someday vice versa. And, we try to bring gratitude along with us for even the chance of joy in this blink of an eye that is our lives.

This month we are focusing on the theme of Integrity – wholeness, what C.S. Lewis called, “doing the right thing when no one is watching,” which feels, in a way, right but also kind of judgmental. In the materials for our children’s lessons, writer Katie Erslev points out that we often associate integrity with doing the right thing, when sometimes “the right thing” is not so clear-cut.

As an example – let’s imagine a little girl of 5 or so, who goes on a bike adventure with her brother to the local store. And let’s just imagine she had saved pennies left over from her daily milk purchase which cost 3 cents when her father regularly gave her a nickel. This really sweet little girl thought maybe she could use the pennies to buy a little treat for herself, like a beautiful elasticized pearl bracelet that slapped on and off her wrist with ease. Let’s guess that the day had been exceptional: a true adventure with her brother, and a lovely piece of jewelry purchased independently, until her parents discovered it. Where did you get that, they might have asked, pointing out that the pennies had not been, actually, hers to spend, having been provided for milk money, not fabulous jewelry. Alas . . . the bracelet was taken away. Was she a bad child? If she had a slightly different perspective on whose pennies they were, did she do the “wrong” thing? Maybe the parents were stingy and miserly and should have been more willing to celebrate a day of independence?

Well, you get my point. Integrity is a somewhat more complicated, perhaps nuanced, idea. Erslev encourages us to be both curious and creative in our assessments of integrity, less bent on “right vs. wrong” than “intention,” though follow-through, of course, matters.

How is it we learn to “walk the talk” we espouse, as individuals and as communities of faith, and how do we hold ourselves accountable? How do we live our lives with the kind of integrity that proves our intentions ARE made real, knowing that we are just a wee bit less than perfect, not to mention more than a wee bit unaware of our own need to see what may have been invisible to us – our privileges, our implicit biases?

We keep learning, of course – we try to pay attention to what we may be missing, or who we may be missing. We have a great opportunity to exercise the creativity of integrity today, right here at Theodore Parker Church. For as long as I have been with you, and longer, you have recognized the desire to be an accessible space, despite historic structures that challenge that intention. You have truly been working to make real the idea that in the spirit of love, all are welcome here. You have paved access to this building and provided an accessible restroom. You have provided hearing loops for those who are hard of hearing. If your pulpit is not yet a place

that all can access, no doubt making it so is on the list. Today you have the chance to commit your parish hall to that same degree of accessibility by voting to raise the funds needed for a dual project: construction of a lift and accessible restroom on the main floor, along with solar panels to lessen our carbon footprint. These are historic alterations to the environment that we are working to make a community space of welcome, of universal welcome. I have every confidence that these projects will happen because you have become people of abundance, which is not to say rich or wildly wealthy, necessarily, but abundant in your hearts, and in your intentions. I see it all the time – not least this week in the way people were trying so hard to find the right socks for our sock drive – trying, despite the fact that it is apparently not at all easy to find 100% cotton socks! But don't take that effort lightly – it is a really thoughtful and beautiful sign of your care and your knowing that you have that attention to give, that you are generous in spirit and in giving.

I want to point out how really blessed you are to have the resources among you to make today's goal bigger than simply a lift and solar panels. And by resources, again, I'm not simply pointing to funds, as important as they are. You – as a community of seekers – have made a practice of reflecting on what you are doing well, and what you could improve upon. I see it in your meetings, in your conversations, in your commitment to each other, and to the work of justice in the world. You have supported people in sanctuary; you have taken on the work of understanding our systems of oppression and how we each participate; you have lived into your identity as a welcoming congregation; you welcome new folks of all stripes into ongoing activities of the church; you stretch your understanding of spiritual language; you sing beautifully, better and better all the time; you make room for and increasingly welcome the sounds of all sizes and ages of people; AND, you appear to have become okay with the idea that all these things mean you will always be changing and growing and becoming, that standing still is not an option for a vibrant and engaged congregation.

We're never done, right? Always and continually, we are looking for signs of love in the world, and writing new songs about it.

In these old spaces, you are creating new welcome all the time.

Let us be about our tasks, then – doing what we can to make our world whole, yes?

Amen.

Closing Hymn

Our World Is One World