

Theodore Parker Church  
Stories That Bind, or Set Us Free  
May 16, 2021

**OPENING WORDS**

**The day unwritten... \*\***

*Rev. Dr. David Breeden*

**Permission secured by Soul Matters**

Welcome to a new story!  
Welcome to a day unwritten.  
We gather to speak of possibility.

We remember the losses,  
we celebrate the victories.  
As a people of story,

we embrace the possible  
over than the probable,  
weaving a story of hope.

Join us in the new story.  
Join us in the day unwritten.  
Join us in the future of possibility.

**SFAA**            **Voices in the Park**, Anthony Browne

This story is told in four parts, four different perspectives on the events of an ordinary afternoon.

*FIRST VOICE*

It was time to take Victoria, our pedigree Labrador, and Charles, our son, for a walk.

When we arrived at the park, I let Victoria off her lead. Immediately some scruffy mongrel appeared and started bothering her. I shooed it off, but the horrible thing chased her all over the park.

I ordered it to go away, but it took no notice of me whatsoever. "Sit," I said to Charles. "Here."

I was just planning what we should have to eat that evening when I saw Charles had disappeared. Oh dear! Where had he gone? You get some frightful types in the park these days! I called his name for what seemed like an age.

Then I saw him talking to a very rough-looking child. "Charles, come here. At once!" I said. "And come here please, Victoria."

We walked home in silence.

#### *SECOND VOICE*

I needed to get out of the house, so me and Smudge took the dog to the park. He loves it there. I wish I had half the energy he's got. I settled on a bench and looked through the paper for a job. I know it's a waste of time, really, but you've got to have a bit of hope, haven't you?

Then it was time to go. Smudge cheered me up. She chatted happily to me all the way home.

#### *THIRD VOICE*

I was at home on my own again. It's so boring. Then Mummy said that it was time for our walk.

There was a very friendly dog in the park and Victoria was having a great time. I wished I was.

"D'you wanna come on the slide?" a voice asked. It was a girl, unfortunately, but I went anyway. She was brilliant on the slide, she went really fast. I was amazed.

The two dogs raced around like old friends. The girl took off her coat and swung on the climbing frame, so I did the same.

I'm good at climbing trees, so I showed her how to do it. She told me her name was Smudge – a funny name, I know, but she's quite nice. Then Mummy caught us talking together and I had to go home. Maybe Smudge will be there next time?

#### *FOURTH VOICE*

Dad had been really fed up, so I was pleased when he said we could take Albert to the park. Albert's always in such a hurry to be let off his lead. He went straight up to this lovely dog and sniffed its bum (he always does that.) Of course, the other dog didn't mind, but its owner was really angry, the silly twit.

I got talking to this boy. I thought he was a bit of a wimp at first, but he's okay. We played on the see-saw and he didn't say much, but later on he was a bit more friendly.

We both burst out laughing when we saw Albert having a swim. Then we all played on the bandstand, and I felt really, really happy.

Charlie picked a flower and gave it to me. Then his mum called him and he had to go. He looked sad.

When I got home I put the flower in some water, and made Dad a nice cup of tea.

**HOMILY, pt. 1**      **Rose Gallogly**, Coordinator of Religious Exploration

A few years ago, when I was pretty fresh out of college and still stumbling to find my footing in the world, I had the opportunity to be a part of something called the Seeds Program, run by the Ayni Institute in East Boston. The program was run by some leaders in the local immigrant rights movement who I'd been connected to through shared community organizing work, but it wasn't going to be like one of the many justice-focused/educational workshops I'd been spending a lot of my time in — this program was about giving its participants an opportunity to connect with a larger story about the moment we're in, one that centered a spiritual journey to reconnect with community, ancestors, and Mother Earth. (*"We honor our ancestors by remembering the wisdom of life, to nurture communities towards a reciprocal world."*) The leaders were informed by their own journey to reconnect with their indigenous Central and South American roots, and their years of study with indigenous elders in Peru.

I went into this program excited to learn, but carrying some trepidation about my position as a white person in the space. I imagine that feeling may be familiar for any of you who identify as white. I knew that in exploring our connections with our ancestors in particular, the violent realities of colonization and white supremacy would be on the surface of our conversations. As one of just a few white folks in the room, I prepared myself to feel the weight and (the) guilt (we sometimes experience) of those legacies of harm. I assumed that the only 'right' way to be there would be to make myself as small as possible in our conversations, or when I did speak, to constantly name and reject the legacy of my ancestors. In other words, I went into the program

with a predetermined story of how those complex dynamics would play out, and a neat box where my role in them would fit. (Might that feel familiar?)

By the end of the first session, the story I had come in with about how to be a ‘good white person’ in this space had already started to dissolve. I found that I was being asked to show up not with my white guilt on the surface, but instead to draw out the pain and need for intergenerational healing that guilt was covering up. When I named my deep sense of loss in my disconnection from the culture of my ancestors — a loss that is part of a legacy of migration, colonialism, and the process of becoming white — that was met with resonance and affirmation from others, no matter how different their own ancestry; even folks who were direct immigrants themselves shared similar stories of pain in their disconnection from a larger ancestral story. We had a shared commitment to dismantling colonialism and white supremacy, and with that commitment came a recognition that we are ALL harmed by these systems — differently harmed, yes, but still harmed. Efforts to dismantle them are efforts to reclaim our shared humanity and our inherent interconnection.

In the container of this program, I was welcomed into a new story: one that rooted me in deep solidarity, not surface-level ally-ship. If I had stuck to my old story, my white guilt would have blocked me from the deeper, heart-centered engagement I was being invited into — but by leaving that old story behind, I found myself able to feel my solidarity as a spiritual truth, rooting my commitment to our shared work even more deeply. The new story— grounded in an understanding that people of all ancestries need and deserve healing specific to the legacies we’re inheriting, and that we can all be in solidarity with each other in that process— required me to stretch and be more vulnerable than was easy. But ultimately, it also allowed me an openness and connection to others that expanded my sense of self, and grounded me in a larger collective story that I carry with me to this day.

**HOMILY, pt. 2**            **the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

I loved Rose’s story this morning and am so grateful for her sharing the experience of having imagined herself into an environment - like we all do so often, right? - fairly certain of what it would feel like to be a part of something given her location, her identity, only to have her assumptions challenged, turned upside down. The emotions she was carrying - her sense of guilt about her ancestry and her identity as inheritor of an oppressive past - shifted, moved, realigned to help her experience a shared intention to move forward among and with those she had felt separate from before. We move into spaces, don’t we, or we remember events, in such particular ways - so often ways that confirm our preconceptions of ourselves, or others, when

what we heard from Rose was this experience of shifting, of realigning - so that she was freed rather than bound. I wonder if you have experienced anything like that? Or might you still?

In our story earlier, we heard four voices describe a time and place - remember? The first voice, the mother, takes her son and dog for a walk in the park - a perfectly proper place, though the dog (Victoria) is approached by a "scruffy mongrel," she says. She shooed it off. This is the same dog the son describes as "a very friendly dog," with whom his dog, Victoria, "raced around like old friends." The little girl, Smudge, is described by the mother as rough-looking - remember, "you get some frightful types in the park these days." (How often do we think that, or something similar?) The same Smudge, of course, who cheered up her father, who "chatted happily . . . all the way home," who was "brilliant on the slide," who the boy thought was actually "quite nice." And the boy, Charlie, who had been so bored at home, who looked sad when the mom called him home after he had given Smudge a flower.

Four people, four perspectives - a reminder to us when we hear them together of how we see the same moments in time so differently.

It's an English story, so maybe that's why I was reminded of a trip my own mother and I took to England for her 65th birthday. She wanted to see London, and - lucky me - took me along. As it happens, we were there over two Sundays - the first of which we went to St. Paul's Cathedral for worship - big, gothic, formal, boys' choir, organ, formal liturgy - she loved it. Or, I should say, appeared to! The next week, as it happens, we were closer to the theatre district, with reservations for lunch following the service - it was a small church, lovely and warm inside - much more relaxed, a more eclectic crowd - no organ so they had a cantor. After about 15 minutes, my mom started looking at her watch, indicating it was probably time to go to brunch; at any rate making it perfectly clear she was ready to go.

Part of me wonders why she was so uncomfortable with the more relaxed environment - the one where the congregants hugged and chatted with each other, where - to me - the idea of God, the holy, the spirit that connects us - felt so much more accessible and imminent. And then part of me wonders why I bind my mother so tightly to this perception, when I never bothered to ask her about the experiences. Maybe her sense of holy, of spirit that touches her and finds her heart, is more accessible with a bit more elbow room, with beautiful colors and fabrics and structure that one can view from the privacy of one's pew? I have simply put that story into a frame that rings true for me but may not be giving reality - let alone my mother - much credit.

How is it we free or bind ourselves by what we are willing to imagine or understand about ourselves, about each other, our patterns and habits, our assumptions? I am reminded this week in particular of time-worn stories that Palestinians and Israelis believe about each other and how they are binding them in tragic and disastrous patterns, not to mention how our government continues to reinforce them. It is heartbreaking.

We are no less bound, often, attached to histories that ring true for us when, if we were willing to consider the limitations of our perceptions, we might see entirely new possibilities.

We are being asked, invited, to consider our patterns of congregational life this year through the report of the Commission on Institutional Change. I'm hopeful that you have seen the articles in the e-news, or heard me or others speak about Widening the Circle this year. The conversation that the Racial Justice Task Force is hosting today after the service will engage with that text. It is another challenge to our perceptions, our assumptions about ourselves and this tradition. It's not always comfortable, but since when has the practice of opening our hearts and minds ever been entirely comfortable? I'm quite sure Rose had to pass through levels of discomfort in her efforts to locate herself "among" instead of "at odds with" the experiences around her. And I'm sure I'm not alone in finding the effort to reimagine the assumptions I make about my mother - or any of the people we care about - pretty unsettling. I have often been downright resistant as it is FAR easier to stick with the known patterns, the familiar, so often the us v. them stories that separate us.

But it is also quite a bit more lonely, isn't it? Self-righteousness, after all, is not a team sport.

Our faith is calling us to a renewal of the spirit, to be those who are brave enough, **and trust in love enough**, to look again at the stories that have defined us: to imagine ourselves, our habits, our patterns, into a more inclusive and expansive way of being. We can't know exactly what that will look like, or feel like - the same way that Rose could not have known what the experience of solidarity would have felt like before her willingness to jump in in order to learn.

But even as we can't know how our individual lives will shift when we risk a willingness to open our hearts, we can trust that there is a story that can free us in new and unexpected ways.

Let's do this. Let's answer this call with the confidence to know that love will sustain us, whatever we learn. Love will carry us through and set us free, despite the discomfort, and maybe even a bit because of it. It always does.

So may it be. And, amen.

