

Theodore Parker Church
The Distance from Then to Now
May 30, 2021

INTROIT <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8AegG5en2g>

Hope comes from the place where the hurt comes.

OPENING WORDS the Rev. Anne Bancroft

What is the distance from then to now?

The time from despair to joy; from war to peace;

from the practice of taking from our shared earth to giving back?

It's the same as the distance from one to the other:

as much or little as a story, and a new way of seeing,

a new way of being..

Come, let us be reminded together,

as we answer the call of love.

SERVICE INTRO - Anne

Every week I put a title in the e-news for the upcoming service, this week: the Distance from Then to Now - and when I wrote the description I mentioned the idea of change - and how we move from one "place" to another: from despair to joy, for example, or - given our Memorial Day Weekend - from war to peace; or - in another context - from an extracting approach to our planet to a regenerative one. In truth, it was a bit of a misnomer, because I wanted us to think not so much about *change*, per se, (which we talked about A LOT this spring beginning back in January when the Rev. June Cooper preached for us about transformation - she quoted Octavia Butler that God is Change) But what I want us to think about today is more about how we come to change, our flexibility, our resilience - about how we engender them in ourselves in the FACE of change, especially in the places where our stories incline us to get stuck. How is it we come to trust our capacity to move, to adapt, to experiment and evolve? Because what's ahead of us now - what's always ahead of us individually, but right now ahead of us in this church and ahead of us as a country and a world - is going to require that - more than ever, no doubt about it. In Krista Tippet's conversation this weekend, she interviewed the poet, Tracy K. Smith, who suggested that right now, in our country, history is upon us. In so many ways, our human history has caught up to where we are and we are going to need the resilience of our spirits more than ever.

So, we have several stories to offer this morning by way of the seeds that find their ways into our imaginations. We begin with a story that riffs off of Henry David Thoreau. "Though I do not believe that

a plant will spring up where no seed has been,” he said, “I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.”

Story for All Ages Unlikely Eden - Sandy Stott, 2015

The other day, I pulled my kayak gear from storage. There it was all spread across the driveway, . . . (and) scattered liberally too were hundreds of cones from our local pine (trees) – so many that the ground was dark with them in places, all in search of the next spot for a pine. **There’s always always always faith in what’s to come.** And then I knew where my first paddle would be; I’d aim for an islet that has its own seed-story.

. . . Some years ago, perhaps around the time I was born, an apple fetched up on an islet between the two Goose Islands (Upper and Lower) in Casco’s Middle Bay. How do I know this history? Its long story of growth lies there still.

I first noticed a tree on the north end of the islet during late August while water-ambling in my kayak. From a distance it looked decidedly out of place amid the clutch of sumac and wild roses that ran along the thirty feet of ridge a few feet above the tideline. That’s an apple tree, I thought from a distance, and as I drew near, I saw that it was. The trunk was a foot thick, and, on its inland side, away from the salt-burned foliage, I saw pale apples the size of a baby’s fist.

That islet’s a most unlikely Eden, I thought (remember the apple?) and then I went ashore. It took about a minute to circumstroll the islet, and as I edged up under the apple tree, I could just reach some of its (fruit). I picked one, turned to an unmarred side, checked for worm-holes and took a bite; the sour saltiness pulled my whole face askew – this apple was tough in so many ways. But I took another bite, worked it hard with my jaws and finally swallowed. So began a ritual that ended only last year: as an act of taking on summer to ready for winter, I always paddled out for a few salt-apples. And out there, miles from any other apple tree, I wondered at this tree’s story and survival only feet from the sea and exposed to the wind that drives waves up the bay.

Last spring’s first paddle took me out to the islet, and even from a half-mile away, I noticed the change – no tree jutted from the north end like a defiant fist. Drawing closer I read the story of the tree’s fall – its trunk lay prone toward the water, and its root-system, which had grown sideways up into the islet’s meager bank was pulled away. Some winter gale or accumulation of ice and snow had toppled the tree, or waves had pulled finally the support from around it.

So no more salty apples, but the remnant trunk is still a story of amazement at how seeds – of life or thought – meander to and root in the most unlikely Edens.

And, when you come to think of it, isn’t every Eden unlikely?

MUSIC 137 We Utter our Cry

We utter our cry: that peace may prevail.
That hope will survive and faith must not fail.
We pray with our life for the world in our care,
for people diminished with doubt and despair.

We cry from the fight of our daily scene
for strength to say “no” to all that is mean:
designs bearing chaos, extinction of life,
all energy wasted on heartbreak and strife.

We lift up our hearts for all yet to come:
give wisdom, O Love, that we may hand on,
replenished and tended this good planet earth,
preserving the future of all things of worth.

ANNE: Our second story comes to us from the Rev. Robbie Walsh, a Unitarian Universalist minister, a former colleague of mine who died of complications from Lewy Body Dementia in 2016. I only met Robbie once, in person. He was - at that point in his life, at least - a gentle, funny, warm person struggling to keep pace in a collegial gathering when his degenerative disease had already become complicated. Robbie had a book of meditations published called Stone Blessings - a collection of memories that, to be honest, reflect his generation of ministry. The story we have chosen this morning references a folk song with problematic lyrics, but I hope you will recognize the point of this reading being about Robbie’s ability to hear a truth that he had not previously heard, and about his willingness to respond to it once he heard it.

READING Songs I Sang the Rev. Robbie Walsh

Once upon a time - this goes back to the 1960s - I used to travel around some and play the banjo and sing folks songs in front of audiences. Some of the songs I sang mocked and ridiculed women. There are many songs like that in the folk tradition, reflecting the fact that sexism has permeated all levels of our culture for as long as we know. I sang these songs because I thought they were funny. . . The WORST one of all went like this:

It’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday.
It’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday.
When you’ve got Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday
It’s a shame to whip your wife on Sunday.

In those years, I sang that song dozens of times, and the audiences laughed and applauded.

In 1973, I sang at a meeting in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I included that song and some of the others. My audience laughed and applauded. Afterward, a woman came up to me. She didn't look angry; she wasn't scolding. She simply said, "I wish you wouldn't sing songs that belittle women."

I can't remember how I responded. Maybe I just stood there with my mouth open. I know this: I never sang those songs again.

That woman liberated me; she empowered me. She made it possible for me to change. She did two things. She named what I was doing: singing songs that belittled women. And she told me what she wanted: for me to stop doing it. I can't remember whether I had given any serious thought to the issue before that day. If so, it had made no difference in my behavior. But her words made the difference.

MEDITATION

I want to begin our time of prayer with a small piece of an essay from a book called *Not for Ourselves Alone*, which makes me think: not apples, not lyrics that we no longer find funny - these, our lives, are not for ourselves alone. Jenny Weil writes, at the end of her piece, "Church has become my way. It's where I practice recognition of what is already true: that we are bound to one another, and by that understanding, we might be saved. . . It is grace enough. It is amazing."

Let us breath together with grace enough in this church that we are, just now:

Spirit of love, spirit of life and of breath and the wholeness we seek,
help us to hear the words we need to hear - the words, spoken or unspoken - of repair, of the existence of every unlikely Eden we discover: the words that assure us we have the capacity to move, to adapt, to amend, to resist, to become: that uncertainty of what is to be, or fear that we are not enough need not have the *last* word. Help us to know that only love - that restores, that rejuvenates, and revives, is the word we need to hear, first, last and always.

May it be so - and may we hear it now in the quiet we share . . .

HOMILY the Rev. Anne Bancroft

So, my friends - you will have received the announcement yesterday about the amazing success of your Interim Search Team. They have found a wonderful minister for you – the Rev. Joanna Lubkin. I know she is as excited to be joining you in August as they are to have had their search bear such fruit. I am so hopeful that your partnership will prove to be yet another example of an unexpected Eden.

And is this not another way that our history, your history, is upon you? Differently, of course, than what the poet, Tracy Smith, referenced – her claiming was that our national history of injustice to people of color has come to be owned and acknowledged in new ways, that we are all being called to own it and be accountable to it. That history is no doubt asking for a resilience and a willingness to draw hope out of hurt and I pray it will find resolution, if not in our lifetimes, then soon. But your history is also upon you – this congregation’s experience of nearly closing its doors and now, now offering at long last a full-time invitation to the minister of your choosing – I hope you are so proud. I am so proud of you.

I hope you’ll indulge me in sharing a note I received from the Rev. Gordon Gibson who served you in the early 60’s. You may remember his visit here several years ago – and his doppelganger, Stan Gross! Gordon wrote me this note shortly after learning of my intended departure – and mind you, this is the minister who left Theodore Parker Church to march and be arrested in Selma, and pursue his ministry in the deep south for his commitment to antiracism.

Anne,

Thank you for seven years (gee, has it really been that long? time flies!) of transformative ministry to Theodore Parker Church. I feel that you have taken the steps to bring the congregation to a level of activity and involvement that had long been only a dream. As one of your dreaming predecessors I am deeply appreciative of what you have done.

Gordon Gibson

I am very grateful for his words, and his generous thoughts. I love the idea that you have been served by dreamers like Rev. Gibson. And, here is what I know – that unless you were willing to hear them, whatever words I offered, whatever encouragement, whatever dreams I and all the ministers before me had for you would have been as dust in the wind if you were not ready to hear them and give them life. I have said it before: it is your ministry to each other and to this world that defines this church.

I’m not saying that leadership is not important – it is. Ironically, the words of John Boehner come to mind – I heard an interview that he did recently talking about his time as Speaker of the House and why he chose to get in front of a perspective that he was not entirely on board with. He kept saying, if you don’t have the crowd behind you, following your lead, you’re just a person taking a walk.

What is it, then, that allows us to move – either as individuals OR all together - from then to now? What is IT that finally makes us able to hear when we didn’t hear before. How do seeds find root, even - sometimes - in places they are least expected, or have never taken hold before?

Oh, I wish I had the answer. I wish I could tell you for certain that if you meet these particular conditions, this amazing thing will be the result: that your ears will be opened to what you have long needed to hear: that pain is not endless, that well-being will return to you; that justice will roll down like water; that if only these boxes are checked, all the earth will be made fair and all her people one. I wish I knew.

St. Irenaeus wrote in the second century of the Common Era “The tender flesh will be found one day – quite surprisingly – to be capable of receiving, and yes, full of embracing the searing energies of God. Go figure. Fear not.”

It’s all a mystery, I think, how we come to be ready to break into a new way, whether God has any place in your vocabulary or not. The willingness, the ability, to receive and embrace the energies of life that transform us - they happen in pieces, I think – small gifts that pull together to create a readiness so that even if it feels like a windfall, there has been a building.

We have many pieces to consider going forward. So many parts of our lives are splintered, not least this year and more of Covid-separation, woven - of course - with all our personal challenges. I have been reading of global phenomena, as well - climate change, of course, but also a demographic shift in process as we speak where our population is actually shrinking for the first time ever in human history. Isn’t that amazing? In the New York Times last week (**World is facing First Long Slide in Its Population** - NY Times, Sunday, 5/23), an article reported, “Maternity wards are already shutting down in Italy. Ghost cities are appearing in northeastern China. Universities in South Korea can’t find enough students and in Germany, hundreds of thousands of properties have been razed, with the land turned into parks.” Joni Mitchell would be pleased, don’t you think? Instead of paving paradise, they are rebuilding it! “Demographers now predict that by the latter half of the century or possibly earlier, the global population will enter a sustained decline for the first time.”

What will it mean? Is it only worrisome that there will not be enough young to care for the old? Or might we imagine, as the article suggests, that “Smaller populations could lead to higher wages, more equal societies, lower carbon emissions and a higher quality of life for the smaller numbers of children who are born.”

Either way, it will require imagination and creativity and resilience, and each other.

There are lots of amazing things going on right now that are the building blocks for that bigger transformation, the one we have not yet seen but that many are creating nonetheless. There is a growing energy around the idea of new economies - The Ujima Project that many of you are familiar

with is a great example - a member-driven project “with a focus on building a community-driven economy geared toward communities of color. . . Members are comprised of working-class Boston residents, small-business owners, activists, and investors; Boston residents who do not identify as working class and/or a person of color [can join as a solidarity member](#).” It’s a new economic model for a different kind of future and it will contribute to a bigger wave of redefining, no doubt.

What’s exciting about it is the engagement it requires for people charting their own opportunities. Any movement forward requires that, at least, whether it’s on a small and very personal scale, or a large and very shared one. Getting from Then to Now requires our attention, and our intention, which is to say our presence to the change, eyes and ears open for what we have not previously seen or heard.

So let’s circle back to Theodore Parker Church. Big things are on the horizon for you. We will have three playful Sundays together in June and then you will have a small pause time before getting ready and welcoming new energy during your Interim years. If all goes well, and you can return to the sanctuary for gathering in worship and other delights in the fall, you will also have the capacity to be present in multiple platforms! Oh, I know - it will mean things will feel different. So true! But different doesn’t mean bad . . . it just means . . . different! And it means you get to play and experiment and see how it feels and what you want to keep and what you want to shed. These are the building blocks for your movement!

I want to share a few more thoughts from Jenny Weil, who I referenced earlier during our time of prayer because she writes so compellingly about the truths of congregational life. After a time of resisting church engagement, she writes, “Belonging to our church has been a blessing, unconditional in the love it offers, but demanding in the way of all meaningful relationships. Like marriage, like parenting, belonging to church has been a liberating constraint. We have chosen this place and these people, and our lives and values can be measured by the quality of our commitment. Our covenant means that we’re willing to be transformed by one another and to be accountable for our effect on others. We have thrown in our lot together. . . . It means that I need to love (or at least make peace with) the cranks and glad-handers, those I find too eccentric or too conventional, just as they try to make peace with me. Even if we never achieve more than the detente of the doughnut table, (or for Theodore Parker Church, the bean dip or most recent creation of Dr. Colgrove’s) we remain connected. It means that when I fail to live up to community ideals - whether I am called out or not - I must keep showing up, owning up, and trying again. In return, I am free of feeling adrift or alone in this life. I’m needed at church, as we all are. We have work to do in this world. Not as we might be in some better version of ourselves, but now. . . . together, we can be good. We can be love. . . This is how church life heals. It is grace enough. It is amazing.”

And it will help each and every one of you move from the many Thens to Nows in the most surprising ways - your very own Unlikely Edens. May we be ever grateful for that.

CLOSING HYMN Oh, We Give Thanks

Oh, we give thanks for this precious day,
For those gathered here, and those far away,
For this time we share, with love and care.
Oh, we give thanks for this precious day.

BENEDICTION

The blessing of truth be upon us,
the power of love direct us and sustain us,
and may the peace of this community
preserve our going out and our coming in,
from this time forth, until we meet again.

- Duke T. Gray