Readings

from the inaugural address of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, January 20, 1961

Now the trumpet summons us again… a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, "rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation"--a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

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And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you--ask what you can do for your country.

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

from the writings of Rev. Olympia Brown (1835-1926)

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world more beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new application of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

Sermon

We’ve just as a nation honored the 100th anniversary of the birth of President Kennedy.

Well, I was not quite ten year’s old when JFK was inaugurated. But I actually do remember that particular January 20. Though admittedly less for the inauguration and more for the fact that a snowstorm had relieved us of school.

Now, it may well be that our mother had us watch the inauguration, and in particular Kennedy’s speech; or it may be that my memory of his speech, along with Robert Frost’s poem for the day, hinges more on video replays in later years.
In any case, like many of you, whether my own memory originated on that January day in 1961 or in subsequent years, the memory is vivid of the president standing (famously hatless on that cold day) and delivering what is to this day considered by historians to have been one of the most inspiring inauguration speeches in our history.

And if we remember nothing else about that speech, we surely remember the line I shared earlier from near the end of the speech:

“And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country.”

What we may or may not remember as well is the context Kennedy had built for this line throughout the talk, a context that led so beautifully to this most memorable call. Kennedy spoke of paying any price to secure human freedom. He spoke of the “quest for peace” with our adversaries. He spoke of all that could be accomplished in the world cooperatively: to “break bonds of mass misery… to let the oppressed go free… (to) explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce… (to) join in creating not a new balance of power, but a new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure and the peace preserved.” And he asked, as you also heard earlier, whether a new “global alliance… can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind.”

In short, the newly inaugurated young president did not offer the proverbial political laundry list of what the government could provide for its citizens. Instead, though some of that was implicit in his words, he was mostly calling citizens and nations to a shared mission, to shared aspirations and goals.

And it was indeed stirring.

Well, my thoughts returned to JFK’s speech not only because of his 100th birthday earlier this week, but in relation to a recent column by the New York Times scribe David Brooks.

A month or so ago Brooks penned a column in which he described the difference between what he called thin institutions or organizations and thick ones.

The shorthand difference is this: A thin institution of any kind is one that is largely organized around what participants or members can get from it. A thick institution or organization is one that is organized around a sense of common purpose or mission, creating along the way strong bonds among its members, sometimes through shared rituals.

Brooks picked all this up from the research of two University of Virginia professors who summarize their idea by noting that a thin institution sees its members as “resources to be marshaled” whereas thick institutions “take advantage of people’s desire to do good and arouse their higher longings.”

Put yet one more way, Brooks wrote, “thin institutions tend to see themselves horizontally. People are members for mutual benefit. Thick organizations often see themselves on a vertical axis. People are members so they can collectively serve the same higher good.”

Well, I recommend the entire column – a column that was inspired by Brooks’ remembrance of the Watertown fire fighter, Joe Toscano, who died in the service of duty in March. For he and Brooks had worked at a summer camp decades ago, a camp that Brooks writes was a thick institution in spades, a real community to which people
belonged to serve a common purpose and along the way supported one another – even these decades later as they mourned one of their own.

Well, I’m pretty certain I don’t have to draw the connection for you. President Kennedy was striving in his inauguration speech to lift us up as a nation by assuming that as a nation we were a “thick” institution or community rather than a “thin” one.

He was assuming that what we shared as a nation had less to do with what we each could get out of our government, and much more to do with what we could give - give not to the government, but to our country of shared ideals and aspirations.

One can only ask, in the spirit of lament: In the decades since, have we become “thinner” as a nation? And therefore more and more divided based on what we want from government… and less and less united by shared ideals and aspirations?

I’ll leave that question for your reflection. Because with all that I’ve said thus far as introduction, where I want to land on this New Members Sunday has to do with asking what sort of community we believe Old Ship to be – and what sort of community we want to be or think we ought to be.

To begin with, it is worth noting that all institutions or communities are, I would think, a blend of thin and thick. But shouldn’t a religious community of any kind lean mostly in the direction of thick? Shouldn’t we be built primarily on a foundation of shared aspiration, of ideals which are of the loftiest sort, as Olympia Brown affirmed of Universalism a century and a half ago?

Yet… I fear that sometimes and maybe more often than is healthy we fall back on thin. For example at the time of our annual pledge drive we may put too much emphasis on asking ourselves to reflect on all that we “get” from our Old Ship Church community, and not enough emphasis on all that we are able to do together to further our loftiest ideals as enshrined in our Unitarian Universalist Principles and in our Old Ship covenant, a covenant which commits each of us to:

seek the truth freely… nurture spiritual growth and ethical commitment… care for one another…. and, seeking justice, peace, and ecological sustainability, to serve life.

Lofty ideals indeed. And this is what we are signing on to when we sign the Membership Book. Then, practically speaking, getting into the trenches of our community life, through our five Old Ship ministries we are meant to strive together to give life to this covenant of growth and care and service.

Do we each “get” anything out of Old Ship? Of course we do. And there is nothing wrong with noticing this with gratitude.

But the getting is a byproduct of the giving, of all that we do together in service of those loftiest of ideals to which we aspire.

We are at a turning point in the life of our congregation. As you know, our Parish House is “under contract” and if the sale goes through we will be building a new Parish House just next door to this, our Meeting House. If the sale fails to go through, we will have decisions to make as to whether to undertake a capital campaign to restore and to a significant extent renovate the current Parish House.
In either case we face a few years of transition when it comes to one of our buildings.

Which I invite us to consider as an opportunity to renew and deepen our shared aspirations, to more thoroughly live our covenant, and in this way to ensure the health and well-being of our congregation for the next generation and the next.

Now, President Kennedy named the moment he became president as a moment of both danger and opportunity. I hardly have to remind us this morning that our nation (and our world) is surely at another such crossroads today. Further, it is a time when we may feel (and understandably so) that the dangers far outweigh the opportunities.

We have, though, no way of knowing how the scales are balanced. We do, however, have the power to choose which side of the scale on which we will put our weight... as individual citizens and, here, as a community of faith and love: in relation to racial justice, immigration, climate change, and much else

In this spirit, then, may we love one another more deeply, care for one another with ever fuller compassion and understanding, seek the truth together with ever greater clarity of mind and heart, and as a community be among those in this world of mystery and miracle who serve life by serving the loftiest of ideals of justice, peace, and ecological integrity.

So may it be.