

**Never Delicate to Live**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

Matthew 25:34-40

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Then the righteous will answer him “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Spiderweb, by Kay Ryan

From other  
angles the  
fibers look  
fragile, but  
not from the  
spider’s, always  
hauling coarse  
ropes, hitching  
lines to the  
best posts  
possible. It’s  
heavy work  
everyplace,  
fighting sag,  
winching up  
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to live.

## Sermon

“It isn’t ever delicate to live.”

Our daughter Sandra does not send me poems every day. In fact I can’t recall the last time she sent me a poem... before the day last month that she sent this one.

Clearly it struck a chord for her.

Sandra is a high school English teacher in the Bronx, at a school for kids who had dropped out and have now returned. One can imagine, or for many of us maybe not so easily imagine, the challenges these young people have already faced in their lives – and continue to face: “heavy work everyplace, fighting sag, winching up give.”

In short, I have a pretty good sense as to why this poem may have hit home for Sandra, as it might for you too... all of us one way or another knowing “It isn’t ever delicate to live.”

Though we might wish to take a bit of issue with the poet, or at least offer elucidating commentary – I know I do. Because strong as that web is, life *is* at the same time fragile.

This is, after all, one of the reasons we gather in houses of worship, in congregations such as ours. Because sometimes a line of the web of our lives is near breaking... or breaks... and sometimes the weaving that each of us do in our own lives is very hard indeed. So we need one another.

The good news is that we are not and never have been entirely separate from the largest web of all, the web of life... even when we feel, as we sometimes do feel, quite alone, even lonely.

So simply gathering together in an old Meeting House or in a church or temple or mosque... simply gathering together, whatever words we speak or songs we sing, whatever beliefs are affirmed or not affirmed... simply gathering together can remind us that we have never been entirely alone, that however we may sometimes feel, we have always been part of one body of humanity, part of one fabric of life.

Choose your language – but whatever language helps you, me, us, to remember that we are part and parcel of one another and of the creation, that we are all kin, each of us an individual manifestation of the divine (by whatever name, transcending names after all) – and to remember that the most essential manifestation of all this is, of course, love in all of its various shadings, beginning with the intimately personal and rippling out... so that we remember too, as Cornel West reminds, us “that justice is what love looks like in public.”

Needless to say, Martin Luther King, Jr., knew this better than most. His life can be understood as about as clear a manifestation of this affirmation as one could imagine. So I expect that the passage we heard earlier from Matthew was embedded in his heart. For he knew that however else we might understand God, we experience that divine spark or light in one another.

Paraphrasing Walt Whitman, no need to see God, because we see God every day in the faces and eyes of everyone we meet – and most assuredly not just in the eyes of our friends and dear ones, but (back to the words from Matthew) in the eyes of the hungry or ill, in the eyes of those who are imprisoned or oppressed.

Indeed, as Jesus is said to have affirmed elsewhere, also in the eyes of the enemy, the oppressor, the perpetrator of injustice.

In this spirit, the ancient Buddhist sutra on compassion enjoins us to wish happiness, safety, and peace not just on those dearest to us, but to everyone – “omit none” is the language used. Yes, compassionate wishes for *everyone*.

After all, how else could we truly be weaving a web of wholeness, not a web that divides, but a web that unites?

I know: these days such sentiments may sound worse than sentimental, in fact pretty unrealistic, even impossible. But how else would we want to live other than in the direction of wholeness, of reconciliation, of peace grounded in justice – weaving *that* sort of web?

Dr. King affirmed (affirmed in his own quite divided and tumultuous times to say the least) that we live in an “inescapable network of mutuality.” Knowing this, experiencing this, he further said that only love can overcome hatred.

I for one do not wish to live in any other spirit than that, resisting (though not always successfully) the impulse to put those with whom I disagree, even those I believe are doing great damage these days to our democracy, outside the circle of humanity and love. Yes, I will oppose much of what they say and do with my heart and soul and with my words and vote. But the circle of life and love includes everyone, all life, all beings. If it does not, then it is not truly a circle of life and love.

Now... for a little while I’m going to downshift from the national/global/cosmic to the very local.

So: A few words about our part of this circle of life and love here at Old Ship – our part in weaving a web of wholeness and kindness and compassion and love

As you know, we’ve been meeting these few days to consider where we are as a parish and what our “next steps” as a parish ought to be, in relation to the financial and other challenges we currently face. Many thanks to all of you who have participated, many thanks to our leaders on the Board of Trustees who have coordinated this weekend, and of course much appreciation to our Stewardship for Us consultant, Liz Coit.

As we reflect on all this, though, I’m thinking that it might be helpful to put our current challenges and conversations in a bit of historical context:

Our First Parish in Hingham was gathered in 1635. A long time ago. We have worshipped in this Meeting House since the posts and beams were raised in 1681. Also a long time ago.

Long enough that the challenges we face today are by no means the first challenges our parish has ever faced.

Even in the earliest years, not long after the gathering of our First Parish, we experienced turmoil when our first minister, Rev. Peter Hobart, confronted the powers that be in Boston in what came to be known as the “sad, unbrotherly contention.”

Well, we survived, repaired the frayed web, and thrived in the years following. Indeed, after King Philip’s War (itself a shameful episode) we built this Meeting House.

A century or so later the congregation was, to put it mildly, stressed by divisions during the Revolution, patriots and loyalists (among them our third minister Rev. Ebenezer Gay) sharing these pews.

Well, we survived and thrived in the years following. Including successive votes (first one way, then another...) in the 1790s having to do with whether to repair or replace our Meeting House.

The congregation literally divided in 1805 over the controversial call of Rev. Joseph Richardson to this pulpit, resulting in the formation of what is now called New North Church.

We survived and thrived in the years following – Richardson serving for over sixty years.

Now, perhaps it goes without saying that none of that surviving, web repair, and eventual thriving was easy. And without doubt I've left many other occasions unnamed, among them occasions lost in the mists of history.

But I'm not done with our history journey.

In much more recent years, for a variety of reasons – including the tumult of the 1960s – our parish had five ministers in the course of less than fifteen years from the 1950s to the early 1970s. I've heard many of the stories, some of them pretty tough.

But we survived, repaired the frayed web, and eventually thrived yet again.

This said, as with all the times we have faced challenges and moved on to fresh growth and health, it was not automatic.

In the recent era I've just noted, in its wisdom the parish called Rev. Ken LaFleur in 1971, whose gentle spirit and splendid preaching, along with dedicated and loyal members (many of you still among us) enabled the congregation to heal.

Then, Following Ken's retirement, the interim ministry of Rev. John Luopa brought fresh energy and some young families to the congregation; and the second year of interim with Rev. Wayne Shuttee brought enormously helpful reorganization of our committee structure and re-writing of our bylaws. All of which, again, in partnership with dedicated Old Ship members.

All this, along with the visionary hiring in 1986 of Diane Elliott as our Director of Religious Education (at time when we only had a small handful of young families)... all of this enabled us together, as the next Rev. Ken arrived, to enter a period of growth in membership of all ages, in growing commitment to social service and activism, and much else.

In other words, we survived those challenging 1960s, and eventually strengthened the web of life at Old Ship and thrived once again.

But not without shared hard work and vision.

“Never delicate to live.”

So here we are again, at a time of challenge, which also means a time of opportunity. And though, as perhaps you've gleaned, our moment is by no means the most challenging moment in the history of Old Ship Church, First Parish in Hingham, this is by no means to be dismissive of the challenges, even dangers, we face. For even after close to four hundred years, churches have been known to divide or dissolve.

Yet I am confident that we will neither divide or dissolve, not in the foreseeable future in any case. You might say it seems to be in our institutional DNA to be able to meet challenges, survive, and thrive. Plus, it seems to me that we have too much talent and too many among us with such a depth of commitment to our Old Ship community

and to the heart-centered, open-minded, justice-seeking values of Unitarian Universalism (more needed now than ever!), to do anything but survive and thrive.

In this spirit, then, this weekend we have been discerning the posts on which to tie strands of the web of our community, discerning ways to re-weave parts of our web that are frayed or weak, seeking to strengthen our financial stewardship so that we can continue and strengthen our other ministries of nourishing the spirit, educating mind and heart, nurturing community, serving others in the wider world we share, serving life and love.

So, again, deep thanks to you all for being among the weavers of the web of life here at Old Ship at this time in our long history; and thank you for being among the weavers of the web of life we share with all life.

Finally then...

In the spirit of Dr. King and of all the great prophets and visionary leaders of humanity, may the love in which we live and move and have our being continue to manifest here in the ways we treat one another with kindness, compassion, and care – companions in ministry, companions with our families, friends, and community, companions with our fellow citizens and with all life on this earth we share, together weaving, “lifting up sag, winching give,” a web strong enough to support us all, to support life.

There is so much to do in this moment of the life of our nation and of life on earth, and working together here at Old Ship, inspired by our Unitarian Universalist Principles and values, we can do our part more effectively than each on our own: To heal the broken, to welcome the stranger, to bring justice to the oppressed and peace to warring nations, to create ways of living that are sustainable and that heal the earth upon which our lives and all lives depend.

So may it be.