

Spiritual, Prophetic, Religious, Political

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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(text from live-streamed worship)

Opening Song – Vine and Fig Tree (traditional, round)

And everyone ‘neath a vine and fig tree shall live in peace and unafraid. (2x)

And into plowshares turn their swords, nations shall learn war no more. (2x)

Call to Worship

Though at a distance, we have once again gathered in spirit.

May our time together bring comfort to those who need comfort.

Bring inspiration to those who need inspiration.

Bring all-embracing love – God’s other name – to... everyone!

Chalice Lighting

Walt Whitman wrote 165 years ago:

“I will not have a single person slighted or left away...”

In the spirit of these words, I light the flaming chalice of our Unitarian Universalist faith, which calls us in our First Principle to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Story

A brief true story, from many years ago – centuries actually.

In 1787 delegates from all the American colonies met in Philadelphia to design a new constitution. The Revolution was several years past, and the Articles of Confederation... well, they weren’t working very well. Changes needed to be made – and some thought starting from scratch was the way to go – and that’s what ended up happening.

In any case, the gathering of the Constitutional Convention began right about this time of year (233 years ago) and extended all the way through the middle of September. It was a long, very hot and humid summer, as summers in Philadelphia can be. No air conditioning of course!

But they kept at it, they got the work done – imperfectly of course, since they were human beings. And, quite a bit more than imperfectly when it came to the issue of slavery, and way more than imperfect when it came to the role of women – but they got the work done.

Well, shortly after the convention adjourned, so the story goes, Ben Franklin was asked by someone (might have been a woman we are told – since women had of course not been part of the deliberations...) what sort of government we would have – monarchy or republic.

Franklin is said to have replied: “A republic, if we can keep it.”

Well, we *have* kept this republic, this form of democracy, however imperfect it remains, for 233 years. Can we keep it still? Here ends the story of 1787, but not the story of our republic...

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit...

Just present... to the room around us... to whatever sights and sounds we may be aware of outside... to any companions nearby, whether human, canine, feline, or otherwise... present to our own breathing... just present...

And from this deeper presence in the moment, our hearts' yearnings arise, prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings...

...as every week during these days... for all in need of help and healing for whatever reason, for the ill, for the hungry, for those facing financial hardship, for those who have already been marginalized who are suffering all the more during these days...

All this, along with prayers of gratitude for all the helpers and healers, and for all those who lead us with knowledge and wisdom and compassion...

May we pause in silent communion... wherever we are... whoever we are... whatever our circumstances...

Reading – from Isaiah 58

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house...

Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

You shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.

Message – Spiritual, Religious, Prophetic, Political – Poetic too!

The fifth of our seven Unitarian Universalist Principles affirms “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

How is it that this is one of the principles of a religious community? Isn’t democracy about politics rather than religion?

Yes, democracy is of course about politics, but if your religion also affirms (as our does in our First and Second Principles) “The inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” – then the democratic process is the natural political dimension in which these spiritual and moral imperatives can be manifest and realized.

Imperatives which indeed we find in many religious traditions – from the Hebrew prophets calling for justice, as we heard earlier, to Jesus’s affirmation that we are all children of God, to Hindus declaring that the divinity resides within each of us.

Ben Franklin, as we heard earlier, said that the Constitutional Convention had created a republic (which of course is a form of democracy) – but that we had work to do to keep it.

Our work, over two centuries later – political work with ethical and spiritual foundations, is starkly cut out for us this election year in the midst of many threats to our democratic process, all in the midst of the centuries’ long struggle for full voting rights, for full equality under the law, and for justice for all citizens, no matter the color of their skin or their ethnic background or gender.

Who is to be our guide in this work? Well, there are many. But poets are among them.

Here’s what perhaps the greatest poet of American democracy had to say – Walt Whitman in his introduction to the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions...

Of all nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest. Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their poets shall.

Well, we’d like our presidents to be “referees” too; and as for poets, Whitman was talking about his own aspiring poetical self – with typical bravado. . But poets do matter, and other poets have since arrived in similar spirit.

African American Langston Hughes for one, writing in the mid-twentieth century in his poem “Let America Be America” in which he catalogued all those for whom the so-called American dream has been just that, a dream, a chimera, sour...

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

Yet then choosing and able to end with this:

I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

And in our own time, Richard Blanco, son of Cuban immigrants, and well aware of injustice and inequality as a gay Cuban-American, nevertheless ended his 2013 inaugural poem with these words of hope:

We head home...,
always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon
like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop
and every window, of one country—all of us—
facing the stars
hope—a new constellation
waiting for us to map it,
waiting for us to name it—together

And, finally, one more poet “referee” and guide for these times: African American writer and poet Alice Walker – her poem “Patriot”:

If you
Want to show
Your love
For America
Love
Americans
Smile
When you see
One
Flowerlike
His
Turban
Rosepink

Rejoice
At the
Eagle feather
In a grandfather's
Braid.

If a sister
Bus rider's hair
Is
Especially
Nappy
A miracle
In itself
Praise it.

How can there be
Homeless
In a land
So crammed
With houses....?

&
Young children
Sold
As sex snacks
Causing our thoughts
To flinch &
Snag?

Love your country
By loving
Americans.

Love Americans.

Salute the soul
& the body
Of who we
Spectacularly &
Sometimes
Pitifully are.
Love *us*. We are
The flag.

The call, then, as we might put it, is for us all to be poets of democracy, poets of a true patriotism; if not poets of rhymed or metrical words, then surely poets of our own halting words and our own imperfect deeds of the heart – from our voice to our votes, from our support of those who live on the margins to our support of candidates who seek, in Langston Hughes words, to make America again, the America of genuine equality, of justice and compassion, an America of kindness under one sky, as Richard Blanco wrote.

I'll say it again. This is not just a political task, though it is that. It is our task, each in our own way, as a prophetic, spiritual, religious people. Our worthy, indeed essential, task during this time of pandemic when social, economic, and racial inequities have been laid more bare than ever... our task now... and always.

So may it be.

Song – This Land is Your Land, by Woody Guthrie – another poet....

We'll sing all the verses, not just the ones many of us sang in elementary school; also the three verses at the end which some have thought were subversive or anti-American, but are calls for America to be America in the best sense.

This Land is Your Land by Woody Guthrie

This land is your land, this land is my land,
From California to the New York island,
From the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters,
This land was made for you and me.

As I was walking that ribbon of highway,
I saw above me that endless skyway,
I saw below me that golden valley,
This land was made for you and me.

I've roamed and rambled and I followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
And all around me a voice was sounding,
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun came shining and I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling,
As the fog was lifting, a voice was chanting,
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking, I saw a sign there,
On the sign it said, "No Trespassing"
But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
That side was made for you and me.

In the square of the city, in the shadow of the steeple,
By the relief office, I seen my people,
As they stood there hungry I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me.

Nobody living can ever stop me
As I go walking that freedom highway,
Nobody living can make me turn back,
This land was made for you and me.

Closing Words and Benediction

"You and me" – which must mean everyone,
of every color and gender expression,
from every land, including first and most assuredly
first peoples of this land...
everyone...!

Be well. Be safe.

May we take care of one another... take care of everyone! As best we can...

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.