

Virtual Worship – Prayer, Readings & Homily

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Prayer

Breathe deep the breath of life.

Breathe deeply, connected to this community of love and justice, hope and grace –
know that here you are named and you are known as beloved.

Join me in this time of meditation and prayer, first by sharing silence together.

Spirit of Life, Source of Love,

God of a thousand names and beyond all naming,

How much? How many? seem to be the questions these days.

How much longer will be it be like this,

how many people will get sick,

how much do we really need to live,

how much can we give to others,

how many of whatever we have is enough for us to feel safe,

how much can we stay connected

how many times do we need to take a break

from all the efforts to replicate what can't be replicated –

the in-person moments of beauty, laughter, love –

how much love and patience and grace

can we offer ourselves and others

so that we know, and believe, we're all beloved?

We hold in our hearts this day all those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit.

I invite you to bring the names you are holding in your heart this day –

in joy or in sorrow, in celebration or in grief,

and silently or aloud now in this sacred hour,

to speak their names...

For all those names, and many others, may we all be held in love and grace.

These words of meditation come from poet who has been helping so many these days, Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Lynn Ungar, entitled *Toilet Paper*

How many rolls of toilet paper will make you safe?

How many bottles of Purell?

How much peanut butter or pasta, bread or beer?

How much money will make you secure?

Ten thousand dollars? A million?

A billion dollars and a yacht?

At what point do you say "I have what I need"?

Ask the Buddha, he says

it is the nature of all things to change

it is the nature of all beings to suffer

it is the natural of all beings to die.

How many rolls will make you safe?

Wouldn't it be better if you, yourself,

were multi-layered, and soft, and strong?

May we all be soft enough, strong enough, for these days.

Reading

"This is the Part" by Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen

This is the part
where we commandeer cruise ships for people migrating
to feast at all you can eat buffets and party pool side
and then split the corporate profits with the staff, right?

This is the part where teach ourselves how to make our own medicine –
the kind from herbs and grandma's recipes
and vaccines and antivirals and insulin and epipens too, right?

This is the part where we open our spare rooms
to the college student whose school is closed
and the asylum seeker who just got out of detention,
and our co-worker who just got evicted
and the queer teen who needs a place to crash, right?

This is the part where we feed lunch to the kid whose school is cancelled
and text the people who can't be in public spaces anymore and we breathe, right?

This is the part where we introduce ourselves
to our neighbors we've been living next to for 10 years
because tomorrow we might need each other, right?
This is the part where we ask "what do i really need for surviving?"
and find a way to seek no more and no less, right?

This is the part where we stay home, we cancel, we show up, we call, we fight,
we let go, we stay, we don't let anyone go it alone, right?

This is the part where when we say we, we mean:
we elderly, we immunocompromised, we sick, we well, we in prison, we free,
we who can buffer our way out with money and privilege
and we who definitely can't.

Right?

Right.

Homily – No More, No Less

One of my favorite places in Rochester is along the south Zumbro river trail,
down the hill past the little dam, by the large stones near the community garden.

From there, you can see woods, river, paths,
chuck-e-cheese, trader joes, and some golden arches,
as well as the plumber building and the clinic downtown,
as well as the sky, and geese, and plants – and stars.

I've been going there often these days,
during the morning with my family, and later in the evening with just our dog.

A couple nights ago, well after sunset, with illumination coming only from the city
and a bit from a half moon,
Lucy, our English Setter, perked up toward the slope going down to the river.

My eyes, slower to adjust, eventually made out 6 deer, who I often find in the
evening, grazing along the water.

They were staring at us, stopped in their tracks,
not moving an inch, until they knew, somehow, when it was safe to move again.

That's what's happening now, isn't it?
We're stopped in our tracks, the world gone still,
life as we know it, no more the same –
much as Mark described in the Call to Worship.

And I wonder, perhaps, if some of that is good –
the earth itself taking a breath, we, ourselves, taking a breath,
at least those of us not on front lines –
and hopefully, even more so, those who are –
a few breaths here and there to keep on.

And if we're doing it right, this humanity thing,
we stop – we don't move –
we take heed of the danger, some of which is quite unknown to us –
we don't start running out of fear, or fighting,
we stop in our tracks – pause, wait,
until the danger has passed and it is safe to continue on.

The deer don't seem to hoard things.
They seem to heed the question from Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen, as Mark read to us in
the poem, as she writes,

*This is the part where we ask "what do i really need for surviving?"
and find a way to seek no more and no less, right?*

No more, no less than we need.
Learning to live in new ways, adapt daily, unsure of what will be.

It's funny the differences among us as to what feels essential to stock up on –
toilet paper, the now immortal reference,
but beyond that –
what do you need to live the life you're being asked to live?

How much of this, how many of that –
what are you being asked to refrain from
so that others who really need it can get it?

We are writing a history that has been unprecedented in any of our lifetimes –
I'm assuming your age, here –
we are writing a story about humanity by our action, our inaction,
of what are, or are not, doing.

Some of you may remember we are, in our Universalist heritage, in the time of
Lent in the Christian year.

This paints a different picture now –

one Lutheran friend said, *well, this is the Lentiest Lent I've ever Lented*

Lent, the season leading to Easter –
at its core has been about practices of sacrifice to help put in perspective
the core things that matter in our lives –
giving up small, frivolous things.

If you practice anything with Lent or not,
we are all sacrificing things, far beyond the stereotypical chocolate or types of food
or drink -and I might recommend right now, keep the chocolate.

I think we're being asked, or kind of forced, into a practice
of giving up things to really drill down and define what is essential –
what do I need to survive, what do I not,
what am I giving up, how am I loving my neighbor?

*This is the part, writes the poet,
where we stay home, we cancel, we show up, we call, we fight,
we let go, we stay, we don't let anyone go it alone, right?*

*This is the part where when we say we, we mean:
we elderly, we immunocompromised, we sick, we well, we in prison, we free,
we who can buffer our way out with money and privilege
and we who definitely can't.*

So – we're here –
this is going to be the longest Lent we've ever known, I think.

But this is what's true –
for some, feelings of isolation, uncertainty,
feeling the strain of figuring out a life that seems impossible,

for many on the margins, those are not new feelings.

Perhaps, what we're experiencing, while unprecedented,

is a spotlight on the ways our society, our systems,
fail vulnerable populations all the time.

Perhaps, when the strain is felt by even the most privileged among us,
that is an invitation to compassion –
to remember the gifts we have,
and call us to new ways of thinking, acting, and being,
in love to our neighbor.

As I moved along the Zumbro path,
I found myself held, there,
amidst the wisdom of the deer, the magic of the shining ancient stars overhead,
the love and skill and compassion represented by the blue and white lights
illuminated the Plummer building, the very spot where the first Universalist Chapel
had stood over 150 years ago –
I felt held, there, but ancient wisdom and love showing up right now –
and I felt a truth – they persevered, through who knows what, and so will we.

So may we give up hoarding,
may we give up and let go
of believing in our invincibility,
may we give up any belief that we aren't all connected,

may we give up
any belief, any action, any cynicism,
that doesn't take this moment, this time in our lives,
as a chance to grow a heart of compassion, wider and wider still,
until we turn to each other in mutual aid,
until we say we,
and know who we mean –
which is everyone, everyone, everyone.

Amen.