

## **Prisoners of Hope ©**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel  
At the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist  
First Sunday of Advent, November 27, 2016*

*“There is a world of hurt out there that needs the word of hope in here.”*

*– Rev. Jo Hudson, UCC*

Last Sunday afternoon, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader stood in the chancel of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and showed the gathered congregation how a Muslim prays. He demonstrated how one begins by putting their hands by their ears, the words that are repeated, the prostrations on the floor.

He had the help of an adult, a man from town who was there with his wife, who had been invited to speak. They went back and forth, in English and in Arabic, explaining. The man was concerned with taking up too much time. The 7<sup>th</sup> grader was concerned about doing it all correctly. The congregation was patient, attentive, listening.

It was not a large gathering last Sunday afternoon, but I suspect that for many there, it was the very first time that they had been given such a lesson, perhaps the first time they heard from a Muslim neighbor, and certainly the first time for a Muslim to share his faith in their church.

How I wish the whole town was there to witness it! I wish the whole town was a witness because this 7<sup>th</sup> grade Muslim boy was so generous, sincere and pure of heart- not to mention so clearly non-threatening.

I am *impatient* for a sea change in our nation  
away from divisiveness and suspicion, cruelty and hate  
to curiosity and solidarity, kindness and love.

I don't know how else to say it.

It was a moment of simple human connection  
at a time when much of the nation is on edge,  
when some of our relationships are on edge,  
when our hearts and spirits are on edge.

So many people are wrestling with despair and in need of hope—  
just as we enter into the darkest months of the year.

Some are newly baptized into despair;  
others have wrestled with it their whole lives.

For some, the struggle is in their personal lives, their families,  
the circumstances they find themselves in.

For others the struggle is with fellow citizens, with our nation—  
fraught as we are with division, discrimination and hate, even death.

For others, the struggle is about the destiny of our good green-blue earth—  
our life-support system and a true love.

Still others struggle on a spiritual level, with shaken understandings  
of ourselves or God or humanity or Love's power.

So how do we turn from despair toward hope?  
How might we make hope real and tangible in our lives?

This is one of the questions that the Rev. Dr. William Barber  
addresses in his book *The Third Reconstruction*,  
which a number of us at North Parish are reading.

We are reading it to understand the pattern of history that led to today,  
to make sense out of the moment of time we find ourselves in,  
to try to find a roadmap for the way ahead.

Rev. Barber calls for a prophetic moral movement that is strong enough, broad enough, active enough to overcome the politics of division and fear. And he speaks to this question of “hope”.

In the very first chapter of this book, Rev. Barber tells a story about growing up in Roper, North Carolina with his parents and his grandmother, whom he calls Grandmamma. He says she was the “spiritual anchor” of the family. *(Anyone here have a gramma like that?)*

She was a person who watched over her children and grandchildren and the whole community; a person who passed on the wisdom of previous generations; a person who taught him more *practical* theology than any high-falutin’ theology professor ever did. He tells this story:

“When we were growing up, Grandmamma and her nieces always cooked for the whole family (and for anyone else who happened to stop by). When I was at her house, I often sat with them in the kitchen. They would hum songs from church as she rolled out biscuits and stirred pots on her old gas stove.”

*(Can you imagine that scene?*

*Women rolling out biscuits and humming? He continues...)*

“They also had a ritual whenever the food was done. Grandmamma would take a bottle of the anointing oil that she rubbed on people’s heads when she prayed for them and slip it into the front of her apron. She and the other ladies would take some money, a rag, and some of the food they’d cooked and they would say, **‘We’ll be back shortly. We’ve got to go and hope somebody.’”**

“As a young black boy learning proper English in school, I thought my uneducated grandmamma was misspeaking—that she mistook the word “hope” for “help”. I even may have tried to correct her error in word choice a time or two. But looking back, I see that Grandmamma articulated more theology in that single phrase that some preachers managed to get into an entire sermon.”  
*(Now isn't that the truth?!)*

**“We'll be back shortly. We've got to go and *hope* somebody.”**

*He says:*

“As a person of faith struggling to survive in a society that so often despised her and the people she loved most, my grandmamma knew that any prayers worth their salt had to be accompanied by food for the hungry. She and other mothers of the church practiced “visitation” *as a spiritual discipline*, every *bit* as important as Sunday worship or Holy Communion.

She knew in her bones that faith and works, belief and practice, were inseparable. *And* she knew in her careful choice of words that **love in action was not simply about helping people.** **It was a practice of *hope*** that enabled others to keep going and helped her to keep her eyes on the prize and hold on.”

Do *you* have any practices of hope?

What are *our* practices of hope here, at North Parish?

Might we begin to see *everything that we do* here as practices of hope?

If so, how are we *deepen and expand those practices of hope* for the months that lie ahead?

Not to be overly dramatic, but I believe these are life and death questions.  
Some people's *lives* are depending on how we answer.  
A *lot* of folks' spiritual lives are depending on how we answer.  
A whole bunch of life on earth *depends on how we answer*.

And lest you're getting a little puffed up or a little overwhelmed,  
by "we", I'm not just talking about the people in this room,  
although I am including us all in that "we."  
But I'm also talking about a whole lot of other people-  
our fellow Unitarian Universalists across the nation,  
and your friends, your colleagues, your family members, your neighbors,  
your Muslim friends and your Hindu friends and your Jewish friends  
and the friends you haven't made yet but will,  
and yes even your FaceBook friends  
and the people who aren't your friend *but might join us in practicing hope*.

Practicing hope means finding among us the resources to care for one another-  
for those among us in crisis, those who are ill, or suffering, or in trouble.  
Practicing hope means becoming the most vibrant beloved community we can be,  
doing what it takes to make that possible- personally, collectively, financially, spiritually.  
Practicing hope means joining with other faith communities to take a stand  
for human decency and fairness and connection.  
It means saying more often- with each other—

**"We'll be back shortly. We've got to go and *hope* somebody."**

*We've got to go and hope somebody* fighting gas pipelines  
in Standing Rock, North Dakota or down the road in West Roxbury.  
*We've got to go and hope somebody* with a child who's transgender...  
or whose child is disabled, or whose child is ill.  
*We've got to go hope somebody* whose child is lost to drugs or a custody battle.  
*We've got to go and hope somebody* in Lowell who is a new refugee.

*We've got to go and hope somebody* in Chicago mourning Kajuan Raye-  
19 years old and killed by police last week;  
and somebody in Charleston, West Virginia mourning James Means-  
15 years old and shot this week by a remorseless white man;  
and somebody in Richmond, CA mourning William Sims-  
a 28 year old black man killed by white supremacists on November 12<sup>th</sup>.

***We'll be back in a little while- we've got to go hope somebody.***

We've got to go and hope somebody who needs a hot meal.  
We've got to go and hope somebody whose mama is dying.  
We've got to go and hope somebody right here in our midst who is struggling like mad.  
Maybe they're here; you might know who they are or you might not.  
Maybe they're not even showing up.

**We'll be back shortly. *Why? Say it with me: We've got to go and hope somebody.***

Hope is not wishful thinking or sentimental feeling.  
Hope is not based on looking at history while wearing rose-colored glasses,  
on a progressive sense of history where things are always getting better.  
Hope does not require denying reality.  
It does not rely on willful naiveté about what's really going on out there.  
Hope is not the same as optimism, although the two are often confused.

Rev. Barber shares the words of Dr. Cornell West,  
who says we are called- not to be optimists who *deny* reality-  
but prisoners of hope who work to *change* reality.  
If you want to hear it from him directly,  
just look up Dr. Cornell West and the phrase "prisoner of hope" when you get home.

West suggests that optimism is like a spectator sport,  
where we look at the evidence and think,  
"Well, we can just keep doing what we have been all along,  
things can just keep going like they have been all along, and things will get better."

Hope is different, he suggests.

Hope looks at the evidence and says it doesn't look good.

No. It doesn't look good *at all*.

Hope is based in a tragic sense of history.

Hope refuses to sugar-coat reality.

But it *also* refuses to give in to despair, even as it wrestles with it tooth and nail.

West says hope is for those who *actively struggle*,

who say "OK, we're in the game.

We're going to create NEW possibilities based on a CONTAGIOUS vision.

We're gonna invite people to engage in heroic actions *against the odds*."

*That's* what hope is like.

That's what it's like in West Roxbury and Standing Rock,

in Lawrence and Lowell, in North Andover and Methuen:

acting against the odds, wrestling with despair,

*but never letting despair have the last word.*

Dr. West says "That's hope. I'm a prisoner of hope. Gonna die a prisoner of hope."

It seems to me that optimism and despair

are actually two sides of the same coin, two sides of the same piece of cloth.

To be optimistic is to invite despair when history rears its ugly side.

In contrast, to have hope is to find *a middle way*—

*a way to thread the needle between optimism and despair.*

Many of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues,

and quite possibly many of you, have a "Love wins" theology.

What I mean is that, when asked to sum up theology, they might say "Love wins."

It is a perfectly good and beautiful theology,

and I have deep respect, admiration and perhaps a bit of jealousy

for my colleagues who believe and preach this theology.

My own theology is slightly different.

My theology could be summed up like this: Love, period. Even when it loses.

Love, even when.

Love, even though.

Love, still.

Love, always.

Love, period. Even when it loses. And sometimes, it loses.

Some might call me a pessimist for this-  
but I'd prefer to be called a prisoner of hope.

My theology has been shaped by many things,  
but once profoundly by a question that was posed to a classroom  
when I was a divinity school student.

The question referred to the Holocaust, and it was this:

“Does your theology hold in the face of burning children?”

It is a harsh question, but a good one.

For me, it was impossible to hold a “Love wins” theology  
in the face of the Holocaust, in the face of burning children-  
it made no sense, it had no practical or embodied meaning  
for too many millions of people, too many children.

For me, “Love wins” was too optimistic, **but not hopeful enough.**

I think about a column in last Sunday's *Boston Globe* by Yvonne Abraham  
that some of you may have read.

It was about a man named Aron Greenfield- a 90 year old man  
who had just had his bar mitzvah in 1937 when the Nazis invaded Poland.

His father and three brothers were sent to labor camps.  
His mother and 5 other siblings pushed into a ghetto.  
He witnessed public executions, his parents being beaten.

He witnessed the night of “the selection”, when his 4 year old sister was wrenched from his mother’s arms, and he heard his mother’s cries.

He lied about his age and was sent to a labor camp.

The rest of his family- except for one sister- was loaded onto trucks and sent to their deaths.

It gives him insomnia and is still hard to talk about, but he feels it is his duty to tell the stories.

He recently told them to a customer at his shop, a 13 year old boy who was preparing for his own bar mitzvah at a temple in Wellesley.

He told him the story about waking one frigid morning in the labor camp only to discover that the man on whose stomach he had rested his head had died.

Greenfield says: “People say, ‘What did you do?’

“What do you think I did, said Kaddish? I stole his shoes.

By that time you didn’t believe there is a God.

‘He’s on vacation’ is what we used to say.”

During the boy’s bar mitzvah, the 13 year old, this young man asked the congregation to honor Mr. Greenfield, and he shared the advice the old man had given him.

Here’s what the 13 year old said:

*“He reminded me that in the case of Hitler, all it took was one charismatic leader to lead the masses down the wrong path, because nobody questioned him... Always question what you read- and what you are told... Stand up for the good, fight for the minority, and be an upstander, not a bystander.”*

That is not the advice of a wishful thinker.

It is not the advice of an optimist.

It is not the advice of a person who has not known total and utter despair in his personal, communal and spiritual life.

It is the advice of a Prisoner of Hope. A *prisoner* of hope. A prisoner of *hope*.

You know, people I admire—  
like the Rev. Theodore Parker, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,  
have said that the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice.  
Indeed, I have preached this myself.  
But this phrase can be interpreted in two ways-  
with either a progressive or a tragic view of history.

Some might assume that these words imply that the arc of history  
will bend toward justice on its own,  
perhaps thanks to a Divine Mover or human spiritual evolution.  
But others might assume that bending the arc of history ain't gonna happen on its own.  
So rather than a statement of *fact*, this is a statement of *faith*.

Here's how I say it: The arc of the universe is long and it bends towards justice,  
*but the bending must be done by human hands.*  
The arc of the universe is long and it *will* bend towards justice,  
*if and when we human beings grab hold of that arc, and bend it, together.*

So as I close today, I will mention this:  
Yesterday, I reached out to the Muslim woman, Zahira,  
who spoke at St. Paul's last Sunday.  
I reached out to her, to the Christian clergy in North Andover and Andover,  
the leader from the Hindu temple in Andover and two Jewish rabbis.

I reached out because we need them all.  
I reached out because I heard yesterday about the swastikas and racist, homophobic, sexist,  
anti-Semitic graffiti spray painted on a school in Harvard, MA.  
I reached out because the Andover clergy are meeting Tuesday  
to discuss an incident of harassment at the high school.

I reached out because I believe that we need to be prepared and proactive,  
and that if we keep doing what we have been, keep up with business as usual,

sticking to our own little circles of influence, things aren't going to get better.  
I reached out because I believe communities of faith are being called upon NOW  
to create new possibilities, and spread contagious visions,  
and join together in heroic actions against the odds.

So in that spirit of joining together and spreading a vision,  
even though I've already been talking even longer than usual,  
I'd like to end today by sharing the words of Zahira from last Sunday,  
which she gave me permission to share with you. She said this:

"Greetings, mercy and blessings of God upon you,  
First of all, I would like to thank God for bringing us together...  
My family and I are honored to be with you this evening.  
We feel very fortunate to be part of this wonderful community.

1400 years ago, prophet Mohammad (greetings and prayers of Allah upon him)  
advised his followers- after witnessing the tremendous amount of animosity  
and persecution they were subjected to in Mecca,  
to seek refuge in a Christian land, Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia).  
He told them 'go to Abyssinia, because there is a king there  
who does not allow any injustice to be committed against anyone in his kingdom'

Today, history is repeating itself.  
The world has witnessed the waves of Muslim refugees fleeing Syria and Iraq  
and heading north to Germany and Sweden.  
These refugees could have travelled a couple hundred miles south to Saudi Arabia,  
the wealthiest Muslim country in the world,  
but instead they prefer to travel thousands of miles to seek refuge in Christian countries,  
because what they are looking for is not faith, they already have that.  
What they're looking for is justice and equality.

What those two events teach us is that we might have a lot of differences,  
but regardless of our differences, regardless of our religion, ethnicity or color,

we all aspire to the same things: we all want to have a roof over our head,  
and food on the table, we all want to live in safe neighborhoods,  
and have our kids in good schools, in other words, we look for justice and equality.

This is the very idea expressed in the Quran, when Allah said:

“Oh mankind, we have created you from a male and a female,  
and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may know one another.  
The most honorable of you in the sight of God are those who are the most pious.”

*(Al Hujurat 49:13)*

That is why I pray that God help us look not to our differences  
but to our common humanity.”

The words of Zahira, a Muslim resident of North Andover  
at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church last Sunday— like us, a prisoner of hope.

Like me, like you.

May peace be upon us all.

Amen.