

In a Time Like This ©

A Sermon Preached Post-Election, on Nov. 13, 2016
by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
at the North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist

*"I believed my happiness would be incomplete while one creature remained miserable."
--George De Benneville, Universalist, 1703-1793*

*"Keep alert, stand firm in your faith; be courageous, be strong.
Let all that you do be done in love." – 1 Corinthians 16*

Four years from now it will be the year 2020.

No doubt, between now and then, we can expect some change.

There will be change in our personal lives, our congregation, our nation... our world.

Right now, it is hard to know what those changes will be.

But we can ask ourselves some questions about what we *hope* to come true.

Four years from now we will celebrate the 375th birthday of this congregation.

What do we want to be known for- as individuals, as people of faith?

What kind of hard work will it take to get us there?

What depth of generosity? What intensity of focus?

What connections and commitments and new friends?

What is required of us to get there, in a time like this?

One week ago, when we met in this sanctuary,
many of us were ready for the election to be over,
tired of its incessant intrusion into our lives,
tired of the division and divisiveness it engendered.

Today, it is over... but a sense of division and divisiveness and utter alienation
remains among many- in some cases lightening up, but in others, hardening further.

As I mentioned in my Enews article this week,
the feelings of the members of this congregation are all over the map-
shock, anger, relief, fear, , gladness, deep grief.

Many are also feeling alienated, estranged from their neighbors.

“How- and why- could they possibly vote that way?”

“It’s over, it is what it is; why are folks so upset?”

So many are utterly baffled or upset by other’s points of view,
by others’ reactions and feelings,
by others’ interpretation of Christianity,
by others’ vision of the nation,
by others’ complacency or complicity.

This is not an easy place to be, nor is the fallout easy to bear.
Some have lost friends over this election.
Some have fought with family members and are changing Thanksgiving plans.
Some are wondering about every stranger they meet.
Some may be avoiding church because they are in the minority.
Some have had their suspicions confirmed about the corruption of politics and religion,
or the state of white America.
Some communities- like this town- are almost as divided as the nation.

And then there’s the fact that post-election, friends, children, and the media
are reporting incident after incident of harassment
towards people of color, Muslims and gays.
Has anyone heard of such a story- not from the media- but from someone you know?
Raise your hands... keep them up.

(About a ¼ to 1/3 of the congregation raises their hands.)

Wow.

All over, folks have been shouted at to go back to their countries,
as if the U.S. wasn’t their country, as if people of color have no place in America today.

Talk about alienation and division.

It's fullest expression is in bigotry, racism and misogyny, Islamophobia and homophobia.

This is not normal.

Too many parents, too many teenagers, too many children are terrified.

The truth is, we live in a Market Basket nation. That is our reality.

So what do I mean by that?

Anybody shop there?

For those of you who don't shop at Market Basket in Lawrence, let me explain.

When you shop there, you will see people there
of many, many different national origins.

You will over hear people speaking in a variety of different languages.

There are folks whose families have been here for over 300 years
and those who've been here 3 weeks.

At Market Basket, there are lots of strangers,
but you'll probably also run into to someone you know--
neighbors, acquaintances, your kid's teacher,
the youth group member who bags your groceries.
If you do, it's no biggie if you're in your sweats and didn't put on make-up.
It's Market Basket. We're just all trying *to get the shopping done*.

At Market Basket, there are old people and babies, kids and grown-ups,
teenagers and folks with disabilities shopping with their helpers.
You push your cart past people with different skin colors,
different religions, different politics, different sexual orientations,
people who dress quite differently, are tattooed differently,
people with different levels of income and wealth,
who do vastly different types of work.

It's as if the lines that were drawn between the Immigrant City
and the suburbs are erased.

In the Market Basket nation, we're all mixed up together,
looking for our food, comparing prices, checking out the specials,
because *we all need to eat*.

We manage to steer our carts around each other, being civil.
Pretty soon we'll be in there getting ready for Thanksgiving.
The turkeys are already out.

At Market Basket, you have choices.

You can get pork ribs for \$2.99 per pound or grass-fed ground beef for \$5.49 per pound.
You can buy bamboo shoots in chili oil, or a drink made from basil seeds,
you can get okra or edamame, quinoa and toasted carob powder,
Rice-A-Roni and Chef Boyardee, papaya, plantain and batata.
No judgment. Your choice. No problem. Everyone's money is taken the same.

Does anyone remember back to the days of the strike-
when folks refused to shop at Market Basket out of loyalty to the workers,
and how they had to trundle up the hill to another grocery store- which shall not be named—
a grocery store that didn't have all the right foods?
Do you remember how confused people were, wandering around the store?
Do you remember how confused Stop and Shop seemed to be--
how *clueless* that they might be missing something?

After a while, they finally put out one smallish table
of things like mangoes and plantains.
They made a small effort, but honestly it just wasn't big enough.
It was clear that the suburban store *just didn't get it*,
didn't understand the *lived realities* of their new clientele,
which is often the case with suburban institutions, even churches.

So they lost their window of opportunity to serve more people.
As soon as the strike was over, everyone returned to what they knew,
to where they were comfortable— being part of a Market Basket nation.

Market Basket in Lawrence, MA looks like today's America.

It is also looks like the old time Universalists' vision of heaven.

It is how they envisioned heaven—with just maybe a little more- or a *lot* more- love.

Now, some theologies imagine a heaven of division-
say, a heaven only for Christians, or only for Muslims, or whatever group they're part of.
They imagine that folks are as sharply divided in heaven as it is on earth.
(That's backwards- imagining heaven as it is on earth, not the other way around-
on earth as it is in heaven.)

Not so the Universalists.

Our forebears were convinced and convicted that God's grace was wider
than we humans could comprehend, that all people would be saved,
that all would return to an ocean of love after this life...
not just the few elect, not just the Christians.

Even centuries ago, their heaven was full to the brim
with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews-
people of all faiths, all nations, all ethnicities, all languages, all skin colors.

And it wasn't just that they didn't know about human diversity.

A few weeks ago, I told the story of George De Benneville,
whose conversion to Universalism in the 1700's began on a ship
when he encountered some Muslims crying for a wounded friend,
and he realized they, too, were loved by God. That realization changed his life.

Eventually he came to America, understanding that his fate was connected to all people.
He built relationships of equality and collaboration with the indigenous people.
He said, "*I believed my happiness would be incomplete
while one creature remained miserable.*"

It's a remarkable statement of interdependence, of mutuality, of faith.

Today, some Universalists still hold a vision of this heaven
that our forebears imagined- a heaven where all souls meet
on the common ground of eternal love.

Some envision that heaven as a place where each soul is recognizable, retaining their identity in all its particularity- Muslim, pagan, mother, son, gay, straight, smart or funny.

Others suspect that our souls are more like drops of water, losing our particularity at the end of life, dissolving into the sea of love.

Others of us believe something else entirely- such as reincarnation, or no afterlife at all, but the shared destiny of our atoms becoming one with the earth and the glorious universe.

Regardless of our heavenly visions, we Unitarian Universalists *agree* about this: that we are called to co-create a Beloved Community *right here on earth, right in this life, right here, right now.*

We are called to love the hell out of this world so that all beings might be happy, safe, peaceful and free.

We are called to have each other's backs, and to defend the vulnerable and the helpless- even the earth and its creatures.

We call our vision by different names:

The Interdependent web. The Peaceable Kingdom. The Reign of God.

The Earth Made Fair and all its People One.

This vision is theological, faithful, heart-and-soul centered; it is not just political or social.

And it requires something of us, as it did of all our ancestors.

Through 371 years, our ancestors had a remarkable ability to survive hardship and crises, to slowly inch closer toward a Beloved Community.

As a group, they survived epidemics, wars, repeated recessions and depressions, periods of great austerity and periods of great anxiety.

They had each other's backs... *sometimes*, that is.

We know now that they were not innocent— that they reflected their time.

We know that, way back, the minister took advantage of the indigenous people of this place; that way back, in the Puritan days, the minister and parishioners held and exchanged slaves;

that way back, the people voted *three times* to keep black Unitarians out of the pews. It took *centuries* for black men and women to be admitted as members, and another century still for its gay and lesbian members to be blessed in marriage.

And each step towards greater inclusion and equality encountered predictable resistance.

There is always resistance.

There is *always* resistance.

There is always resistance, and sometimes fierce backlash to progress towards equality.

As a 371 year old American institution, our history is one of segregation *and* struggle for inclusion. In most cases, the congregation was ahead of the curve compared to the nation. Blacks and women could vote here before they could vote in national elections. GBLTQ people could be married religiously here before they could be legally married. In many ways, our history is a mirror of the dominant American society, but a mirror that reflects *what will be* a few years or decades down the road. We've come a long way... but we still have a long way to go.

In a congregation this old, it is tempting sometimes to think that the hard work is done. It's tempting to think we've got all the time in the world to get our act together. But I'd like to suggest that every week, every month, every year counts. This is no time to be casual Unitarian Universalists. Church is not a spectator sport, especially in a time like this.

In four years, we will celebrate our 375th birthday. So what does our faith require of us? No doubt, there are many answers to that question- as many people as are in this room.

We need to know the history of the brave women and men who sacrificed for great causes before us.

We need to show up, to give of our time and energy, gifts and skills.

We need to make space for holy rest, deep thought, meditation and prayer.

We need to invite friends to church, and invite them again.

We need to support each other and engage in actions of kindness and social justice.

We need to build interfaith partnerships, and demand a moral agenda for our nation.

We need to spend less time on institutional maintenance and more time leaving the building.

Can you imagine, for example, if the stewardship drive had as much participation and enthusiasm as the Red Bow Fair— if it basically ran itself over the course of one month instead of five? That would free up some of my time, let me tell you.

Can you imagine- and here's where the rubber hits the road- can you imagine what we could do if we *all* made a commitment to giving a percentage of our income- 2%, 3%, 5%, a tithe— to the various causes we care about- all those voluntary organizations?

I have to wonder. Because honestly, I think it's time to up our game, to bring everybody in, to hold each other accountable, to get out of our pews- and I need to get out of this pulpit- to take our message to the streets.

In the 8th century B.C., a prophet named Micah predicted that his nation, the nation of Judah, would be destroyed because of the evil behavior of its religious and political leaders.

Micah was concerned that time was running out, so he tried to get his people to focus on Judaism's ethical bottom line.

It was Micah who wrote those beautiful words that some of us know so well:

*“What does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

Justice, kindness, humility. This is what is required.

About 800 years later, another Jewish prophet lived at a time when the religious and political leaders were *again* corrupt.

He tried to get his people to focus by summarizing his theology like this:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”

And then, he put it into action.

He loved his neighbors, all sorts of neighbors, and invited them to dinner.

For centuries, Universalists have seen Jesus as the architect of Beloved Community. Sure, he made a mistake once- by rejecting the Syrophonecian woman, but she corrected him, and he learned.

He healed and talked to and ate with *all* kinds of people.

In fact, I bet Jesus would love hanging out at Market Basket if he only could.

Now, some of us might have a hard time imagining ourselves walking around Market Basket, thinking,

“This is what heaven looks like?!? (Maybe with a lot more love...)”

But for Jesus, it would be heaven on earth.

He’d probably be hanging out, chatting up strangers, setting up Market Basket Circle Suppers right and left.

“You? Go with her—you’ve got tomatoes and three kids.”

“You need a place? Yes, I can see you’re Muslim.

Assalam Alaikum- Peace be with you. We won’t serve pork; Jews like me don’t eat that either.”

“How about you... Yes, of course, Hindus are welcome! Yes, we’ll make sure- no beef! People! Let’s just go vegetarian- or maybe have a side of turkey— it’s best thing we can do for the earth anyway.”

*“You need a spot? You’re an *atheist* Unitarian Universalist?*

*And your spouse is a *pagan*? Fascinating! Welcome! There’s a place at my table.*

Let’s break out the good silverware and get to know each other.”

Can you see him there, like I can, Jesus in the Market Basket aisles?

Well, I'm going to come down from the pulpit now,
and suggest that today we practice making new connections, taking a little risk right here.
This may feel a little awkward for some, especially if you're shy or hate touchy-feely stuff,
but that's OK— we can all stretch a little bit today.

So if you are able-bodied, I invite you to stand up.
Now I invite the folks in the front pew to turn around
so you're facing people in the pew behind you.
Third pew people—you turn around to folks behind you,
and so on, until you're facing each other.

(conversation ensues as folks naturally greet each other)

Now, as we go back into silence...
I invite you to place your hand over your heart if you've been feeling scared
for the physical or emotional safety of your child, your spouse, a parent or yourself.

Now I invite you to put a hand over your heart
if you are afraid for the physical or emotional safety of a friend, or colleague
or extended family member- or afraid for their civil rights.

Now, let's just take a breath.
Let's try breathing in love, exhaling fear; breathing in peace, exhaling peace.
Notice who has their hands over their hearts.

These are the ones who most need our love right now.

Notice who is part of our Beloved Community.

Now I invite you to reach out a hand to those opposite to you-
to hold a hand or touch a shoulder.

And let's say to each other: "Friend, I've got your back."

("Friend, I've got your back.")

"Friend, we're in this together."

("Friend, we're in this together.")

Staying right where we are, let us pray:

*Spirit of Life, and Love, and God, Spirit of Truth and Freedom,
Be with us, and within us now, in this troubled time.
Strengthen our hearts for what may lie ahead.
Help us to be gentle with one another, to be kind, and to defend one another.
And help us trust again in the promise of Beloved Community, made real in this world.
Amen.*

Reading: We Are Prophets of a Future Not Our Own by Bishop Ken Unterer (*adapted*)

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us...

This is what we are about: we plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity *for Love, for Life*, for God's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results...
We are prophets of a future not our own.