

Immortal, Invisible.
An Easter talk by Rev. Jim McKinley
UU Fellowship of Hendersonville, April 16, 2006

Take a moment to read silently, in as much solitude as you can find in this public place,
familiar reading no. 646:

The Larger Circle

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
And the hands of those who come after us,

We enter the little circle of each others arms
And the larger circle of lovers, whose hands are joined in a dance,

And the larger circle of all creatures,
Passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance,
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it

Except in fragments.

Wendell Berry

This has been a productive week. Places where I was stuck, there is motion. I could list several things that got done, such as cleaning my house, rearranging my room, getting my taxes done, getting half the garden planted. Here in the congregation several initiatives moved forward. The covenant groups are metaphorical for this morning. I have not gotten them going this year. There are reasons but they don't remove the weight of the undone.

So this week I did something different, I asked for help. I don't know why I didn't think of doing that before, but I didn't. Now I have and we have 6 volunteers to facilitate covenant groups and will be ready to go in May. This week I was productive and I sought and got help. I had the initiative and took it, but I did not go it alone. If I had, I'd probably still be stuck wishing I would get that garden in.

Ella planted it the garden and showed Hannah how to do it. Hannah's grandmother rearranged my room. Before I left for work I asked for her ideas and gave her mine so she could advise me on what to do at some future date when I had time. I came home to a rearranged room that works. Well I can't find some things. That goes with the territory, but the arrangement creates room and function where there wasn't either before.

And oh, yes, taxes. Wendell and Deanna Capes made preparing taxes easy and even pleasant. Yeah, I still had to pay them myself. And ministerial tax rates are anything but pleasant. But it all came together this week with some new energy and today, this Easter, I feel born again. At least a little bit.

Wednesday evening in my rearranged room I noticed that a book of Wendell Berry essays had surfaced among the newly shuffled reading material on the night stand. I hadn't looked in it in along time, but for some unknown reason I paused and did. And in the quiet and settling space of my rearranged room, I read the poem to which the book opened. I read this open prose piece called "Healing" only to discover that in this one writing are two of the readings from "Singing the Living Tradition." I don't remember ever reading it before.

It begins:

Healing

I

The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common.

In healing the scattered members come together.

In health, the flesh is graced, the holy enters the world.

II

The task of healing is to respect oneself as a creature, no more and no less.

A creature is not a creator, and cannot be. There is only one Creation, and we are its members.

To be creative is only to have health: to keep oneself fully alive in the Creation, to keep the creation fully alive in oneself, to see the Creation anew, to welcome one's part in it anew.

The most creative works are all strategies of this health.

Works of pride by self-called creators, with their premium on originality, reduce the Creation to novelty – the faint surprises of minds incapable of wonder.

Pursuing originality, the would-be creator works alone. In loneliness one assumes a responsibility for oneself that one cannot fulfill.

Today is Easter Sunday. It is the faith defining Sunday for many Christians as well as some Unitarian Universalists. It is an important marker of life and the calendar for many more. Whatever we think of this holiday, some importance of it and for it resides in our bones from the repetition and ritual of tradition and culture. It has multiple meanings. It is a Sunday of religious concepts, ideas and history. Centrally, however, it is a day of season and story and a person - the season of spring and the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The story generates and embodies difficult

metaphysical understandings of God and Jesus. Different forms of Christian religion then relate the different understandings to how we should be in the world.

Personally I do not embrace the limited and restricting Christology of Jesus dying for our sins and rising to heaven and thus being the only entrée to immortality. But, at the same time, I work each year and throughout the year with truths that if not defining, are central to the story and its relevance for human knowing and guidance. Much of the central truths of the great religions tell us that there is glorious life to be known on the other side of our fear of death. To the degree that we are able to face that existential fear, we glimpse heaven. We glimpse immortality. Still, it is a fact that much, if not most, of our lives are lived in the shadow of that fear. We spend a lot of our time and energy trying to run from the very creatureliness we have been given, one would think, to enjoy.

The familiar hymn from which today's title is borrowed, begins "Immortal invisible" and continues "God only wise. In light inaccessible hid from our eyes." I know, the hymn is referring to the mystery of God, but Immortality itself is invisible to us. Hid from our eyes. It is invisible because it is an experience of life and we are looking outside ourselves in the language of the hymn to the heavens and a notion of God that is out there some where. Easter doesn't need focus our interest beyond this life, to a story and a Jesus and a God that behave in ways we can at best struggle to comprehend. Closer in to the world we know and observe, it can bring to our awareness truths of life that have been carried through human history and experience and yes, Christian faith. Truths that say the immortality of life is here among us. Being born again is both a seasonal reality and an immanent possibility.

In my first sermon of last month I worked with the idea of bridging the gap between heaven and earth, the gap between the realities of the finite and the possibilities of the infinite. The gap that defines the job of religion.

I focused on Historian of religion, Karen Armstrong's talk at Harvard Divinity School entitled, "Is Immortality Important?" The focus of her message was the title page sentence: "Religion is about inhabiting the eternal in the here and now." She said that Christianity's emphasis on visions of an afterlife that emphasizes heaven and hell and retribution and reward was an accident of history that "recalls the frightened and despairing [apocalyptic] vision" of Zoroastrianism, absorbed by Christianity [and Islam]. Armstrong went on to show that, the examples, sages or exemplars in all the great religious traditions focus on the immortality of the soul here in this world. Not in some other place. Immortality is experienced through connecting to heaven here. Heaven is the experience of living in the present here and now. "[It is how we can be liberated [by] living beyond the reach of hatred, greed and anxieties about our status and survival."

Living in the here and now can be stated simply but we know it is not easy to do or ever really achieved. It requires trying to move through or beyond our greatest fear, our fear of death. It requires moving through the fear and anxiety of this one given passing life into the generous sense of present compassion. It requires repeatedly facing and practicing Easter.

We have to believe in our selves in order to be generous - with our lives and others. The messages of Easter inspire us to keep trying over and over again. Trying over and over again to be born again into compassionate, empathetic life. Life complete with moments of glimpsing the Heaven of “living beyond the reach of hatred, greed, and anxieties about our status and survival.”

Armstrong says that immortality is to be found in living compassionately and unafraid. In a move that is surprising and contrary to most modern cultural messages, freedom from existential fear is to be found by living compassionately. Hear the language Armstrong uses to describe what a compassionate, empathetic life can do. Confucian master Yan Hui experienced: “momentary glimpses of a sacred reality that was both immanent and transcendent, looming from within, yet also a companionable presence, “standing over him sharp and clear.””

In last week’s service I reflected on life choices in light of questions of integrity and wholeness and with language from developmental psychologist Erik Erikson within which one hears echoes of Armstrong’s religious thoughts and language. Erikson maps out human development in stages all held within a wider belonging, belongingness with life. He calls the final task of our life journey, integrity (where its flip side is despair). It requires making sense of the way the choices of our lives come together in the unique picture that not only is us but is the us that had to be. This idea is very similar to the notion of being present with what we have and who we are.

Erikson talks about integrity held within a basic trust of life. Integrity, he says in an important statement, comes from believing at a somatic level that life is trustworthy and finding it by experience to be so. Integration is an ongoing activity of our lives. “Every act calls for an integration of all.” We are always integrating the meaning of what we are doing as we explore the wider belongingness of life and living.

All of these ideas are summarized in a brief quote that has stayed with me all these years. It is stated in multi layered language reminiscent of both Passover and Easter messages. In summarizing our journey, Erikson says “healthy children will not fear life if their elders have integrity enough not to fear death.”

Wendell Berry continues:

IV

Good work finds the way between pride and despair.

It graces with health. It heals with grace.

It preserves the given [of creation] so that it remains a gift.

By it we lose loneliness:

We clasp the hands of those who go before us, and the hands of those who come after us;

And the little circle of each other's arms,

And the larger circle of lovers whose hands are joined in a dance,

And the larger circle of all creatures, passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance, to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it except in fragments.

Then in the VII stanza follow more familiar words:

Seeing the work that is to be done, who can help wanting to be the one to do it?

But one is afraid that there will be no rest until the work is finished and the house is in order, the form is in order, the town is in order, and all loved ones are well.

But it is pride that lies awake in the night with its desire and its grief.

To work at this work alone is to fail. There is no help for it. Loneliness is its failure.

It is despair that sees the work failing in one's own failure.

This despair is the awkwardest pride of all.

Keeping On is a discussion group in this congregation that meets once a month to explore together the struggles and opportunities of later years. It draws us out of our aloneness. Out of necessity and focus the group considers questions of health, work, family, desire, possibility, grief, loneliness, declining health and tries to find visions of imagination and hope all within an outer framework of the attrition of increasing losses and declining options. This week a few of the discussions centered on the topic of moving from individual homes and beloved community to assisted living or away to be near family.

The group voiced the acknowledgement that it is difficult to understand how to both live responsibly - that is not denying the changes that are coming in the future as long as the future continues, - and not live afraid. It is often difficult to envision visions to look forward to rather than imagine scenarios to fear. It is difficult to construct a world to anticipate rather than be trapped in a world you dread. Yet out of this week and these discussions came the seemingly miraculous insights of hopeful visions and shared understandings. There were glimpses of belonging in the too close face of mortality. There were glimpses of immortality as it were. Shared with others nonetheless.

This week in the collage that is our lived Easter an 11-year-old friend and advisor of mine brought me back from all my notions and applications to the story that is at the heart of Easter. She said she wanted a religion that had a story and a person that they talked about. Was that ok? You can see where she is coming from. Easter is a central story with founding understandings in both the Unitarian and Universalist traditions. They each took different approaches to what they believed about the story. The Universalists did not believe that Jesus died to appease an angry God for the sins of

humanity. The Unitarians were concerned about the miraculous notion of the bodily resurrection. But that is history. Whatever your theology now, Jesus and Easter gives immortality a face. Jesus embodies wider belonging in a brief story.

Easter speaks in the form of a person and a story. Jesus sends the message to Relax a little if you can. If you mess up – which you will, it's a part of who you are – you can still be loved as you are. The creation forgives you. Jesus also says someone will stand up for you.

If your biggest fear is dying – Jesus says don't be afraid. There is no need to be. The more you are able to move through that biggest of fears, the more you will know life in all its glory, beauty and wonder. The practice isn't easy. It takes the entire Easter journey, complete with commitment, repeated practice and suffering.

But all along the way as well as in the end, you are part of something larger than yourself. You are part of something more that supports you. You may understand it as God's love. You may understand it as the belonging of life or the integrity in and of life. But it is there. It is here. Immortal. All too invisible. Yet real.

This morning in flower communion, we celebrate the embodiment of the spirit of the gift of life. The larger circle in which we are held. We hold the immortality of Easter in our hands.

Wendell Berry from stanza VI:

One enters the larger circle by willingness to be a creature, the smaller by choosing to be human.

Back in the first week of March I spoke about a quiet conversation that started by talking about shared history in the larger circle that is Universalism. The mother I was talking with shared the story of how her daughter was sitting at the table with a friend who said she didn't believe in god. Her daughter looked at her and took a flower out of the vase in the center and held it up and responded "what do you mean you don't believe in God? God's right here in this flower." [Pause, take a flower from the Flower Communion basket].

I know we can get off into specific discussions of the theology and language of this but I paused. The simple truth in that moment gave me pause. I paused in the truth and the wonder of a child. The in between and the more – that more- that you know is true however you name it - held up and made real. Made real in the reflective presentation of the flower. Whatever your theology, you sense this connection with what the girl is saying. And with your flower.

Wendell Berry's "Healing" closes with the words that are now#697 in our hymnal:

The love and the work of friends and lovers belong to the task, and are its health.

Rest and rejoice belong to the task, and are its grace.

Let tomorrow come tomorrow. Not by your will is the house carried through the night.

May you enjoy a good Easter, this most amazing Sunday and may you glimpse Easter and immortality in your life throughout the year.