

How Is It with Your Spirit?

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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This is not the sermon I meant to preach today. In fact it's not the sermon I *wrote* for today. Today was meant to kick off a six part series on the senses in religion, and until Friday afternoon that was the plan. Following a difficult, divisive and often disappointing political season I thought you all needed a break. I enjoy living in denial and thought you might enjoy a brief vacation thee with me. But there are deeper issues to be addressed in this day and so the sermon series will have to wait just a bit.

Instead I want to invite you into two questions that my friend's clergy group uses to shape the check-in that begins their meetings. How is it with your spirit? And where have you seen the holy? Dinner party wisdom says never to discuss politics or religion in polite company so to make the two collide here could be sheer folly. To paraphrase Bette Davis, "Fasten your seat belts. It's gonna be a bumpy sermon."

So how is it with your spirit in these days after the election and after a long and often horrifying campaign?

Like many of you perhaps, I had had all I could take of politics and particularly the presidential race by the time Election Day rolled around. I usually love voting on Election Day because participating in democracy is important to me and there is a certain energy to the public polling place. But not this year. This year I was weary of the name calling and saddened by the demeaning behavior. And then the surprise of the results.

Whichever political party you affiliate with, whichever candidate you voted for, I think few of us were expecting the result. Many people in our country arose elated on Wednesday morning. Many arose saddened or even despondent. This election has been unlike any other in my adult life. Following the election of Barack Obama, the incidence of acts of violence, hatred and racism rose, and we are seeing that already again following this election. But the tenor is now different. Today, the acts of bigotry and hatred seem spurred by the political rhetoric rather than standing in contrast to it.

This is not indicative of party or progressive versus conservative philosophy. This is moving outside the politics of cooperation into a politic of divisiveness. It poses a great challenge for any and all religious people that want to truly create the beloved community where "love thy neighbor" is a mandate, not a suggestion pertaining to the neighbors who look and think and worship just like you. This is a particular challenge for Unitarian Universalists for when we say "all are welcome here" we cannot mean the neighbors who look and think and worship just like we do. To build the beloved community, to be the beloved community necessarily means letting the other in, not in the door but into your heart. Without community that lets everyone in, the democratic principle cannot stand.

It's going to be a stretch. It's going to be as hard as affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We need to embrace those who think so very differently and know them as people of worth and dignity. And we are going to have to remain awakened to the very real possibilities this week has brought. How will we do that? How will we continue to bend the arc toward justice?

I think that there will be a new world of people to whom we need to open our doors. I think there will be partnerships in which we must engage if we are to continue to bend the arc. I think it will require of us change and discomfort to open the circle wide enough. But we have something here that people need. We can offer comfort to those that are hurting and we can offer a base for action to ensure that the gains we have made are not erased. We

Many of us in this room come with great privilege. We are not the ones who will suffer the greatest harm if immigrants are ripped away from the lives and families they have built, if access to healthcare is removed from those living on the margins, if environmental protections are stripped away, if violence against young Black men is not checked and the prison system is

That it is not our bodies on the line makes it even more our responsibility to confront what works against our values. We do not all in this room agree on the best approach to a more just and peaceful world, we do not support the same policies. But we all gather by principles that affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person; that affirm that we are caught in a mutual web of interdependence and that injustice for any one single person gives lie to justice for all.

Our historic Universalist buildings shared one Biblical quotation more than any other inscribed in beams above the chancel or painted above entryways. It is from the book of Micah:

And what does Yahweh require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God

No matter what party you belong to, no matter what candidate you voted for our task is the same—to create justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with the ground of our being. This calls us to live our values, to be a voice for the voiceless, to be a haven for the homeless, to confront injustice and hatred and oppression when and where we see it. It requires us to love kindness. That means not demonizing anyone, no matter how profoundly you might disagree. No matter how far apart our ideas on the best course may be, no matter how profoundly our values may differ, still, *our* values are the ones we need to live by—the values that call us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

We will need to ask ourselves how we can best live that out. And to do that we have to be able to see the holy somewhere. And so to our second question: where have you seen the holy?

On Wednesday, I visited the Abraham Lincoln Museum in Springfield. It reminded me how important it is to take a longer view of history, to remember when we are in our own struggles how some of the struggles of the past were overcome, to remember how we have indeed made progress in bending the arc of the universe toward justice. Encountering the objects of history can offer us the comfort of knowing that we stand in a long line of people who have struggled to

bend that arc, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so much as they had hoped. But the struggle is not in vain. It is the struggle, not the outcome that bends the arc. It is people of good intention and loving hearts putting their hands to the task where I have seen the holy.

One of the new things I learned at the Lincoln Museum was that the Emancipation Proclamation was an essentially empty document in that it freed no one. It pertained only to the states that remained with the Union, which were largely non-slaveholding states already. And for those few border states that remained in the Union and where slavery was legal, an exemption was made. So the Emancipation Proclamation did not actually free a single person, and yet its ultimate impact was enormous. The success of our efforts is not always immediate or visible.

The essential hollowness of the Emancipation Proclamation was a new piece of information I learned at the museum. An old friend I encountered there was the phrase from the Gettysburg Address: a government of the people, by the people and for the people. That phrase is woven into the carpet of the Oval Office from where our current President leads. Government of the people, by the people, for the people.

Another of the five quotes included on that rug is one I have alluded to several times this morning, “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” On the rug and popularly that quote is attributed to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just as the phrase about the government of the people is attribute to Lincoln. Did they know when they said them the long lasting impact of those words? The thing is that neither of those quotes is original to King or to Lincoln. They both come from the sermons of Theodore Parker, a nineteenth century Unitarian minister. The success of our efforts is not always immediate or visible. Parker never knew that his words would live on to inspire justice movements through others like Lincoln and King. Or that the first Black President of the United States would include those words among the ones that inform his presidency. The success of our efforts is not always immediate or visible. This is where I see the holy, in the fact that we keep trying anyway.

But mostly where I see the holy is right here in your faces. In the faces of good people who are wondering where our country strayed from simple civility to a political system of vitriol and the inability to hear one another’s point of view. It is in our coming together to support one another that there is hope and inspiration, nurture for the work ahead, solace for those who need solace, a place of gladness for the moments of our gladness.

I know many of you come here today with sore hearts or full of questions about what will happen and what will be asked of us. I share the questions if not the answers, but I know this. The holy is to be found wherever good hearted people gather together for support, to comfort each other in hard times, to encourage each other in the bending of the arc, to remain open to the worth of all people refusing to demonize and committed to the understanding that builds beloved community.

I see the holy in the hands that do the work and in hugs given and received, hugs of encouragement, compassion, celebration, healing and always the deepening of relationship. So perhaps this sermon has not strayed quite as far as expected because engaging our senses is one of the ways we deepen the relationship on which the work of justice depends. We put our hands

to the work together. We sing the song of protest and progress together. And sometimes we just need to hug it out, together. Talking about it won't always get you there.

It is through our senses that we encounter the world and approach the sacred. For those of us who find the holy to be present here, immanent, embodied in humanity, we can see the holy among us. For those of us who see divinity as transcendent, eternal and formless, we can see here the signs that point to that sacredness, in a creation that sustains us and in the love shared between people. Whatever our theology, our senses provide the gateway to approaching what is sacred.

We store the objects of the past in museums where we can encounter them because we must remember. What is tangible, what we can touch and hold, wrap our arms around, feel the texture of anchors us into the stories of the past. More, they can anchor us into our own stories into the present. And that is something we are going to need in the days to come, to awaken to the present, to remain in the present for there is work to be done.

If it is to be well with our spirits we will need such anchors. We will need to be reminded that we have bent the arc toward justice though it is hard sometimes hard to see. The beginning of Parker's words may help us set the context when he says, "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways." May our coming together help us to expand our vision.

Like Sam and Frodo, let us hold on to the knowledge that there is some good in the world and it is worth fighting for. Here may we see the holy and today may it be well with your spirit for you are needed in the work ahead.

Namaste.

Por lo tanto puede ser.