

January 7, 2018, Ring out the False; Ring in the True

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

Truth stood on one side and Ease on the other; it has often been so. – Rev. Theodore Parker

Chalice Lighting

To the New Year ~ W.S. Merwin ~

With what stillness at last
you appear in the valley
your first sunlight reaching down
to touch the tips of a few
high leaves that do not stir
as though they had not noticed
and did not know you at all
then the voice of a dove calls
from far away in itself
to the hush of the morning

so this is the sound of you
here and now whether or not
anyone hears it this is
where we have come with our age
our knowledge such as it is
and our hopes such as they are
invisible before us
untouched and still possible

Reading

“Telling” by Laura Hershey

What you risk telling your story:
You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink
spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.

You will park yourself forever
on the outside, your differentness once
and for all revealed, dangerous.

The names you give to yourself
will become epithets.

Your happiness will be called
bravery, denial.
Your sadness will justify their pity.
Your fear will magnify their fears.
Everything you say will prove something about
their god, or their economic system.

Your feelings, that change day
to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place,
brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do
with you.

Those with power can afford
to tell their story
or not.

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.

Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

Sermon “Ring Out the False; Ring in the True” (c) Sylvia Stocker

With truth an endangered commodity in these times, I bring you a favorite passage from a book on preaching. In *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*, the Rev. Frederick Buechener describes the following scene:

So the sermon hymn comes to a close with a somewhat unsteady amen, and the organist gestures the choir to sit down. Fresh from breakfast with his wife and children and a quick run-through of the Sunday papers, the preacher climbs the steps to the pulpit with his sermon in his hand. He hikes his black robe up at the knee so he will not trip over it on the way up. His mouth is a little dry. He has cut himself shaving. He feels as if he has swallowed an anchor. If it weren't for the honor of the thing, he would just as soon be somewhere else.

In the front pews the old ladies turn up their hearing aids, and a young lady slips her six year old a Lifesaver and a Magic Marker. A college sophomore home for vacation, who is there

because he was dragged there, slumps forward with his chin in his hand. The vice-president of a bank who twice that week has seriously contemplated suicide places his hymnal in the rack. A pregnant girl feels the life stir inside her. A high-school math teacher, who for twenty years has managed to keep his homosexuality a secret for the most part even from himself, creases his order of service down the center with his thumbnail and tucks it under his knee.

[Pontius] Pilate is there... and [the great preacher, orator, and social reformer] Henry Ward Beecher is there. It is a busman's holiday for him. The vestry has urged him to take a week off for a badly needed rest, and he has come to hear somebody else for a change. It is not that he doesn't love his wife, but just that, pushing sixty, he has been caught preposterously off guard by someone who lets him open his heart to her, someone willing in her beauty to hear out the old spellbinder, who as a minister has never had anybody much to minister to him. King Lear is there with a bit of dried egg on his tie and weak kidneys.

The preacher pulls the little cord that turns on the lectern light and deals out his note cards like a riverboat gambler. The stakes have never been higher. Two minutes from now he may have lost his listeners completely to their own thoughts, but at this minute he has them in the palm of his hand. The silence in the shabby church is deafening because everybody is listening to it. Everybody is listening including even himself. Everybody knows the kind of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out of the silence, he will tell them?

Let him tell them the truth. [pp.22 to 23]

That little scene from Frederick Buecher's imagination is the one text that has always stayed with me for years now. The passage describes my experience of preaching. Crafting a worship service takes hours and hours of time, but no single element takes longer than writing the sermon. Even once the sermon is written, it still isn't complete until it is delivered. I bring what I have, the congregation brings what they have, and the sermon actually gets created somewhere in the air between us.

A sermon needs a gathered body. But the gathered body, of course, is precisely what makes the sermon feel like such a gamble. Buechner so aptly describes a gathered body with so many different perspectives, experiences – and, most to the point, needs. The elderly ladies, the young mother, the six year old, the math teacher, Pontius Pilate, Henry Ward Beecher, King Lear, the suicidal bank vice president, the college sophomore – they all need something different. The preacher doesn't know what the unspoken needs are or, even, who will show up hoping to have their needs addressed.

One time, when I was an intern in Brookline, Massachusetts, I preached a sermon called, “Boston Driving: A Buddhist Approach.” When I climbed into the pulpit and gazed out at the congregation, a Burmese Buddhist monk was sitting there. You just never know.

The ending of Buechner's reading has been, for me, the most instructive over the years: “Everybody knows the kind of things he has told them before and not told them, but who knows what this time, out

of the silence, he will tell them? *Let him tell them the truth.*”

What, pray tell, is the truth? For Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, the truth was anchored in the Gospel. That's some guidance, but even the Gospel is interpreted in so many different ways, as the nearly countless branches of Christianity demonstrate.

So what, pray tell, is the truth? For a Unitarian Universalist, with no singular sacred text, the truth may seem more ephemeral, harder to locate and grasp. Some things you can know, because they are measurable. The size of a crowd at an inauguration, for example. Some things we know only partially, because new research is always being conducted and new information revealed. The extent of the deleterious effects of increased carbon in our atmosphere, for example. Or proper nutrition. Remember when coffee was bad for you? Now a certain amount is good for you. New evidence mounts, and the rules keep changing. In such cases, truth is more a process – an increasing understanding, an open question mark, always being answered in increasingly refined ways.

Some truths are experiences and feelings buried deep inside, aching to come out. The #metoo movement, for example. There is great risk but also personal empowerment involved when a woman says, finally, “Me, too.”

Religious faith is another matter. Faith cannot be proven; it is always subject to doubt. Are you a theist? You can't prove God exists. It's a matter of faith. Are you an atheist? You can't prove there is no God. It's a matter of faith. Christians cannot prove Jesus was resurrected from the dead. Mormons can't prove Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon from golden plates that the angel Moroni revealed to him. Jews can't prove Moses parted the Red Sea. Religions are built on stories and myths that cannot be proved. Often they can be interpreted, though, and mined for wisdom and guidance. Sometimes that wrestling with texts can illuminate some of the greatest truths of all.

I believe there is truth to be revealed. I also believe that, just as a preacher must tell the truth, so much a congregation. Our more conservative brothers and sisters understand that, what with the new Museum of the Bible just a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol – where the Bible's meaning is given a singular presentation with the hope of inspiring a Christian nationalist movement.

It's imperative we speak our religious truth. But speaking the truth isn't always easy. This month marks the 450th anniversary of the Edict of Torda, adopted by the first and only Unitarian king in history, King John Sigismund of Hungary. King John was born a Catholic, he converted to Lutheranism, then he was influenced by the great unitarian preacher Francis David. From David's inspiration, King John issued the Edict of Torda, an edict proclaiming religious tolerance in his realm:

in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone ... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching.

In those days, people were killed if their religious convictions didn't conform to those of the king. The Edict of Torda, promulgating – for a short period of time – religious tolerance in King John's little corner of the world was nothing short of revolutionary for the religious freedom it inspired. Today we stand on the shoulders of Francis David and King John. But while we pause to marvel at their contributions to theology and religious freedom, let's remember that King John died an early, suspicious death – from injuries sustained from falling from his horse, and that after several previous assassination attempts. Francis David died in prison, after being arrested for heresy after King John died.

No, speaking the truth is never easy.

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must. (writes Laura Hershey)

Someone, somewhere
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell
her own story,
risking everything.

So, our congregation installs a Black Lives Matter banner on the outside of our building. We display the banner because it is true: Black lives *do* matter. It is also true that our American culture is structured in such a way as to discount black lives, as though they don't matter.

I have heard a lot of positive feedback about the banner from people outside our church. But the feedback hasn't been uniformly positive. As Steve Eagles, Mike Heath, and Glenn Williams installed the banner that November day, a passerby expressed his criticism and consternation. Then on November 18, I received a bitter, angry – and anonymous – email about the banner. On that particular Saturday evening, I was preparing for a high energy Thanksgiving service and a post-service parish meeting. I had to muster a colossal amount of energy to maintain my focus, when my heart was racing and my blood pressure rising. Not long after that, I received an email from my town councilor, asking me to respond to a complaint that had been sent to the Town Council:

Speaking the truth isn't always easy.

“Truth stood on one side and Ease on the other; it has often been so,” said Theodore Parker. Parker was accustomed to being in hot water. . . . for (among other things) his unitarian theology, which rejected the authority of both Bible and Jesus and asserted the miracles described in the Bible could not be factual . . . and for his abolitionist stance and his sheltering of fugitive slaves. The newspapers excoriated Parker. His colleagues shunned him – yet he still spoke his truth. That was his calling.

I believe, and Frederick Buechner backs me up, that speaking the truth should be every minister's calling, even at the risk of being pilloried. More important, it should be every church's calling, even though the storms of criticism may descend. We are called to speak the truth. Because how else does one build a better world? We can't do it by keeping silent. We must bear witness to the world's beauty and its tragedy, its sorrow and its joy, its freedom and liberation and its injustice.

One of my seminary professors told this compelling story: There was a white church, rather set in its rather racist, white supremacist ways. But then they got in a firebrand social justice minister, who was determined to turn things around – to root out the racism, expose the white supremacy, and build a diverse and welcoming congregation. Just imagine the train wreck that must have seemed to be at first!

The church began to falter. A visitor to the church found a bitterly divided, dysfunctional congregation. He left shaking his head, wondering if there was any hope for the congregation and minister. But some years later, the visitor returned – to find the firebrand still in the pulpit, and the pews filled with a lively, and racially mixed congregation.

“How did you do it?” the visitor asked the minister.

“Well,” the minister said, “I preached them down to seven. And then people finally understood. Some of the old people returned, changed. Then word got out about who we really were. That's when new people began to come.”

Can you imagine it? “I preached them down to seven.” That was some strong congregation and some strong minister that stood anchored in their truth. But that is what we are called to do. To speak our truth, even when people don't like what they hear. That's a pretty tall order, especially when truth can be so hard to know and is likely to be received poorly by some. But hear this: If what you, what I, what we have to say is, ultimately, anchored in love, we won't be too far from the mark. If what you, what I, what we have to say is, ultimately, in support of our earth and its creatures, it will be true enough. If what you, what I, what we have to say is, ultimately, meant to heal, not harm, to serve our world and not ourselves, we will survive the slings and arrows. If what you, what I, what we have to say rests on humility, we will be able to make room for new truths as they are revealed.

With compassion, love, mercy, we can tell the truth. We must.

Benediction Words of Jane E. Mauldin

Now may the love of truth guide you,
the warmth of love hold you,
and the spirit of peace bless you,
this day and in the days to come. Amen.