

Order of Service- April 19, 2015

Musical Prelude:

Greeting:

I'm used to addressing congregations in 19th century costume. It seems funny to be standing here without my hoop skirt and bonnet. I'm glad to be standing here just as I am because it means that I am home, but I am a little apprehensive too. Not that I'm not at home in apprehension. I've always been a bundle of nerves. And maybe that's why I decided to make courage the focus of today's message. But not just courage--- fear too and sadness and the idea that we are not asked to overcome the dark, but merely to shine a little within it. And, in that mindset, I invite you to join with me as we sing our first hymn: Number 245 in the green hymnal, "How Can I Keep from Singing?"

1st Hymn: Green p. 245: "How Can I Keep From Singing?"

Reading:

First Reading: Mark 14: 32-38

"They went to a place called Gethsemane and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray. He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved even to death: remain here and keep awake. And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want. He came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Second Reading: *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. Excerpted from Lectures VI and VII, "The Sick Soul"

In short, life and its negation are beaten up inextricably together. But if the life be good, the negation of it must be bad. Yet the two are equally essential facts of existence; and all natural happiness thus seems infected with a contradiction. The breath of the sepulchre surrounds it.

To a mind attentive to this state of things and rightly subject to the joy-destroying chill which such a contemplation engenders, the only relief that healthy-mindedness can give it is by saying, "Stuff and nonsense, get out into the open air!" or "Cheer up, old fellow, you'll be all right ere long, if you will only drop your morbidness!" But in all seriousness, can such bald animal talk as that be treated as a rational answer? To ascribe religious value to a mere happy-go-lucky contentment with one's brief chance at natural good is but the very consecration of forgetfulness and superficiality. Our troubles lie too deep for that cure...

...The normal process of life contains moments as bad as any of those which insane melancholy is filled with, moments in which radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn. The lunatic's visions of horror are all drawn from the material of daily fact. Our civilization is founded in a lonely spasm of helpless agony. If you protest, my friend, wait till you arrive there yourself!

Third Reading: Excerpt from *The Journal of George Fox*

All Friends and brethren everywhere, now is the day of your trial, and now is the time for you to be valiant, and to see that the testimony of the Lord doth not fall. For now is the day of exercise of the gifts, of your patience, of your faith, and now is the time to be armed with patience, and with the light, and with righteousness, and with the helmet of salvation.

For the Lord may try you as he did Job, whom he made rich, whom he made poor, and whom he made rich again; and who still kept his integrity in all conditions.

2nd Hymn: Green p. 292 “When Will You Save the People?”

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer: I borrow the words to today’s prayer from Helen Morgan Brooks, a Quaker poet, educator, home economist, and activist. This is her “Revelation”. It was found in the Log Book at Pendle Hill and published in *Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*. I choose it because it is not only a prayer to the divine beyond us but to the Ineffable, though wounded, divinity within us. It is both recognition of and petition to that of God found even in the lowest and most painful places humanity may dwell.

I too bear record and testify to the things that I saw. Praying all Saints and our Father in Heaven to have mercy on all little people, all homeless ones, all hired hands, all share croppers, all tired washer women, all scrub women, the carriers of the hod, the laborers with pick and shovel, all menials, all who are rejected, all derelicts, all the abandoned.

The worn prostitutes, the whoremongers, the parasitical, the slaves of uncertainty, the nervous, the mentally deficient, the failing, the unwanted, the lonely, the degraded, the fallible, the deluded, the dejected, the injured, the maligned, the sick, the weak.

All Pharisees, all pretentious ones, all sinners and transgressors, and lastly, the Judas Iscariots, the betrayers and the betrayed.

O my people, my people, if I could gather you together as a hen gathereth her brood under her wings and save you from sedition, false doctrine, heresy, schism and contempt of God’s Word and Commandment.

The things we hear with our ears we can refuse to believe but the things we see with our eyes we are bound to believe.

Therefore, those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Those endowed with reason, let them reason, those who know how to pray, let them pray and those who have tears to shed, let them shed them now for my People’s sake.

Amen

3rd Hymn: Blue: pg. 28 “Turn, Turn, Turn”

Pastoral Reflection

“The Heart of Courage”

This message began in a moment of revelation several weeks ago. I was at an event as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and was having a chat with a confident and talent woman who would, without doubt, make the suffragists proud. I mentioned the courage it took Mrs. Stanton to do what she did, and the woman to whom I was speaking disagreed with me. She said something like, “I don’t think it was courage. She just did it!” Now this woman is pretty marvelous and comes from a long line of marvelous women. Movers and shakers. Go-getters. You know the type. And she spoke as a woman made, apparently, of pure unadulterated confidence, of one quite used to making things happen in the world.

Now, I have never had that kind of confidence. If were being romantic, we might call me melancholic. But I’m more likely to bear the labels depressive, anxious, and neurotic. Because of this, I suppose, sometimes I go into little out-of-time thought pockets while people are talking to me. I went to one in that moment. Inside the thought pocket was a vortex of memory—of histories I have learned and taught of injustice and violence, of struggles and sorrows, of marches and protests and hope and faith and loss. So much loss. Would that history was full of victory for the righteous rather than for the mighty, but that, I’m afraid, is not so. In that moment, I realized something that continued to assert itself in my mind for the next several weeks: *courage is not the same as confidence.*

History is full of heroic figures who seem super-human in their accomplishments. How can we ever hope to emulate their confident success in the world? They appear to be as gods among mortals. We love to tell their stories and partake, albeit vicariously, in their glorious adventures. We can skip along the sun-kissed surface of their lives from triumph to triumph. But here’s the thing: rest with them longer and you inevitably sink to depths of humanity below all that shines to find their hidden darkness, their pain, their sacrifices, their doubts, their resentments, their fears. As an historian, I spend time not only with the great stories and speeches but also with the journal entries, the letters, the tell-tale slips in the narrative that betray that even the greatest heroes have broken hearts and feet of clay.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s confidence came from being wealthy and privileged, well-connected, well-traveled, well-educated, and well-loved. Having studied her for years, I can safely say that she was one of the most outrageously confident people who ever lived. She pushed forward when everyone else was holding back. She was robust and cheerful, glorying in her person and her accomplishments in a manner that set her quite apart from most of the women in her generation. But that was never her full story.

When she was eleven years old, her parents’ only surviving son came home from college to die. She recounted that it sent her father into “an agony of suffering” that “half carried him from life.” Her mother’s grief was so profound that she nearly disappeared. Her brother’s death was Elizabeth Cady’s genesis. The end of Eleazar’s story also ended all of her father’s hopes that a son would inherit his legacy. As she told the story, she found her father alone in the room where her brother’s body lay in its coffin. Climbing upon her father’s lap, she pressed her head against his chest to hear his broken heart. He put his arms around his daughter, mechanically and joylessly. “Oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!” She responded, “I will try to be all my brother was!”

In the weeks that followed, she accompanied her father to the cemetery where he stretched himself across the beloved son's grave as if to embrace his child one last time. Elizabeth watched him and made plans. She would master Greek and learn to jump fences with a horse. She would compete with boys in school, and she would best them. Later, she would study law, address the legislature, travel across the country as a lecturer, and become one of America's foremost intellectuals. And yet, her father's response would always be the same. "I wish you were a boy."

I always tell my students that whenever they study an historical life, they should look for the pain. That pain, the kind that can never go away, is the soil out of which joy may grow. "Joy," Paul Tillich wrote in *The Courage to Be*, "is the emotional expression of the courageous Yes to one's own true being."

Stanton's courage came from her brother's death and her father's anguish, from her need to make him see her as a fully capable and worthy human being, not only to celebrate herself as an individual but to give comfort to the man whose approval and love she wanted most in the all the world. Her courage came from a life lived *without* being able to provide that comfort, to convince the man who fathered her, educated her, and loved her that she was worthy of his love and attention, that she was as good as the son he mourned. It drove her forward throughout her entire long life. It held her too in its grasp when she grew weary. "Dear Susan," she wrote in 1855:

"I wish that I were as free as you and I would stump the state in a twinkling. But I am not, and what is more, I passed through a terrible scourging when last at my father's. I cannot tell you how deep the iron entered my soul. I never felt more keenly the degradation of my sex. To think that all in me which my father would have felt a proper pride had I been a man, is deeply mortifying to him because I am a woman.

That thought has stung me to a fierce decision—to speak as soon as I can do myself credit. But the pressure on me just now is too great. Henry sides with my friends, who oppose me in all that is dearest to my heart. They are not willing that I should write even on the woman question. But I will both write and speak. I wish you to consider this letter strictly confidential.

Sometimes, Susan, I struggle in deep waters."

After her father died in 1859, Elizabeth Cady Stanton entered a year of dark depression in which she was haunted by memories of her father's disapproval and her brother's death. When she emerged from it in 1860, she addressed the New York State Legislature with the following words which could easily have been written for her father:

"I stand here before you the rightful representative of woman, claiming a share in the halo of glory that has gathered around her in the ages, and by the wisdom of her past words and works, her peerless heroism and self-sacrifice, I challenge your admiration; and, moreover, claiming, as I do, a share in all her outrages and sufferings, in the cruel injustice, contempt, and ridicule now heaped upon her, in her deep degradation, hopeless wretchedness, by all that is helpless in her present condition, that is false in law and public sentiment, I urge your generous consideration; for as my heart swells with pride to behold woman in the highest walks of literature and art, it grows big enough to take in those who are bleeding in the dust."

It was her heart that was the key. Courage comes from the French word for heart and it is the heart that must be the seat of courage. When her father's heart broke, she became the stout-hearted girl determined to fix it. In her efforts to become all that he missed in his son, she studied the law alongside her father's male students. In the studying of law, her heart raced with indignation at the prejudices against her sex- evidence of the injustice that had followed fathers and daughters throughout history- that girls, no matter how loved, were rarely loved in the fullness of their humanity. Her father bought her houses and gave her money. He praised and protected her. He set her up in a life full of just the right knowledge of how to make hay and move mountains. He adored his bright and pretty daughter, and all of that gave her confidence, but it didn't give her courage. Her courage came from a lifelong sorrow that we can trace back to a broken man, his dead son at rest beside him and his living daughter in his arms. Her courage came from that moment of exquisite pain when even then he chose the boy and not the girl and closed himself off from her promise.

Out of that dark moment, her courage took root whether or not her father could ever see it or acknowledge it. Courage often goes unrecognized in women who lack *arête*, *virtue*, and *andrizomai*— ancient words that indicate the bravery and integrity of manhood.

If her father could not see her, really see her, in all her courage and heart, then maybe her mother could have. Margaret Cady gave birth to eleven children and saw six of them die before adulthood. Her life, wracked with grief, was also a model of courage. Courage is not always translated in grand gestures, but is more often found in the quiet resolve to keep living in the face of overwhelming sadness and fear. Indeed, the Puritans likened women as Christ like not because of their manly integrity, but because of their willingness to take on the fear of childbirth and motherhood.

Despite the sentimental notions of motherhood, it is not an easy path. Whether you hold a new soul for a time within your own body or search for it in the greater world like a treasure, when you find it, your heart grows so large with love that it must, of necessity, be broken. I have been followed by a kind of neurotic fear for my children since I first encountered their spirits in my life.

Sometimes my fear for their sake overtakes me. My heart races and hurts. Sometimes I feel so weak with worry that I think I cannot go on. Here's the truth: I am afraid for them. I am so afraid and so heartsick on some days I don't think I can stand it. And the list of horrors is endless.

Wars, global and personal. Nuclear weapons, machine guns, and biological warfare. Rivers choked, dead lakes, acid rain, pollution, smog, assault, rape, abuse, police brutality, prisons, terrorism, mass murders. I read in the news of the abuses of authority, of those we should be able to trust, of kids in handcuffs, of the humiliations suffered by the poor, of injustices petty and heinous, of corruption, indecency, greed, and cruelties...

This is the world my children inherit.

I have a wonky heart, nothing serious, but it requires occasional check-ups. One day my cardiologist sat with me and told me how she fears for her own child. "The fear never goes away," she told me. And then this woman, this caretaker of hearts, gave me her prescription. "Pray," she said.

But prayer, says my intellect, is problematic. What good is faith when the whole world is on fire? Suffering comes to all of us and to those who deserve it least most of all. I see no evidence that God wants us to be happy. I have not seen that we are called to comfort. None of the historical figures I most admire were called to paths of ease.

Helen Morgan Brooks had something to say about that too:

Tears I've known and pain and sorrow past all trying,

*this way I've come so sharp, so cruel each turn.
My faith I've flown as some small kite aflying,
atop the wind and sometimes far below,
But always through the weariness of trying.
This much I feel and find it ever odd,
my faith in spite of everything
keeps straining up to God.*

“Straining up to God”? What in the world can that mean? Every bit of my formal education rebels against it. It makes no sense at all. Not a bit. Round and round I go, but my thoughts always lead me to the same place. We're in deep trouble, and there is no logical reason to believe we are coming out of this. No one ever escapes this world alive.

In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a sermon called “Shattered Dreams”. In it he speaks of different approaches to a broken world. Bitterness and resentment are easy but they poison the soul. Absolute introversion detaches a person from the world's pain but also from its joy. Fatalism is satisfying for it shifts responsibility onto God or a feckless universe, but it denies us the freedom to play the role we are meant to play in redemption. So he called for a different response to suffering.

“If we are arrested every day, if we are exploited every day, don't ever let anyone pull you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us. We must realize so many people are taught to hate us that they are not responsible for their hate. But we stand in life at midnight. We are always on the threshold of a new dawn.”

I don't know if I have it in me. God, I'm scared and so tired of hurting. I'm so tired of watching the hurt all around me too. So stupid! All of it so cruel and stupid and pointless. So heartless. I wish I could, without hesitation, put my faith in a Christ who redeems the world, but even on the cross he had his doubts. *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

My brain cannot find a way out of this mess no matter how hard I try.

But here is our salvation: The heart can know what the brain cannot understand. You'll forgive me if I turn to a source of wisdom well-loved by the people of my generation. I draw this lesson from the Muppets. It comes from a song they sang on their Christmas album and which comes back to me in times of trouble:

*It's in every one of us to be wise.
Find your heart.
Open up both your eyes.
We can all know everything
Without ever knowing why.
It's in every one of us. By and by.*

You can choose to keep your eyes and your heart closed, to live in a more comfortable delusion and apathy, senseless to the world's exquisite pain, or you can let your heart lead you through pain to

mercy and love and hope and courage. This is the good news. Fear does not stand in the way of courage. Fear is at the heart of courage.

For the opposite of courage is not fear. It is apathy. Apathy is closing our hearts not just to fear but also pain and compassion and love and ultimately to the redemption in which we are the free participants. Courage does not allow that.

Maybe none of this makes sense. When I prepared for this message, I did what I always do. I launched myself into the literature. I sought out Greek and Latin and Hebrew words. I consulted the sermons of Rufus Jones, Reinhold Niebuhr, Rauschenbusch, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and King. I delved into existentialism and civil rights history. I took copious notes on historical figures and scribbled philosophical ideas on scraps of paper. And then I sat down to write and ended with the Muppets and a call to let our hearts lead us where our brains cannot go.

I can study and philosophize for the rest of my life and never understand the mystery. There is fear and injustice on every page of history, and the good guys almost never win. There is no order in the Universe and maybe no justice either. Our joys and sorrows and hopes and fears flow in a chaotic riot in our frail human hearts. But in our darkest hour we burn the brightest. Despite it all, broken and alone, frightened and small, we keep trying. Generation after generation, we keep trying.

I don't know how it all works. I am baffled.

We are all of us injured, flawed, afraid. I would be dishonest if I said I had the faith to speak of God or angels with confidence. Theology is a murky business and way beyond my pay grade. I have no answers. Where does courage come from and what sustains it? I don't know.

That is between you and your heart.

Silent Worship

4th Hymn: Red: pg. 291 "We Shall Overcome"

Closing

Thank yous/Introductions/ Remembrances/ Announcements/ Afterthoughts

Postlude