

“Bless the World”

**Worship Service for the 10th Anniversary of 9/11 and the 50th Anniversary of the Peace Corps
Two Rivers Unitarian Universalist
September 11, 2011**

Reading – Choose to Bless the World by Rebecca Parker

Your gifts
Whatever you discover them to be
Can be used to bless or curse the world.
The mind’s power,
The strength of the hands,
The reach of the heart,
The gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting.
Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,
Bind up wounds,
Welcome the stranger,
Praise what is sacred,
Do the work of justice
Or offer love.
Any of these can draw down the prison door
Hoard bread,
Abandon the poor,
Obscure what is holy,
Comply with injustice
Or withhold love.

You must answer this question:
What will you do with your gifts?
Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will
a moving forward into the world
with the intention to do good.
It is an act of recognition,
A confession of surprise,
A grateful acknowledgement
That in the midst of a broken world
Unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.
There is an embrace of kindness,
That encompasses all life,
Even yours.
And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil
There moves
A holy disturbance
A benevolent rage,

A revolutionary love
Protesting, urging, insisting
That which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
As a gesture of thanks
For this beauty
And this rage.

The choice to bless the world
Can take you into solitude
To search for the sources
Of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing and liberation
More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
Its chorus of life
Welcoming you.
None of us alone can save the world
Together - that is another possibility,
Waiting.

Sermon – Bless the World – by Gretchen Haley

For a few moments, we were fragile, and we knew it.

For a few days in September, we weren't powerful or invincible like we so often tell ourselves we are.

We were vulnerable, and small, and scared, just like everyone else. We were stolen-life-by-stolen life, missing-person-by-missing-person, vulnerable.

There in the rubble of fallen towers and hijacked planes, we were living out the story I shared last Sunday, about the boy and the map – but it went like this: *the person falls apart, and so does the world*. For every life that came to an end that day, in the buildings, in the planes, the whole world seemed to crack open just a little more. Trauma was everywhere, as people took on the story of New York and Pennsylvania and Washington DC as their own. We were broken open, as individuals, as a nation, and our hearts came pouring out without us even having time to think about it – which is usually the way it happens anyway.

My usually quiet and busy office, so efficient in its routines, so isolated in our offices and cubicles, on that day, we were huddled around televisions and radios, shaking our heads in

disbelief, crying onto each other - even the accountants. No work was done, and that was fine, we didn't even ask to be sure, we just knew. We spoke slowly to each other, and softly. We were sent home early, and people who usually took public transportation were offered rides, and accepted.

How long did it last, those feelings of wide-open vulnerability, the feelings of trembling rather than raging fear, of standing still in confusion and chaos? I don't remember now. It's a blur, that time. Those days, or weeks or maybe even months, spent in the wilderness.

Ten years ago today, everyone I know or could imagine knowing walked into the wilderness. Or rather, we were thrust there by a few people whose values seemed so deeply different our political leaders quickly named them as evil and swore justice – which seemed suspiciously synonymous with retribution, retaliation.

One minute we lived in one kind of the world, and the next, we were in chaos.

And in that chaos, so often fruitful ground for that deep change we call transformation, we started to imagine a new creation, imagine ourselves and the world, reborn.

We began by grieving. Slow and mournful grieving, we cared for each other, and listened to each other with patience and tenderness. We held in our collective hearts, the pain of all we had lost, not just the people, but also that sense of security and surety we had taken so much for granted before that day. We cried, and we raged together.

And then, as we moved through our grief, we began to wonder why, what would bring people to such anger and violence, such confident hatred against the nameless thousands of victims on a far-away shore. And in these reflections, we felt connected to places of long-term famine, of generational war, of natural disaster – connected to those people who had been through these things, who lived in these tenuous and trying places for all of their lives. Their stories were ours, and we were all one people, on this fragile planet. And in this feeling of global communion, we thought about how we should respond, who we really wanted to be in the world and how we could become *that*. We thought about the world's needs, and all our resources, and our courageous love, and we felt called to serve.

It took time, and we were often unsure of ourselves, and scared, and uncomfortable, but eventually, in this place of wilderness and unknown, we started to wonder if in this new humility, we might begin a new conversation, a new role for the United States – one of cooperation, and collaboration, one where the whole world was teacher and learner, all at once, where we realized we serve to be transformed just as much as we hope to transform, where we open ourselves up to receive service, and love, and make vulnerability not just the thing that happens in crisis, but a value we lift up as a path towards wholeness, and inner strength, and deeper love.

We realized that no one hates someone whose story they know, and so we reached out to build bridges of understanding – inviting in the stories of Muslims, of Afghanis, of Iraqis. That is to say, the stories of mothers who cared for their children, of brothers who teased each other and loved each other in the best kind of brotherly ways, the stories of teachers, and poets, and scientists, and laborers, of entrepreneurs and clergy, of elders and youth, the stories of people, linked across time and space by some immaterial unity, that spirit of life.

And we listened, and we learned, and our hearts opened more and more, and we were changed. Out of this vast wilderness, this impossible tragedy, we grew a new world, a world of forgiveness, of grace, of kindness, and love.

I can tell by the looks on your faces. You all have decided by now that I am telling you a fiction, right? But, I'm not.

I mean, I know it's not the story that got all the coverage, or the story that a lot of people wanted told and lived about how we responded to that transformational moment in our collective lives, but that doesn't mean it's not true.

Sure, many of our official leaders at the time didn't live out this kind of story, but lots of other leaders did. In religious communities, in activist groups, in friendship circles, within families – the response was - and still is - just as I described.

It happens everywhere, all the time, it's happening right now – it'll happen after the service today. People respond to tragedy and violence, to the worst of things being done to them, or to their fellow humans, with deep resilience and creativity, with profound humility and exceptional forgiveness, with grace.

It's just that most stories like this, they don't happen in one collective burst, they don't really fit the relentless appetite of the 24-hour news cycle. They are slow stories, scattered stories, small stories. They happen in fits, and starts. They aren't undertaken by saints, but carried out by real human beings offering the best they can of themselves in small and big ways, everyday. In neighborhoods, in schools, in community centers, at bus stops, at grocery stores. People are forgiving, and kind, and generous – even when they've been treated rudely or when there's absolutely nothing in it for them. I know, it doesn't make sense to all you Darwinists out there, but it's true.

Perhaps you heard the story of one of our UU congregations, in Knoxville, Tennessee, whose worship service was interrupted one Sunday morning in 2008. About 25 children were performing to a group of 200 adults their much-rehearsed rendition of "The Sun'll Come Out Tomorrow," when a man opened fire on the gathering. Later, we found out he targeted the church for its liberal values – especially its open support of gay and lesbian people, but also for the sanctuary it offered to political refugees, and its service to the homeless. Eight people were shot that morning, two of them died.

Anger and rage and fostering further division. These would be reasonable responses to this kind of impossible violence. Who wouldn't want to differentiate themselves from the violent acts of a man driven to instill fear in children in their church, a man driven to act with hatred in response to a church's open-hearted love? Or fear, we might expect *fear* to lead this church to slowing its social justice work, becoming less visible in the world for their welcome.

And yet, within a week of the shooting, the church did two things – quite the opposite of these possible outcomes. First, they rededicated their sanctuary and immediately restated their religious mission: "to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbor, to work for justice, to nurture the spirits of all who seek a liberal religious home, and to help heal this wounded world." And

second, they helped the UUA take an ad out in the *New York Times* where they restated their – and our – commitment to GLBT rights, anti-racism, and other key liberal values.¹

In the face of violence and hatred, they responded with courageous love.

It happens all the time. We face brutality, and fear, and hate, and in response, we choose to bless the world with acts of courageous love.

Maybe we don't see it, because there's no end point to the need, no perfect moment when the world does not cry out for our forgiveness, our understanding, our patience, our grace. So it can feel like our good service and our good love has done no good, made no difference, but it's not true.

It's just that, human history doesn't work like that, like cause and effect, like one specific action leading to one specific change – at least not very often. Like Rebecca Solnit says: "History is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change of weather."²

We so often tell the world's story, the human story, as a story of inevitable cruelty. When we talk about 9/11 we talk about the missed opportunity, the wars we waged, the equating of feeling "safe to go shopping" with feeling safe to live. We so often tell our stories like we shouldn't act – because the way these stories go, there's no way anything we do could make a difference in this sad and difficult world. We'd have to be President Obama himself to bring the world to peace. And even his power seems insufficient right now. Maybe, Bill Gates...We'd need to be Bill Gates if we want to make any inroads in the way people connect to each other.

But then, we hear stories like Clare's and John's. And we think, maybe the world doesn't change by way of one single perfect person, acting somewhere out there, in some perfect future moment. But instead, the world changes through a series of moments, a series of encounters, that are happening everywhere, right now. Stories like theirs, and stories like so many of us bring with us today, these stories remind us, a different world it's emerging, already. It's making its way like that crab scuttling sideways, like that drip of soft water wearing away stone. And this world that is emerging is based on mutual understanding, mutual service, mutual transformation. A world of peace made possible through human relationships, through giving of ourselves.

This world of generosity and love and kindness – where people give of themselves freely – it's already here. The Peace Corps is just one example.

We just have to have eyes to see it, to see this story of our beauty, and then step into it, partner with it, and do what we can to keep this world moving towards that great dream of beloved community, a world of peace and justice for all.

¹ The quote is taken from the ad in the *New York Times*, which can be found here: <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/117829.shtml>.

² From Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*.

So, in just a little bit, not too long now, you're going to leave this gathering. And when you do, I know there will be all kinds of forces conspiring to tell you how it's hopeless to give of yourself, worthless to send that letter or make that call, that there is no stopping the march of war, the divisions between people, the hatred and fear fueling violence of all kinds. That it's not enough, we're not enough, that the power lies elsewhere and the ending to human history has already been written. And love does not win. There is plenty of real evidence to construct such a theory. Plenty of real reasons to consider defeat.

And yet there is another story, another truth, embodied right here in this gathering. The faces we see here, filled with such love and hope, the memories we all bring into this space of opening our hearts and offering each other, forgiveness, the hours of service we've put in to help bend this world towards justice, the care we've shown each other as we create community and connection, this great vision we have for the world, standing together on the side of love. All of these things, embodied here in this room, they count too. Our stories count too. And in this story we are claiming as our own, we can say, that world John Lennon imagined, it's already happening. In small and big ways, all over this world, and right here among us, kindness and understanding are creating the world of peace. Our lives are the evidence, this room, it's the evidence. This story just isn't told as often. So it's up to us to tell it, to bear witness and offer testimony, to live into this story as the *real* story of our world. To participate in this story, to choose to see ourselves as worthy partners in this building of a new world. We create the world in our telling, and in our living out, partnering with one another in this great calling, giving of ourselves, choosing to bless the world.

May it be so, and amen.