

## A Theology for Hot Mess Times©

A Sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz  
For the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis  
Sunday, June 9, 2019

We've reached the point in the church year where many of us are turning our hearts and minds to vacation and some rest and relaxation – and heaven knows, we all need a break. September 2018 - June 2019 has been a heck of a year, and we're only half way through it! As I looked back at the events that have happened in less than a year – doesn't it seem like every month a new disaster of epic proportions? Think about it – just a couple of months ago, snow storms that were so severe they paralyzed the Pacific Northwest for weeks; temperatures so dramatically cold that even UU churches in Minnesota and Wisconsin cancelled services; tornados ripping through communities taking with it homes and lives in its terrible fury; floods overwhelming towns - people being trapped in their cars and watching all their possession float away down what was Main Street; fires in the West which turned Paradise into a Hell and Hard Times. We haven't even entered into hurricane season yet. With each disaster, there are thousands of people whose lives have been turned completely upside down. But it's not just the natural disasters I've been thinking about recently. A while back I found this photo which perfectly describes what life has felt like recently. Remember this picture that went viral sometime ago? He's probably got his earbuds on, listening to music to block out the sound of the lawnmower, taking care of his little plot of land, oblivious to the great storm that is headed his way.

It's a perfect metaphor for this morning's sermon. I have to tell you that the inspiration for this sermon goes to Rev. Dr. Jacque Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, a liberal Christian church in Manhattan's East Village, who's work in innovative worship and creating a multicultural congregation continues to inspire Unitarian Universalists all over the country. She was the keynote speaker at the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Meadville School of Theology in Chicago. Although not a Unitarian Universalist herself, she affirmed that our faith must get even better at articulating our theology – that is – what it

is we believe and what we stand for. She said “folks, things are a hot mess right now and ya'll better step up to the plate.”

Is it true? Are things really that bad? Just as an exercise in truth-telling, I started cataloguing some of the things that have happened in the past 2 ½ years and wondered if my sense of concern and yes - outrage was warranted. Are we really, as Dr. Lewis said, in these hot mess times?

Sure feels like a hot mess to me when we are told that the environment is fine, that climate change is likely a hoax created by China - that there is no connection between rising sea levels, fierce winters, blazing hot summers, tornadoes, hurricanes, floods, fires – these are all natural disasters that naturally seem to wreak more and more damage with each passing year? Maybe it's always been this bad, as some would tell us, but it's just publicized more.

Still, it sure feels like a hot mess when, thanks to human pressures, one million species may be pushed to extinction in the next few years – few years – with serious consequences for human beings as well as the rest of life on Earth? With deforestation, overfishing, bush meat hunting and poaching, climate change, pollution, and invasive alien species endangering those million species with extinction?

And doesn't it seem that these are hot mess times when the current Administration is proposing a rule that would roll back nondiscrimination protections for transgender people under the Affordable Care Act? When we hear that the Department of Defense will no longer cover transgender-related healthcare for service members – persons willing to fight and die for this country's freedoms? When acts of violence against GLBTQAI people are increasing?

And doesn't it feel like a hot mess when a disease, believe to be eradicated in the United States almost twenty years ago, is making a comeback and

children and entire communities are being ravaged by measles because of skepticism and suspicion of the scientific community?

And doesn't it feel like a hot mess when 77% of Americans want abortion to be safe, legal and rare but four states are now leading a charge to pass some of the most restrictive abortion legislation in decades, thereby ensuring not that abortions will stop, but that women will die. And that now, I am wondering how I can support women to have an abortion because I believe that *Roe V. Wade* may be overturned?

And doesn't it feel like a hot mess that there is so much emphasis on heartbeats inside a woman's womb, but when the child is born and grows up to know nothing but violence and that family seeks asylum from death squads, that same child can die in a detainment camp while in custody of ICE but there seems to be little concern for that child's heartbeat?

And isn't it a hot mess when a young black teenager could be driving home from a party and forget to use his turn signal, get stopped by the police and not know if he would make it home safe and sound? And what about the tacit pardon given to those white supremacists who showed up in Charlottesville because there were some very bad people on both sides – while ignoring the fact that what white supremacists stand for is the domination of white people and white culture to the exclusion of anyone else?

What about simply showing up for work or school could mean a confrontation with a disgruntled employee, someone with a grudge or even someone with no known motive – but who decides to bring a gun that was easily and legally purchased? And what about the fact that no one in Congress is able to pass legislation to restrict the purchase of weapons of mass destruction? What about the fact that in 2019 alone there have been 149 people killed; 585 wounded in mass shootings all over the country?

And what about the ways that the dignity of the most powerful office in the land is degraded with pretty much every statement, text or tweet? Whether it's calling the Duchess of Sussex nasty or the Mayor of London a stone cold loser, or that some African nations and Haiti as s-hold countries,

or the pettiness, the multiple charges of sexual misconduct or the lying or the cover up or twitter attacks or criticizing, berating, insulting almost every global leader except for dictators and thugs who kill their own people.

Man! It's a hot mess indeed! So, when Jacquie Lewis preached to the brand-new, almost graduated ministers to be about these times – I thought to myself, well, that's a heck of a graduation message. Usually graduation speeches are all about change and hope but Lewis, well, like a prophet from ancient Israel, she just laid it out. She said what I've been thinking – and fearing – and wondering if humans are living in the end times. Every day brings a new outrage and with it, an accompanying fear. The fear is that the earth I love will perish if we don't clean up our act; and that people I love might die in random violence; and that the dystopian novels and movies that were for entertainment turn out to be prophetically true. Are these hot mess times really the beginning of the apocalypse?

Then I remember a story I heard, and one that was retold in MacDonald Ladd's book. It's the day after the results of the 2016 election and the then-President Obama gathers his staff to attend an impromptu summit in the Oval Office. There are tears, and fears and questions of what just happened. "This is not the apocalypse" the President told them. "I don't believe in the apocalyptic – until the apocalypse comes. History does not move in straight lines; sometimes it goes sideways, sometimes it goes backward...I think nothing is the end of the world until the end of the world."

And then, closer to home, I can hear Rev. John shaking his head saying "man, you are so pessimistic. It's not that bad." And I want to say "not yet." But then he reminds me – usually very gently and very carefully - that for people of color, they've seen and experienced worse. A lot worse. You don't have to go back very far in history – maybe like yesterday for example, to see that the systems of oppression, violence, and virulent racism – they've always underscored our country. It's just that now a lot of liberals – a lot of white liberals are feeling the heat and the harm. Antiracist educator and lecturer Tim Wise put it this way. He says

“When you’ve had the luxury of presuming yourself to be the norm....any change in the demographic and cultural realities of your society will strike you as an outsized attack on you status... When you’re used to 90% or more of the pie, having to settle for only 75 or 70 ? Oh my God it’s like the end of the world.”

The things that I’m seeing as a middle-income, middle-aged white lady in Annapolis, Maryland – well – I’m just feeling the pain of a history and a legacy of exploitation and abuse and it’s been revealed to me in ways that were very evident to people of color and marginalized people from the day they were born. Worries about not having clean water? Try living in Flint, Michigan, where the residents STILL do not have safe drinking water. Worried about the rise of sea levels? Try living in New Orleans or the Gulf Coast after the levees broke and you got no place to go and no money to get there anyway. It’s like that story from this morning’s reading – they were driving down the road, believing that the flood was occurring somewhere else. It wasn’t until they were in the middle of it that they realized a certain awful truth: as Parker wrote: “we had been...insulated from the present...a present by which both our car and our misjudgments about the country we had been travelling through.” So, the world’s a hot mess! Maybe I should leave the pulpit now and go buy myself a plot of land that hasn’t been touched by climate change and wait for the apocalypse.

No, that’s not the rationale thing to do – and we Unitarian Universalists are first and foremost a rational people. In thinking about this week’s sermon, I suggested that you pick up Nancy MacDonald Ladd’s book entitled: *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*. It’s probably the most important critique of liberal optimism that has come out so far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And Dr. Ladd is just down the road at River Road UU Church in Bethesda!

She calls us out while loving us in. By that I mean, she calls out liberal religion in general, and UU’s, tendency to believe that we can save pretty much fix everything ourselves if we just have a boatload of knowledge and can throw enough of our time and energy (not necessarily our money at an issue. These messes that I described earlier have

been millennia in the making and certainly one sermon and a recycling bin does not make for a lasting solution. She doesn’t fault us for wanting to fix the hot mess, but rather offers tools, corrective measures, and spiritual advice for how we can live creatively in these hot mess times.

So, in short I can say this: I’m not optimistic about the future, but I am hopeful. I am hopeful because of this *thing* that I see that also resides in the human spirit...it’s this *thing* found in the ancient passage which you heard from the book of Acts describes as a gale force wind that moves through these disparate people - from all walks of life and from different lands – people who don’t know each other and who don’t speak the same language – all suddenly understanding one another. This story depicts the moment when people get together in small groups and hear each other’s stories and lo and behold, a deeper understanding emerges. It’s what our community organizing partner is doing with the one-on-one’s’ it’s the reason they are encouraging our entire church to participate in a monthly mixer so that that THING which resides in the human heart –sometimes called the soul, can give voice to its deepest longing. Such conversations require us to get real with one another – to be vulnerable – and to be humble. We are neither God nor the center of the universe. And what emerges from such conversations is an acknowledgement of pain that must be heard and felt in order to be transformed and to change the world.

MacDonald Ladd tells a story that powerfully illustrates this point. As a leader in the community organizing group known as Industrial Areas Foundation, she tells about a movement called Turnabout Tuesday in Baltimore. This is a program that helps prepare previously incarcerated and unemployed citizens to reenter the workforce and step into transformational leadership in their communities. At one such gathering a woman named Penny, volunteered to open the gathering of ex felons, pastors, parole officers and community leaders with these words. She said: Your misery is our ministry, your pain is your purpose, your suffering is your service, your mess becomes your message, your test become your testimony. God allows us to hurt to heal others, because you cannot heal what you cannot feel. So don’t let the aim of

your past punish your present and paralyze your progress and purpose.” Preach it sister Penny!

These hot mess times require us to get messy. And here’s the second point that religious liberals need to grapple with – We are not going to get this right. We are not going to have a perfect strategy. And nothing we do will be perfect. Now I don’t about you, but I like to win and I like things just so. It’s part of white culture and its part of being an engineer’s daughter – who crawled out from the trenches of World War II and into a world he believed could be made better by engineering. And it did. But the hot mess that we’re in right now, calls for a different set of skills from us humans. It’s no longer enough to have big, deep intellectual thoughts as Unitarian Universalists have loved to have in the past. It’s not enough to even participate in marches, protests as important as those public witnesses can be. What’s more important is a willingness to adopt a stance of humility – of not knowing, but willing to engage in the work anyway. It’s the ability to listen to another’s story, particularly the voices of people of color and those from marginalized communities, instead of insisting on a story that must have a happy ending. It’s a different kind of hope, one that exists alongside the people’s “...willingness to engage the world without looking away or slipping into a posture of self-defense.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s a third practice that isn’t really in Ladd’s book, but I think it’s important. This month the theme is beauty. It’s a good theme, but it’s not one that we’ve taken up in much depth or probably will. The thing that scares me most about movies that depict a dystopian future is the lack of beauty. Think of *Blade Runner* for example, set in a grey city with endless rain; or any of the *Mad Max* movies, set in a stark, treeless, desert or, if you’ve read any of Octavia Butler *Earthseed* Trilogy, they are set in a future that is ravaged by a civilization gone amok. It’s not only the terrors of destructive weather patterns, drought which causes food shortages, water available only for the wealthy, violence on every street corner, but the loss of beauty as a value to preserve and to save. Beauty, like the dogwood tree that bloomed just two weeks

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ago outside this sanctuary; beauty, in the Chesapeake as I sailed on a sunset cruise as the water lapped gently against the schooner--beauty of our own Muir woods that exist solely for their own sake. Beauty found in the arts of music and poetry and sculpture and dance; beauty which can nourish us to live in these hot mess times and find the strength to do what needs to be done next, however imperfectly we do it. Beauty which exists in every human heart somewhere – sometimes more explicit than others, but readily available and accessible to each one of us.

So I want you to try something now – something that may make you uncomfortable because maybe you’re introverted – like me – or dislike being asked to do something outside your comfort zone – but I want you to turn to at least three people in this sanctuary and say to them “I see something beautiful in you.” Do more if you can. Look into their eyes. Feel it. Mean it. Do it now.

I don’t know if this happened to you, but being “forced” to do this, really made me see the beauty in another person’s eyes; and softened my shyness or my insecurity or discomfort and helped me to see beauty everywhere I rested my eyes. Everywhere. So beauty alone won’t save us, but it will help us develop the stamina, the will, the commitment to live in and among the hot mess times we’re in. And that gives me, not optimism about the future, but hope.

I want to conclude with thoughts by my colleague, when she writes “Hope...is not just another version of optimism. Optimism tells a preordained narrative. It is an assertion that the scales have already been tipped towards triumph. Optimism is always busy absolving somebody. Hope is different. Like faith, hope is the exact opposite of certainty...It is the possibility, though not the inevitability, of a better way. “ May we find that better way – by cultivating the skills of relationship, by adopting a stance of not knowing and a deeper humility that comes with not knowing – and by seeing beauty, even in the midst of these hot mess times.

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<sup>1</sup> Pg. 120

<sup>2</sup> McDonald Ladd. *Beyond the Good News*. Pg. 142

