

Homily

Sunday, April 5, 2020

UU Church of Annapolis, On-line Worship

When I was a kid – this week was really special for me. Not because of any particular religious holidays but because of a film that I knew was going to be shown sometime this week, as it had been every year since I was born. The film – was the Wizard of Oz. I loved that movie. I watched it over and over again – and found great comfort in it – but there were scary parts too. Those flying monkeys for example, freaked me out. But the scariest scenes, was when the Wicked Witch of the West wrote “Surrender Dorothy” in the sky with her broomstick trailing black smoke.

It came at a low point in Dorothy’s journey – and a time hope seemed lost. And so, as I began to think about this month’s worship theme of “Surrender” I couldn’t help but recall that moment, when Dorothy was challenged to give up all hope – and those ruby red slippers – to the wicked witch of the west, because those slippers had great power.

.When your worship team chose the theme “Surrender” from the Sacred Words packet, produced by the Soul Matters team, we were intellectually interested in the theme. I thought was going to be provocative, because as a rule, UU’s don’t typically like to “surrender” anything. We don’t like to surrender our insistence on bringing our rational minds to religion. We don’t surrender our faith to easy bromides about what religion is or isn’t. In keeping with that thread - just four weeks ago, I had announced the title for today’s sermon was going to be “Surrender to Reality” I had long been dismayed by the constant output of lies, half-truths and alternative facts that has become the norm. I wanted to go off on an intellectual rift on what is reality – how do we know what’s true – what’s real – and what does it mean to surrender our fantasies, desires, and perspective to what is “really real?” I was jazzed about this topic – until COVID-19 hit. I realized the sermon – like everything else in our lives had to change – because most of us in the country right now – are already surrendering to reality.

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I wake up and wonder if all this is really real. Are we really now being told to wear masks when we go out? Yes. Is there really no toilet paper on the shelves? True. Are nurses and doctors and health care professionals entertaining the reality of having to give life-saving ventilators to some and not to others? Yes. It’s all real – and I must surrender my denial to the reality of the times we are living in. And there are some things we have had to surrender or give up in order to preserve the common good; our freedom to go about the world in ways that might jeopardize our own, or other’s health; surrender to a new reality of on-line communications and a new way of being emotionally close while physically distant.

This service is poised on the edge of two great religious celebrations; what’s called Holy Week in Christian tradition; and Passover in Judaism. Two different kind of surrender experiences;

SLIDE Jesus surrendering his own will and agency for a larger cause; not to overthrow empire, but to inscribe God’s love on the human heart;

SLIDE Jews surrendering to the great and powerful Promises of Yahweh; their God; who delivered them from generational trauma of slavery to freedom;

SLIDE – wall hanging. So this week and next we’ll be exploring the things which we can and must surrender to – Rev. John will explore what it means to surrender to hope on Easter Sunday and the following Sunday, I’ll look at what does it mean to surrender to the earth during this time of global crisis.

As I thought about the word “surrender” I also considered the opposite of surrender, which is struggle. Sometimes we struggle – and sometimes we just surrender. It’s an odd truth that when one is being pulled out to sea by a strong current, the best advice is NOT to struggle, not to swim against the current – but parallel to it. It’s counter intuitive

because as you are pulled farther away from where you entered the water, you want to panic and expend all your energies getting back to where you were. Instead, try to relax and remember, as my colleague Rev. Vanessa Southern reminds us “the world won’t stop spinning on her axis if you don’t rise to all occasions today. Love won’t cease to flow in your direction, your heart won’t stop beating, rest, if you must, like the swimmer lying other back who floats. Listen now, to this poem by Philip Booth, read by Intern Minister Leika Lewis Cornwell “ First Lesson.”

SLIDE Reflection of beautiful lake

Believe me, writes the poet, “when you tire on the long thrash to your island, lie up, and survive.” Some of us are thrashing right now – some of us are in the medical professions whose lives are either directly impacted by the Corona Virus – or soon will be. I hold in my daily prayer practice all those who are literally on the front lines of this battle; often operating at long hours with insufficient equipment.

Some of us may be working harder than ever – spending 10-12 hours a day at our computers, trying to keep up, trying to keep our businesses afloat, or our children educated, or our finances intact. Some of us may be surprised to find our lives have slowed down – and maybe even feel guilty about that – that we should be out there “doing something” when so many people are suffering. All of us are forced to surrender something during this time of a global pandemic – security about our financial future, the daily rhythms which ground us; our routines – all of those things which what we thought of as normal life. Some of us will be facing serious financial instability; hopefully none of us – or no one we know will surrender their health or God forbid – their very lives to this virus – but we also know that some will.

Everything is changing so quickly – so constantly – do we wear masks? No – now yes. Is it okay to go out? Yes – but better to stay home. So much we have to let go of. Yet, I’ve been thinking about what do I NOT let go of – what must I NOT surrender – or give in or give up at this time of, and here’s the word of the day “unprecedented” global disaster? The first thing we are not going to

surrender is to this virus. We are going to defeat it – just as science defeated polio and small pox – with science and the best brains we have.

We can’t – we must not surrender those things which make us human; decency, kindness, compassion and empathy. I recently heard an interview of a man who contracted the virus and was put on a ventilator for two weeks. He said he couldn’t remember much of it – it was like a two week dream state. But what he does remember is how he was treated by the medical staff. He remembers they were kind beyond words; they were thoughtful and caring and sensitive – all while, I imagine, they are stressed and worried about their own safety and the safety of their families. We cannot surrender our compassion for one another.

There are other things we can’t surrender – we must not surrender our capacity for wonder in times of pandemic. One of the worst things about dystopian films is that not only do human beings lack basic essentials – they lack imagination, wonder, hope and beauty. We cannot surrender those things to fear. There is much to be fearful of – for sure. The safety of our own health and our loved ones; the government’s ability to lead clearly and decisively; the fear that this may push an already delicate economy to the brink of disaster. But fear turns us into instinctual creatures. Fear triggers another response – an animal-like response to survival. We can’t surrender our humanity – the things that separate us from animals whose primary motivation for living is survival; it is our humanity which will sacrifice our very lives for another.

And finally, we cannot surrender our capacity to appreciate beauty. Last week Leika mentioned some stories of the ways in which humans are continuing to find beauty and art and poetry and music as a balm to the grief that surrounds us. People singing to each other across balconies; people making videos that make us laugh and cry and find joy. People getting creative and discovering depths they didn’t know they had.

That’s why your ministers and worship team created the Surrender Project – inviting you to take pictures or videos of the things that have inspired you – or comforted you. Because many of us are practicing physical distancing from one another, we are staying home – and finding beauty

and freshness in those things around us – those things we might take for granted otherwise. The world is full of beautiful things – especially during this season when the earth awakens itself again and provides us with an abundance of color and light; sound and smells. So, join me now, as Ron Giddings plays some accompanying music, in viewing the pictures that you sent to me this week – things that inspired in you a sense of beauty, awe and wonder.