



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Wisdom of Our Inherent Worth

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Welcome friends to our virtual community. I think of the very real community of people, young and old, of many gender identities, of different ethnicities and passions now all across our country who are tuning in today. So much changes from day to day much less week to week, that I hazard a sermon that will adequately speak to our collective and individual lives. As my colleague Rev. Erika Hewitt wrote recently:

“Leaders are dealing with the decisions each day given only the slightest assurance they are making the best decision.

“Should we ask people to stay home? Should we receive soul nourishment but risk physical exposure? Should our family take this once-in-a-lifetime trip? Every Should we?” is haunted by the Ghost of What We'll Wish We Had Known.

“Ethical Culture Leader Lois Kellerman has said that the smallest number in ethics is two. I believe, moreover, that the most ethically-driven decisions prioritize the most vulnerable members of any given community. Moral decision-making hinges not on the “I” and not even on the interconnected web of “we,” but on the most fragile strands in the web.

“As our leaders make tough decisions—terrible by nature, because there are no “good” decisions in the chaotic fear of what looms—our communities are being tested for their tolerance for uncertainty, as well as how much grace they choose to extend towards the leaders making those high-stakes but values-driven decisions.

“Our communities—bless them, hold them, keep them—are also beginning to absorb the lonely, painful cost of “social distancing.” If two is the smallest number in ethics, it's also the smallest seed of certainty; the way not to get lost. Because the ultimate test, when the fear and grief finally give way to clarity, will be knowing ourselves by how well we cared for one another.” (Published in Braver/Wiser, UUA <https://www.uua.org/braverwiser/smallest-biggest-number>)

The ultimate measure of who we are as people of faith will be in how well we can hold one another in the midst of a world that keeps us apart; some of us in families, some of us in pairs, some of us alone. Holding the sacred worth of each of us is not easy, especially when we feel the fear that we might run out of food, fuel, health, faith.... One of the greatest tragedies in the midst of this pandemic is the loneliness of suffering alone in hospital and critical care units. People are dying bereft of the comfort of their loved ones. This is truly a cruel disease.

So how do we hold up each other's worth in the midst of a plague that does all it can to separate us? How do we lean into the wisdom of our principle that every person has worth and dignity? Suddenly this is not some sort of academic exercise of comfortable contemplation is it? No, this is as real as it gets.

This week I have been on the phone with many of you. And what I hear is the answer to our fears. I hear the usual and expected fear of living in the midst of this slow motion hurricane, but I also hear your thankfulness for being alive and what I can only call a humility in being a part of a community such as ours, or any of our communities, that actually cares what happens to us. To say we are not alone, to feel the love of one another, to connect by phone or video, is to affirm our worth and, more importantly the worth of others.

I don't hear a lot of blame or anger. I don't hear the scapegoating one might expect from having all of our lives turned inside out. What I hear is gratefulness to be alive and to be connecting to others. What I hear is the very affirmation of our humanity, as I quoted from Gabriel Garcia Marques in his classic Love in the Time of Cholera: "There is always something left to love." There is always something left to love. We must look for that love, but it is there. In times such as these, we should look for love wherever we can. That love, whether it is checking in on neighbors, donating blood, or bringing meals to those of us who are in quarantine, is greater than any of our more cruel impulses.

Our Universalist faith proclaims that God is Love and that all of us, with no exception, are worthy of that love. We are more together, even alone in body, than we have ever been. Go ahead. Look for it.

What I do believe is that we can only know this worthiness through our own humility. The wisdom of our time is seeing that we are worthy and flawed at the same time. Flawed in our response to this crisis, flawed in our failure to believe the science, flawed in a misplaced faith in leaders who can't lead, flawed in our mad rush for food, toilet paper and sanitizer. Flawed in giving into the fear that we must circle the wagons, and

prepare for the end times. Yes, I am flawed, you are flawed and when we see that and own those flaws we are able to then uphold our humanity and worth.

It's only because I have given in to the fear that I could die from this, that I am able to reach out to you and hear your own heart-breaking fear. And when we hear one another, even in silence because we don't know what to say, we are at our most worthy moments as people. The world is coming apart and (not but) and we love one another still. Our worth does not lie in the expression of ourselves alone but in how we extend that worthiness towards others. And if this pandemic is doing one thing right now, it is focusing us on connecting with one another and seeing the true Thou that makes us all holy.

I believe we are living through an apocalypse: a time of remaking. I believe we are living through a time of lamentation. A time to feel and bemoan the loss not only of life but of our way of life, what the great tattooed pastor Rev. Naida Bolz-Weber calls an "epidemic of disappointment." (Hat tip to Rev. Alison Paton for this and to Dan Woog for re-publishing her letter.) We have so much disappointment. Graduations which will not happen, weddings postponed, trips cancelled, restaurants closing for good and the far deeper ones, jobs lost, lives torn apart, poor people suffering, an economy dismantled. Like Job we all feel the utter misery of this.

We are in the depth of Lent, the time of sacrifice that is a prelude to the coming of Easter. The biblical reading today, if we were a Christian Church, is from the Hebrew bible, Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones:

The Valley of Dry Bones

37 The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath^[a] enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'"

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’” ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”

If there was ever a valley of dry bones this would be it my friends. And yet here we are, even in the midst of our lamentation, finding connection, and worthiness in each other despite the valley we walk through. We aren’t at the point of bringing those bones to life but we are in the valley of dry bones to be sure.

Our worth as people depends on how we navigate these days ahead. Our worthiness is interwoven with one another. Our worthiness rests in how willing we are to reach out to another, to keep the love that is our faith and to search and hold up hope when hope is so hard to find.

As David Brooks wrote this week:

“...the plague demands that we address our problems in ways we weren’t forced to before. The plague brings forth our creativity. It’s during economic and social depressions that the great organizations of the future are spawned.

“Already, there’s a new energy coming into the world. The paradigmatic image of this crisis is all those online images of people finding ways to sing and dance together across distance....

....(many of us have) begun some new activity to serve (our) neighbors. One lady was passing out vegetable seeds so families could plant their own vegetable gardens. Others are turning those tiny front-yard libraries into front-yard pantries. Some people are putting the holiday lights back up on their houses just to spread some cheer.” ([The New York Times](#), 3/26/20)

I find myself reaching back in history to other times of apocalypse to learn how we can grow from this. When Abraham Lincoln gave his first inaugural address, we were on the verge of a great civil war, a war that would pit neighbor against neighbor, family against family. A war not unlike the virus that threatens us now. The question before us as a nation, even as a congregation, lies in how well we move beyond our fears, and alive again, climb out of the valley of bones with new life again. Lincoln said:

“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Our worth is sometimes so hard to find. The man that amassed three fortunes to gain the love of his father who had been dead 20 years but to whom he was sacrificing his marriage. Athletes who die from strokes not because their bodies weren't in shape but because their sense of self-worthlessness put such a strain on them they snapped. Beauty queens who suddenly end up in the hospital with an eating disorder because their own mothers never felt beautiful enough for their father who ran off with a younger woman anyway. Those around us who claw desperately for resources like ventilators that save lives.

But I could be talking about any of us, couldn't I. I could be talking about me or you. I have my own share of selfish wants amidst this crisis. Wants that are so petty; to eat out again, to see a movie, to go to the opera. Lamentation is not always heroic, but it is instructive. Because only in the darkest valley of our fears, with the dry bones of our lives, can we hold up the worthiness that we all share. Each life is precious, no matter our failings. This is the greatest tragedy our heroic doctors are facing, having to decide who lives and who dies because they don't have the ventilators to keep people alive. When Dan Patrick, the Lt Gov of Texas, suggested that old people should be sacrificed so we can start our economy again, I quivered. Within minutes the social media was alive with outrage: **#Hide your grandparents** and **#NotwillingtodieforWallStreet**. This is not what the sacrifice of Lent means. As none other than Russell Moore, president of the Ethics Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, put it:

“We must also reject suggestions that it makes sense to prioritize the care of those who are young and healthy over those who are elderly or have disabilities. Such considerations turn human lives into checkmarks on a page rather than the sacred mystery they are. When we entertain these ideas, something of our very humanity is lost.” (The New York Times, ‘God Doesn’t Want Us to Sacrifice the Old’ March 26, 2020)

Part of our struggle out of the valley of this lamentation will be to hold on to the worthiness of each person. We can’t fault a doctor put in an impossible dilemma, who has to make a decision about who lives and dies. What we can do, whenever we finally climb out of this valley alive again, is to make sure we have the medicine we need for the next pandemic. That is how the Love of God for all people ultimately is fulfilled.

Twenty-five years ago, Sally was abused by her father. She managed to survive all of that, even to get married but when her own daughter was born she started to criticize her constantly. By the age of ten, her daughter was buying beauty magazines, by 13 she was in the hospital for an eating disorder. The sins of the mother had been visited upon the daughter, generation to generation. It was at the hospital bed, where I had the privilege to watch a miracle. Sally looked down at her daughter and whispered “Why?” and that little girl, thin as a rail, managed to say, bless her soul, “Because I was never good enough, Mom.” Never good enough. Sally got it. She started to cry, her daughter cried, I cried. Sally went home that night and wrote a letter of anger and forgiveness to her father. But she never sent it. Her father had died two years before. Her daughter came home and so did Sally. We are all good enough.

Churches like this should never be places that tell you that you are not good enough, especially now. We should strive to be places of acceptance for who you are. Sanctuaries where God’s light heals and doesn’t condemn. Places which, while we cannot accept behavior that is harmful, can accept those of us who have harmed and been harmed. We are not perfect, we weren’t made to be. I don’t believe in the God that condemns us with plagues. My God knows our suffering and wants us to help one another become whole again.

Churches like this one are full of losers. People who have lost loved ones, lost love, lost acceptance, lost their way. But they are also full of people who have also lost their fear to join together with others, many of whom are not at all alike, in the common hope that we shall break out of our soulful prisons, live life through times such as these .

People like you and I how know why we matter. We matter because we are not alone.
Amen.

Closing Prayer

We are hunkering and hoarding, Great Shimmering Goodness, though you call us to be better than that. Remind us that you delight, first and always, in showing up in the spaces between people—no matter how big those spaces are.