



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Renewal

By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Welcome to you all. Welcome back into our community of faith. Welcome back to the possibility of a new world. Welcome back to hope. This has been a torturous six months hasn't it? The pandemic which was badly managed by our dysfunctional government has led to thousands of deaths. The killing of Floyd and the brutal, yet necessary, reckoning that is now upon us. The slip we seem to have made into a cold civil war, with armed white vigilantes walking the streets with impunity and murdering those who stand for Black Lives. An election, which seems so straight forward, that is anything but. With the defunding of our postal system to derail vote by mail, to the continual lies and outrage that has become our political future. It would seem as someone said to me last week that America is ending.

But it's not. It's not because there are so many other voices, so many other people of good will who perform millions of kind acts each day that define who we really are. Can you hear me?

Rebecca Solnit in her book [A Field Guide to Getting Lost](#) tells the story of the Turtle Man. The Turtle Man would come to the same Zen Monastery in NYC each Tuesday to sell the monks tins of chocolate and caramel turtles, candy which the monks really didn't eat but felt obliged to buy each week because the Turtle Man was blind. One day after the abbot had paid the turtle man for the tins of chocolate turtles, he decided to follow him out to the street. The abbot walked a few paces behind the turtle man as he tapped his cane down the sidewalk. When it came time to cross the road, this was before audible walking signs, the turtle man stopped and then said in a soft spoken voice "Help, help". He would repeat the word "help, help" until someone would take him by the arm and help him cross.

The abbot was beside himself. Sure, he thought, the Turtle Man was no dummy. He knew enough to come to the monastery each week where he could count on the compassion of the monks to buy two tins. He probably had dozens of regular customers, many of them who don't eat the chocolate turtles, but when it came down to it, he had the presence of mind to simply cry out "help, help" and so he survived.

We come together in this struggling time to rededicate our congregation to the work of helping one another and this broken world in which we live. We are renewed in our being together and we are renewed, perhaps most of all by calling out for help when crossing these barriers that our time has put before us. I can't begin to tell you how deeply thankful I am that you, each of you in your own way, have helped one another. Perhaps in just getting up in the morning. That is helping to. You see helping one another as we covenant each week to do, is actually saving us. I mean that. Renewal begins by asking and offering help to those in need. We may not be able to hold one another with our arms but we are holding one another through our actions.

I spent a good deal of my summer in training to become a certified spiritual director. Spiritual directors are a cross between life coach and a monastic. We train to go deeply into silence, to pray and meditate, to use body movement, and most of all to listen and through that listening find the holiness which is guiding us even now in the midst of this upheaval. And one of the great truths I found this summer is what so many prophets have said before and now: We have to breakdown in order to breakthrough. We know this breakdown like a bad cousin, constantly reminding us that our new normal will never look like our old normal. But then, that old normal wasn't working so well was it. Racism, the growing gap between rich and poor, the degradation of our planet, the epidemic of opioid deaths. Make America Great Again? When was that exactly? And so now we are moving through the breakdown. We are not done yet, but we will be. And then I guarantee we will be at the cusp of new age, a new millennium, what the historian Phyllis Tickel calls The Great Emergence, the Age of the Spirit. Glimmers and seeds are floating around us in the ashes of our breakdown; new ways of being religious including worshipping under such places as the John's Street Bridge, hand in hand, mask on, praying for a new day. I have seen those seeds floating down in the way young families are gathering in learning pods to share learning resources. I have seen those seeds happening in the vast expanse of virtual media, not just zoom but in the use of telemedicine in Asia, and insurance plans for poor farmers in Africa who are paid as soon as a local weather station records a drought. I have seen those seeds in us; a people who are becoming more engaged than ever before.

This isn't the first apocalypse we have survived as a species. From the Middle Ages on we have pivoted to a new awareness when pressed with almost unbearable suffering. The 14th century in Europe saw a population collapse of 50% mostly poor people and women. After the darkness of the medieval period, the pandemics, famines and war, turned Europe towards its Renaissance; a flourishing of art and philosophy, the rights and wages

of workers rose, serfdom slowly came to an end and infant mortality tripled. By the late 15th century, life expectancy had risen from 34 years of age to 54 years of age.

I and others have been saying we are in such a pivot now. Ruth DeFries in her book The Big Ratchet describes human history in terms of a ratcheting up of population, culture and technology until we reach a break point in the old paradigm and the hatchet of history comes down. The end of the Roman Empire, the Warring States period in China, the plague, the Holocaust, and now another plague and racism. What happens every time is that humanity pivots to a new order, another renaissance, and so go these swings, ratchet, hatchet, pivot.

We are in the hatchet now. The question is how are we going to pivot both as a species and as a people here and now? How are we going to move from surviving to thriving? Ultimately, this is a deeply spiritual question for me, one I have wrestled with these past three months on spiritual retreat. It is spiritual because if we are to pivot we will need to reorder our faith that is we will need to reorder what matters most to us. We will need to reorder money and things from its top spot and put compassion and experience up there instead. We will need to look for and cultivate the greater virtues of humanity, such as caring, love and connection over our fears of losing something, or our fears of those who are not like us.

It is an essential reordering that lies at the heart of our renewal as people. Over the summer one of my colleagues asked me how we were doing as a congregation, was giving falling off and people leaving. I thought about my response for a long time, I prayed about it and here is what I told her: People have drifted away, it's very hard to keep going virtually and keeping people engaged, but others are joining us, some from as far away as California. We have lost some giving, but we have gained a deeper sense of caring, meals, cards, flowers. We are learning to become a deeper congregation, more engaged than ever before, even as we are physically apart. We are moving from surviving to thriving.

We are moving from surviving to thriving. Yesterday was Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year: the wheel turns again. This is our story of renewal. Yes, I know this is uneven for so many of us. But life doesn't get any easier, we become more resilient. As UUs we pull from a deep well of values that quench our thirst for a new world.

Last week the Interfaith Clergy met with representatives of the Westport PTA who wanted to know what congregations were doing to address racism. One after another, the Congregationalists, the Catholics, the Methodists, the Lutherans, and three of our Jewish congregations all reported new programming to raise awareness around racism. But I was

most impressed with us, the UUs. Because our well of values contain such truths as the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the dream of justice for all, we were clearly in the lead, offering not only new initiatives such as the IDI but through TUCWomen and our new Racial Justice Council, direct understanding of racism and actions to combat racism at the intersection of poverty and homelessness. We were the congregation that has a direct ministry to the homeless in Bridgeport providing food and other needs under the John Street Bridge. We are the ones who ship hundreds of pounds of food to food pantries. And we are the ones, who in partnership with other congregations in Bridgeport are supporting efforts by communities of color. We are living our faith like never before friends.

We are moving from surviving to thriving. There is a model of social change known as the Tuckman Model. When a life changing event such as what we are living through right now occurs, thriving organizations form a response, this is known as forming. That response usually meets with some push back, people who fall away because the organization is not providing what they thought they needed. Sometimes there is resistance. This is known as the storming stage. Then as the organization pivots to a new purpose, a thriving purpose, the change is normalized, the stage of norming. Finally, as the organization finds its new groove, it starts performing better than ever before. Ratchet, hatchet, pivot, thrive. Or in Tuckman's words, forming, storming, norming and performing.

Our congregation is right now coming out of the storming and ramping up to the norming. This church year will see us breakthrough to performing like never before. From surviving to thriving. This is the journey we are on. Yes, there aren't quite as many people coming to worship as before, but the ones who are coming are fully engaged. Moreover we are caring for one another in ways that are deeply profound. Hundreds of hours of chaplains, ministers and you caring for those among us in need. Hundreds of hours more in caring for those around us in need. Ours is an audacious covenant my friends, Love is the Spirit of this church and service is our law. We are norming our way to becoming a truly thriving congregation.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus shares his parable of the mustard seed:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. 32 Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

Here is the good news: The seeds we see floating down around us from this apocalypse are those mustard seeds. Small but capable of providing trees under which the weary

may rest, perches for the birds of our purpose may find shade, and life giving for generations to come.

What we do now makes all the difference. Now is the time to be a vital actor in our thriving congregation. Not to hunker down and wait for this to pass, but rather to stand up for renewal. Regardless who is elected President; our work will be more urgent than ever. By being here today you are part of this change, from a cry for help to a new world, the Age of the Spirit which is ours to usher in. Let's get to it, shall we!