

Rev. Nathan Detering

“Bless This Mess”

Sunday, March 11, 2018

UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn

*“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.
Keep our hearts tender.
Keep our eyes soft.
Because what shows up as conceit or bad manners or rudeness
Or withdrawnness
Is often a sign of things no eyes of seen and no ears have heard.
And so we learn again how there is no answer but to love one another.
We gather in community to practice being the person
The world is calling us to be.
We cannot do everything,
But we can do something, and that something is not nothing.
So forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That is how the light gets in.”*

You don't need me to tell you that a storm bearing down brings out the Hunter Gatherer in all of us – I mean, did anyone try to go to the store On Wednesday before the great Tree Crusher of 2018 rode in? But in the divide and conquer narrative that gets played out in every family, Karyn did the outside errands if I could accomplish one simple but no less important task.
And that task was....?

Get all the flashlights ready.

Simple, right?

You would think, on the surface, you would think yes,

But as someone who always tends to underestimate the apocalypse,

And disbelieve especially the weather doomsayers

Because they, like a modern version of the Hebrew Prophets,

Seem to rail and wail and whimper and yell

In the belief it will get my attention and change my I-don't-care-what-you-say-spring-is-coming-ways,

I tend to have a – let's call it carefree, open, unattached, even Buddhist –

Approach to '*flashlight stability*' in our home.

Which means that, when skies are blue, I may sometimes, on that rare occasion,

I may find one of those flashlights and unscrew the top and tip it sideways

So that one or two beautifully needed batteries can slide into my palm

And power whatever is needed in that blue-sky moment...like the lights

For my bike, or the tv remote, or the xbox controller,

or the old-fashioned, not-smart, am-fm radio I use to listen to NPR and stay abreast of news for the sake of keeping my sermons fresh and timely,

which means I'm actually stealing those batteries as a necessity for work

(!)....

And, really, how often is the storm as bad or worse than they 'fake news' say it will be?

All of which I'm sharing to explain why, from behind,

You see me down on my knees on the left-hand side of the bed,

Hunter-gathering inside the drawer of my nightstand,
 The lights flickering overhead,
 Which is where I think I remember last seeing one of those
 Now needed batteries, or even better yet,
 That wind-up battery flashlight I got as thanks for my NPR contribution,
 Which I listen to, of course, on the radio that uses the batteries I pilfered
 from the real flashlights that I now need,
 Which is proof that God exists and believes in irony, or payback, or both.
 But I'm not having any luck because this drawer is so...unbelievably,
 uncharacteristically, overwhelmingly....messy.

Friends, if you go into my office here at church one thing you will learn
 About me is that I hate messy,
 Mess – you ready for some etymology because it's been a while –
 Coming from the Latin word '*missum*'
 Meaning to '*put out on the table a serving of liquid or pulpy food,*'
 Which gave rise to the word meaning an '*unappetizing concoction*'
 Or '*predicament,...*'
 As in, oh my gosh, this drawer is a mess, and the lights are flickering,
 And the family is wondering when I'm gonna find the flashlight;

As in, seriously? The law Congress wants to pass in response
 To Parkland, FL is arming teachers? What a mess!
 Who the hell in charge? Is the NRA in charge?;

As in, we seem to be getting one-hundred year storms every year!
 What a mess we're giving to our children!

As in, have you seen my hair this morning! I used to have more of it!

What a mess!

As in, look at all these problems and predicaments,

Power down here, and tariffs over there, and ICE is roaming around

Metrowest looking to deport, and I can't charge my phone,

When the power be back on????

And maybe the commute is killing you, or the job you love to hate,

Or the relationship you're in that you're trying to find an exit sign for,

Or the child you love needs more help you know how to give,

And the President prefers to tweet about the Oscar ratings

Than Russia showing a video of them nuking Florida...

...because here in the slow crawl to spring that is March in New England

Messes abound, and I'm not just talking about branches and power lines

And the loss of the limb that gave such beautiful summer shade.

But also out there and over there,

And my soul and your soul want to bless, to honor and say 'beauty'

But too often we feel like our spirits are bogged down

Here in March, our spirits in mud season, wanting to bless and bless

But instead finding mess and mess.

"How you doing up there?" says the family, lights flickering ever more.

Find the light yet?"

Yep, all good! Be right there! I say, which is a big, fat, hot mess of a lie.

Because instead of the light what I'm finding in this drawer

I rarely look through but throw things into I want to keep,

Is this:

The cassette tape Nancy Levy, member here, made of Emerson, then 5 or 6,
Now nearing 18,
Of the message he left her on her voicemail saying thank you for
Gingerbread house they made together,
Her using “W” sound for every “N”, say ‘*Wancy, thank u...*’
even though I am running out machines to play it.

And the card from my dad after his heart surgery in 2008,
Saying he was proud of the dad I had become in his shaky handwriting.

And the mixed tape Karyn made me back when we met
In the Peace Corps full of British rock favorites,
Even though I am running out of machines to play it.

And the zipper bag of watch tools the kids borrowed from the basement,
stuck a sticker on it saying ‘happy father’s day’ in the fine child tradition
Of gifting you something that had been yours to begin with...

And the small pocket Bible that had been grandfather’s in the 2nd
Great War;

And, in a purple velvet sleeve, the silver teaspoon that had been
My grandmother’s as a child;

And, for some reason, an odd number of cufflinks, even though I’m
Not a cufflink kind of guy...

And that little tool to pop out the SIM card on an Iphone...

And still no flashlight!

But in this envelope a stack of anniversary cards, and birthday cards...

And in this envelope some of your thank you cards given me over the years,
Saying thank you for shared ministry...

And folded up, the letters written me by passerby to the church complaining
About the Black Lives Matter flag,
Keeping them because I was and am proud of our church here in segregated
MetroWest...

And, I had forgotten this...lights flickering overhead, inner light flickering
too,

A handwritten letter from my brother 4 years before he died, written
When he was in one of his many recoveries right before the birth of his son,
Asking for advice on how to be a father...

And a sepia-tinged, unframed Ella baby picture,
And 3 cough drops,
And – wait! – one battery, but damn, the wrong size...
But still...NO flashlight.

God, what a mess! No structure! No organization! Forgotten moments.
Reclaimed memories.

Joy. Pain. Love. Loss.

What a mess, in the drawer.

What a life so far, in the drawer.

You're wondering, I'm wondering,

Why I, who hates messes and who loves to throw away,

Hasn't taken the time to clean things up and clear up the predicament

That is layered upon layers in that drawer.

Why not ramp up the spring cleaning, and dust out the winter clutter?

Why not in with the new, and out the with old?

Why not hold onto the joy, and dump the pain?

Why not bless the tidy hallmark memories, and throw out the mess?

I mean, it's appealing, right?

We want to clean up the clutter, and stop living in the litter, right?

And we should. And we do.

Which is why I maybe keep the mess contained, boundaried in a drawer,

Teaching me to bless the beauty and the broken,

The beautiful and terrible, too...

Blessing not as in *'hey this is great! I love you! Thank you'*

But blessing as in, *'I remember this; loss is as much a part of life*

As love; I can hold both.'

Oy! Nathan! Dad! What's up with the flashlight!!!! Seriously,

You had one job! Just one!

Coming!

And so I fully commit and pull the drawer out of its runners,

Never mind that I know how long it took me to get this drawer in when

I build it, because one thing we can all agree on is IKEA furniture is a mess!,

and so I pull it out, and set the blessed mess junk joy drawer aside,
and crouch down, and peer underneath,
God, what a dust mess there!
And, there, just like when we discover something about ourselves
That had been hidden in the clutter,
Just like we learn something new about ourselves in the shadow,
or discover some new strength we had in the midst of some struggle
there, in the back, underneath the nightstand,
having fallen out of the mess,
is the wind-up flashlight.

Coming!

Wind it up! Wind it up!

And just as the lights flicker, just as the mess of the storm heightens,
Just in the nick of time,
I turn on the light and find the blessing.

In the mess of your life, what blessing does the light reveal?

What stories does the light shine on?

Where is the blessing in the mud season?

What do you notice? What do you see?

What are you tempted to avoid? What would you rather not see?

Joy. Pain. Love. Loss.

If it's good enough for a junk drawer,

It might just be good enough for a life lesson, too.

Youth Groove – help us bless this mess!

Amen.