

The Tax on Joy
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Saturday morning airstrikes tend to rewrite Sunday morning sermons. I begin my rewrite with the words of The Reverend Egbert Ethelred Brown, who was the first African American to be ordained as a Unitarian Minister, in 1912. He founded Unitarian churches in Kingston, Jamaica and Harlem, New York. Hear Rev. Brown's words. He says, quote:

“As we face a troubled and puzzled world, we too are troubled and puzzled. As our fond dreams remain unrealized and our bright hopes of yesterday wither in the bitter disappointments of today, our courage fails, our spirits droop, our faith trembles, and, frustrated, we bow our heads in despair.

Nevertheless, we come to God in this hour of worship, in this house of prayer.

As we pray for peace in our time, O God, may we ourselves be at peace with the world, with ourselves, and with Thee. May we know that without love there will never be peace. Teach us therefore to love. What does this world need more than love?

May we, after hearing the message of the day, leave this place inspired and strengthened, faithfully to fulfill the duties of tomorrow.”

Here ends the reading. May it be so.

Yesterday afternoon, Rev. Traci Blackmon, the Executive Minister of Justice & Local Church Ministries for The United Church of Christ and Senior Pastor of Christ The King United Church of Christ in Florissant, MO, sent out this tweet:

And I quote: “So. I guess we should be grateful that Russia or Syria didn't bomb us for poisoning children in Flint. Or gassing citizens in Ferguson and Standing Rock. Or allowing people to go hungry and unhoused in a country of more than enough.” That's the end of her quote.

I guess we should all be grateful, right? But I don't feel grateful this morning. I feel like I imagine the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah must've felt when he said: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick.”

The world is on fire and injustice is all around us. Bombs fall from early morning skies and explode from within barreling delivery trucks. Thursday was Holocaust Remembrance Day, a time for truth-telling. Demonstrations against police brutality and state sanctioned murder continue in Sacramento and Baton Rouge.

And, also on Thursday, on Cape Cod, Officer Sean Gannon was killed in the line of duty, while serving a warrant. A horrific loss for Officer Gannon's family, friends and fellow officers. But, we noticed, didn't we? We noticed that his killer, a white man with over a hundred prior criminal charges, was safely taken into police custody... How long, oh God, how long?

Increased numbers of National Guard troops are deploying to the Mexican Border. And we ask ourselves, is this to reduce violent crime and human trafficking...or to help increase the number of people detained in—and the profits earned for—all of our new privately-owned detention centers? This week, The Intercept reported that, between January 2010 and September 2017, ICE received 1,224 complaints of sexual abuse against immigrant's in custody...half of the reported assaults were allegedly perpetrated by people working for ICE. Only 43 of the 1,224 reports have been investigated. And we know very few sexual assaults are ever reported at all...

Nevertheless, my friends. Nevertheless, we gather together in this worship hour. We gather in resistance to apathy. We gather to share our strength, our faith, our questions and our struggles. We gather to feel and to lament, because we know numbness obstructs accountability and delays justice. The poet Joy Harjo says: *“At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.”*

But before thanks and joy, we must sing with sorrow. In times such as these, how can we keep from singing? Faith is not magical thinking. Faith doesn't take away pain and despair. Faith is companionship. Faith is not being alone. Religion is what we do together, right? And the Reverend Egbert Ethelred Brown explained “Religion is ethics touched by emotion. If the intellect dominates and there is no hint of emotion, a cold and barren matter-of-factness results. Conversely, if emotion leads, unguided by intellect, we are doomed to a wild sea of fanaticism. Yet mind and soul united create one music, grander than before.”

We cannot think our way out of evil and hardship. We feel our way through and see what else there is to learn. For this, I often turn to the Psalms.

Psalm 4:1

Answer me when I call, O God of my right! You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

Psalm 77:1-4

*I cry aloud to God,
aloud to God, that she may hear me.
In the day of trouble I seek the
LORD;
in the night my hand is stretched
out without wearying;
my soul refuses to be comforted.
I think of God, and I moan;
I meditate, and my spirit faints.
You keep my eyelids from closing;
I am so troubled that I cannot
speak.*

Psalm 88:13-14

But I, O LORD, cry out to you;

*In the morning my prayer comes
before you.*

*O LORD, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?*

These Psalms help break denial—they help me get in touch with my own pain and the pain of our world. Denial taxes and steals from joy. Denial must be broken by truth. When we get honest about life in front of other people, we get energy out of that honest...energy for something new.

Honesty is transformative. Being honest gives space for emotions to be processed. Sacred space for honoring vulnerability.

Space in which we learn that wisdom and hope emerge not from optimism or positivity...

Wisdom and hope emerge from truth.

And pain becomes bearable because our community helps us hold it.

Our opening words today were from The Reverend Lewis A. McGee, who was first an African Methodist Episcopal minister before he was fellowshipped as a Unitarian in 1948. Rev. McGee said, “Those who grapple courageously with the events of life will get more joy out of living.”

We know we want more joy out of life, right!?
But what is joy? _____

The dictionary tells me joy can be a noun and a verb. We can experience, express or even be a source of delight, bliss, jubilation. We can enact and embody joy by gladdening and enjoying...what?

What is it that brings you joy? _____
Tell me what taxes your joy? _____
Thank you for helping me with my sermon!

Did you know that Joy is mentioned 267 times in the New Revised Standard Version of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament? Joy isn't necessarily dependent on circumstance. In our reading this morning, theologian Barbara A. Holmes called it unspeakable joy. She observed...

“Joy Unspeakable
is not silent...

...joy unspeakable is drum talk...
...joy unspeakable is the surprise
of living one more day...

...joy unspeakable is the moment of
mystical encounter
when God tiptoes into the hush arbor...

Joy unspeakable is humming
“how I got over”
After swimming safely

to the other shore of a swollen Ohio river
when you know that you can't swim."

Joy is how we keep standing back up again. We feel our way through to joy. Joy is a communal experience. Joy is showing up for one another. Caring and tending for one another. As the Rev. Kimberly Quinn Johnson explained to us in today's reading: "This is not joy in spite of suffering — a mask put on to hide pain, an armor put on to push through pain. This is an embrace, holding and soothing us in our suffering."

She implores "Unitarian Universalist Joy will require a different way of imagining ourselves and a different way of being with each other." I thought of this new imagining while I was watching "The Greatest Showman" with my children. Have you seen this movie? Did you know PT Barnum was a Universalist? He was certainly a complicated man, but Barnum's circus shows encouraged new ways of imagining the world together.

I was listening to my children belt out the words to "This is Me," sung by Keala Settle, a US-born Maori actress and singer and watching this scene from the movie. It's incredible, really...how many themes are woven together in this one song. The lyrics reference the Bible, prose from Audre Lorde, othering groups of people, state violence and civil disobedience. In this scene from the movie, the "freaks" of the circus are good enough to make money for Barnum, but not good enough to join him in the after party, right? So, they've already been rejected inside and waiting outside are the screaming thugs who want to run them out of town. The performers walk through the room of the exclusive after party and head to the street to start and after party of their own. The words of the song are painful but the joy the characters express in their dancing is palpable.

"Another round of bullets hits my skin
Well, fire away 'cause today, I won't let the shame sink in
We are bursting through the barricades
And reaching for the sun (we are warriors)
Yeah, that's what we'll become

Won't let them break me down to dust
I know that there's a place for us
For we are glorious

When the sharpest words wanna cut me down
Gonna send a flood, gonna drown them out
I am brave, I am bruised
I am who I'm meant to be, this is me
Look out 'cause here I come
And I'm marching on to the beat I drum
I'm not scared to be seen
I make no apologies, this is me"

So much truth here for us to learn...songs from pop culture weave together with our own hymns and the words of our own prophets:

When we slow down and open ourselves to the pulse of the drum,
when we gather together to express the truth of our lives
and hear the truths of others...

we make space to find a new song...
a deeper current of surprising joy.

“We are the people who commit to justice, equity, and compassion.”

We burst through the barricades and reach for the sun, marching to the beat we drum.

“We are the people who aspire to world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.”

We won't let them break us down to dust. We know there is a place and enough resources for all of us!

“We are the people who affirm our interdependence with each other and the universe itself.”

To be who we know we're meant to be...

We are not scared to be seen,

We make no apologies...

Brave, bruised, glorious, joyful.

Joy is ours to claim, Friends.

May we open ourselves to that encounter

with the mystical in and around all of us.

Knowing we are held and carried forward by a power beyond what we can comprehend.

May be courageously embody our faith tradition in new ways.

May be claim the joy that is ours.

Amen?

