

Rev. Nathan Detering
“Better Angels in Aisle 12E”
Sunday, October 21, 2018

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Keep our hearts tender.

Keep our eyes soft.

Keep our words true.

Because this is what we are about:

We know there is no answer but to love one another.

We bear witness against unnecessary destruction.

We gather in community to practice being the person

We say we want 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.”

There is an old transistor radio on the upstairs bathroom counter

That, despite my turning and turning of the dial,

will only tune in barely two stations –

Acid, improvisational jazz that, according to the announcer, is so genius that

My regular, folk-loving ears will never be able appreciate it...

And the other, WBPR, which is Worcester’s NPR station, coming in

All fuzz and muffled, so that the latest prognostications about

The Mid-Term elections sound like public service announcements

From the apocalypse – *fffftt...house hangs in balance, nurses say yes 1,*
Nurses say no on 1, Trump riles base...fffftt...
Warren issues DNA...fft.
Test..ffttt...Yes on 3!

Which provokes a question I read in an essay this week: *how we can look*
Beyond winning over the next 17 days and focus on our whole lives?
Because Brett Kavanaugh has been confirmed to the Supreme Court.
And now, says Carol Hewitt Merritt (Christian Century, Oct.9, 2018),
people on the left scramble to figure out what to do,

Some hold on to Michelle Obama's advice, "When they go low, we go
high."

Others say that you can't bring roses to a gun fight and expect to get out
alive.

Some hold strong for the midterms, counting on a blue wave to flood the
map.

Others remind us of the grave injustices inherent in the voting process,
where gerrymandering, partisanship, racial discrimination, the electoral
college, and class bias rob people of their vote and leave them feeling
disenfranchised.

Some say the Democratic Party needs to be moderate in order to pick up
more independents and Trump defectors.

Others direct the Party to take a hard-left turn to pick up the growing
number of Socialist Millennials.

Some urge for civility, saying that people need to be able to eat out at a restaurant, without jeers and protestors.

Others say that social change is often ugly, and civility is a smug tool for the privileged.

*Says Carol, As a minister slogging through these culture wars,
I feel less concerned with what sort of method it takes to win,
Because every person is needed —the peacemakers and protesters,
thinkers and demonstrators, serpents and doves.*

What I'm worried about is what kind of humans we will be.

But a more pressing issue than these pressing issues is at hand as the
radio, antenna bent from so much turning and bending,
kind of like my spirit, kind of like your spirit,
fuzzes on...

...and that is that there is an inch and a half of still, soapy water
At the bottom of the tub left over from the last shower,
The drain no longer draining free, but instead locked so frozen and firm
That not even the index finger, and then stolen pencil from a child's
backpack, and then a coat hanger, and then the plunger can release it.

*God, I'm thinking, if I can't even unplug a drain how the hell
Can I figure out what kind of human I need to be in these times...*

In my day job I am the minister of a religion that savors questions more than answers and process more than product and journey more than arrival,

But in my other life I just adore a quick fix....(who's with me?)

So off I go to that place where there is a problem for every tool

And a tool for every problem, that earth-bound heaven where they are even people who wear helpful vests that say: *How can I help you?*

Once in the car I am again thrust back into the audio book

I am supposed to read for the next week's clergy conference,

A book of history by John Meacham called 'The Soul of America'

That now, in these times, reads like a work of fantasy fiction,

When there, at the new stoplights of Exchange and Washington Street

In Holliston,

The author intones these lines from an uncomfortably similar

Time in our country's history of painful polarization:

*"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.**"*

Written by whom? Lincoln.

Written when? The first inaugural in 1861, prior to the civil war.

I'm not sure, but I think those lines have too many characters to fit

Into a Twitter message, which makes them sound what?

Almost quant. Almost Pollyanna-ish.

Except that they came not that many years after President Jackson,

Who the current president most admires and most mirrors
As a stoker of populist fervor.

But I'm clergy and not a politician, so as I'm driving through Holliston
Into Milford I turn off the radio and turn up the silence,
Wondering about my nature, about your nature, as you do
As you drive to the hardware store...

....holding in the mix those times we have snarled and snapped and stayed
silent and been complicit and fallen so short of what we could be....
which is why we say we come her to practice being the person we want to
be,
Because we need help and repetition and second chances...
(maybe we can hold a moment here to think of a time...)

...And other times when we've loved are way into strength we didn't
Know we had, and unfurled arms which might as well as have been wings
as we acted out of a generosity, and a selflessness, and soothed
heartbreak, or took a stand,
Or shared a hard truth with gentleness,
And acted from the better angels of our nature...
(maybe we can hold a moment here to think of a time...)

Because the truth is we are both, aren't we....broken and beautiful, aren't
we? Redeemed in a need of redeeming....
Full of flight and fallen...
And isn't the question before us what kind of human we want to be?

That's my question; I think it's your question...

Isn't the question before us how we can hold the nuance,
How in our lives and own relationships, and in our country's life,
How we are supposed to love each other...and hold each other
accountable?

How we are supposed to love ourselves and each other for who we are...
But love ourselves and each other not let us stay there,
Because don't all of us have to grow?

"Good morning sir; can I help you?"

And I'm tempted, I'm so tempted...

Because of what I've just been thinking of in the silence on the way over,
And because of how unguarded and unarmored my heart has been
These last many weeks, which is what grief can do sometimes,
I'm tempted to ask her:

*Actually you can: do you know what kind of human I'm supposed to be
In these times?*

Peacemaker? Protester? Thinker? Demonstrator?

Serpent? Dove? Better angel? Worse-er angel?

But instead I say to her, taking the easy, low road of practicality:

"Clogged drain"

And without a beat she says: *Aisle 12E.*

Oh praise the God of quick fixes and direct directions.

Without this saint of a woman and her vest, I'd be wondering the aisles,
like we do a lot in our lives....wondering here for hope,

In the back for bravery, is vocation in the far corner with the lumber?

Patience outside with the perennials...because maybe, like hope,
It springs eternal...
But 12E is less metaphorical; instead it just says "*Plumbing, Pipes,
Toilets*"
Well.

And it was there that I found it, I mean...just for a moment,
Just a glimpse...
Next to the hose clamps, near the low water flusher,
Across from the bottle of something called "Heat Sparkle"
That promises to clean out those pipes clogged with half a year's
Worth of soap slime.

Because this: you know how sometimes you feel like you're watching
Yourself from above,
Like you're outside yourself looking in?
That's how it was I feel a tap on my shoulder
And watched as I turn around and smile,
And without even thinking, without even hesitation,
Open my arms and give the man standing there a big, giant,
Awkward, free hug...one of those hugs where one tries to shake hands
And reaches over the shoulder...

The man whose name is Pete,
Pete the father of one of Emerson's friends,
who I don't really know very well save for the surface conversations on the
sidelines of lacrosse,

Pete who works all day as a maintenance worker at a nearby apartment
 complex and whose hands are rough and heavy like cinder blocks;
 Pete who wears work boots everywhere, even with shorts, and a brown
 Carhart jacket, and...who, after my brother died,
 once told me about his own brother who struggled with drinking,
 and drives not a new pick-up truck,
 on the bumper of which is a now starting to fade
 Make America Great Again Sticker
 and who also told me, long after I shared once that we mentor inmates
 in prison to help them get their degree and told him about some of their
 backstories,
 How that changed something in him, how he doesn't just
 Think of them as people who should be locked up and forgotten.

But never mind, I'm hugging him. Why am I hugging him?
 Because these days I am just a walking, beating raw heart,
 And because his earthiness somehow reminds me of my dad's earthiness,
 And because the normal never-mind-I'm-fine-distance I often keep
 Has been narrowed...

'Sorry Pete!' I...stumble, because look, we should ask for hugs
 Before we give them, ok?
 Men need to learn this especially...just as, with each other, we also
 Need to learn how to share our emotions more and without shame,
 Without embarrassment, without the corrosive culture of fake toughness
 And stoicism and patriarchy that hurts women and hurts men, too....

“Sorry Pete...just raw these days, I guess...”

Which is just about as real and brave as I know how to be....

And then he offered his condolences because I hadn't seen him since

The last lacrosse game in the spring,

And then, without asking, he told me about how he lost his dad, too...

And that it takes a while...and even then,

time doesn't heal so much as make the less the sharpness of loss...

Which he didn't say in those words.

I think he said... *'just gotta keep moving, kid...and, ya know...*

After a while it hurts less....'

And look...I'm not saying we had a complete kumbaya moment

Between the toilet plungers,

Or that our inevitable political differences were somehow collapsed or
papered over,

Because that wouldn't be real and it wouldn't be honest

And it's not what kind of humans were supposed to be in these times,

Humans who pretend our differences aren't real

And who pretend that what's at stake in these times isn't

Just political preferences but actual life and lives, many them

In the margins.

Just ask a transgender person about question 3 and you know what me
mean...

...But what I am saying is that these times, these polarizations

So often put our better angels in cages and clip their wings,

Right?

So that our differences become all that we see
And the only headline we read...
At least they do for me...
...but now, there in 12E, I felt an opening for Pete and me....
So that when I invite him for coffee, as I will in these coming weeks,
There is an opening...an opening to talk and listen and learn and share...
You follow me?

But that's just me; I'm a peacemaker by nature.
Others of you are protesters, doves, demonstrators, serpents (in a good way)...
....and whoever you are I want the best part of us to show up in these days,
Our better angels to show up with the people closest to us
And the people who are further away...
Because that's the kind of human we are called to be.....
There in 12E aisles our lives – open, vulnerable, beating hearts
Meeting open, vulnerable beating hearts.
Who knows what might change?
Who knows...