

**Rev. Nathan Detering**

**January 8, 2017**

**“Top Ten Religious News Stories of 2016”**

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

*Be not afraid.*

*Because this is what we are about:*

*We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.*

*We plant seeds that will one day grow.*

*We are prophets of a future not our own.*

*We cannot do everything,*

*But we can do something.*

*So forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That is how the light gets in.”*

The Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist Dave Barry, who I always

Read in preparation for this sermon,

Began his year in review this way:

“In the future, Americans — assuming there are any left — will look back at 2016 and remark: *“What the HELL?”*”

Yes, we’ve seen some weird years. Remember 2000, says Barry, when the outcome of a presidential election was decided by a tiny group of deeply confused Florida residents who had apparently attempted to vote by chewing on their ballots?

Or 2006, when the vice president of the United States — who claimed he was attempting to bring down a suspected quail — shot a 78-year-old man in the face, only to be exonerated after an investigation revealed that the victim was an attorney?

Yes, we've seen some weird years. But we've never seen one as weird as 2016. This was the Al Yankovic of years.

If years were movies, 2016 would be “Plan 9 From Outer Space.”

If years were relatives, 2016 would be the uncle who shows up at your Thanksgiving dinner wearing his underpants on the outside.

But as weird and, yes, troubling as it has been, 2016 wasn't without its wonder too, and this is especially true of religious news.

And when I say religion I don't mean the zealot kind,

Or the believe 6 impossible things before breakfast kind.

I mean the kind that brings people together and makes connection

Where otherwise there would conflict, which is what the world religion

Literally means from the Latin...*to tie together*.

So this year I'm inviting into a mood of what I'm calling “*Intentional*

*Tenderness*” – as we look back over the year's top religious stories,

Remembering as we do so that when it comes to religion, as with all things,

It's far easier to be ironic or sarcastic or cynical

Than it is be affirming, tender, loving.

So deep breath in, deep breath out,

Remembering as we share my Top Ten Religious News Stories of 2016

That mine is a free pulpit and yours is a free pew,

Which means I get to speak my heart and you, should you be so inclined,  
 get to disagree with me,  
 Because that is how we grow a soul...we learn from and stretch each other.

**10) Sexton, tear down that fake nativity scene ‘cause we’re replacing it  
 with a real one!**

In a year that saw 4,600 migrants killed in Mediterranean shipwrecks  
 While fleeing conflicts in Africa and Asia, particularly in Syria,  
 And the thousands of refugees seeking safety fueling an anti-migrant,  
 rightward political shift in Europe,  
 Including Brexit, or what Karyn, my British spouse, described  
 As ‘*Brex –apocalypse;*’  
 And in a year when the now president-elect (more on him later),  
 In the opening speech of his campaign,  
 Referred to Mexican immigrants as murderers and rapists,  
 And promised to create a registry for all Muslim immigrants living here in  
 the U.S. (because you can’t make this stuff up, and if you did,  
 You would rightfully be accused of hate speech),

Three weeks before Christmas,  
 A tiny Mennonite Church in San Antonio, TX,  
 Tore down its nativity scene to make room for an influx  
 Of immigrants being discharged from a local detention center.  
 The church has a guest house that houses eight people  
 And is frequently used as short-term housing for immigrants.  
 In the first week the church housed – listen – *over 500 women*  
*And children*, most of them escaping violence in Central America.

The church put down air mattresses and space heaters in the Sanctuary, the fellowship hall, the pastor's office, and the Sunday School rooms to accommodate all the immigrants,  
 Leaving the pastor to joke, but not: *we replaced the fake nativity scene With a real one!*

One has wonder after this year: If Jesus were alive in America today, would he be deported?

### **9) Putting the Protest back in the name Protestant!**

Any time I'm asked if politics belong in church, or the church belongs In politics, I'm reminded of the African proverb that says:

*Pray, but then move your feet.*

Meaning: creeds need deeds, love needs to put into action,

And politics need to hear the moral voice of faith communities.

I'm also reminded of how Protestants, of which UUism is a part,

Got that name Protestant...from Martin Luther, who protested the Catholic Church's selling of front row tickets into heaven, known as indulgences,

By tacking 95 complaints or protests on the front door of the Castle Church In Wittenberg, Germany.

In other words, the history we belong to of raising our voices, resisting

The status quo, and demonstrating with our bodies and our banners

About what we believe is long and rich and varied.

Which is why Black Lives Matter protests continued this year,

Including the banner we hung from our own 1827 sanctuary,

With clergy and religious communities participating in the protests

Following the high profile shootings of African Americans by police.

Clergy, particularly in Dallas, played a role in uniting communities (remember meaning of word religion?) after deadly shootings Of police officers in that city.

And then there were the religious activists, many of them UU's, Who joined with the Standing Rock Sioux members in demonstrating Against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota, Which the Sioux say will foul water and sacred lands, One member likened the pipeline to the equivalent of an energy company Planning to drill underneath Jerusalem.

In addition to religious folks, the camp of protestors, or 'water protectors' As they preferred to be called,

Included envoys from all over the world: Muslims, people from 90 Native Nations, various rock stars, a group calling themselves the Water Wookie Warriors, whose pop-up camper had a Star Wars theme,

And the arrival of veterans on motorcycles adept at winter survival.

Feeling the pressure, last month the Army Corps of Engineers halted the project and said they would look for an alternative route,

But not before the energy company and the President-Elect vowed to overturn the decision.

And then...in two weeks millions of women from across the country, On the day after the inauguration, will descend on Washington DC To demonstrate against the ways the president-elect has objectified women And girls, ensuring that their voices are heard and their bodies are Not objects to be used.

Religious communities from across the country, including our own,

Are inviting women to get on busses and planes and trains to show  
That all have inherent worth and dignity.

A show of hands if you are going?

Thank you. As your minister, I bless you and your work.

### **8) Songbirds of Faith**

2016 felt like a long, heartrending memorial service as we said good-bye to  
Souls like Muhammed Ali, Elie Weisel, Shimon Peres, Nancy Reagan,  
Harper Lee, John Glenn, Gene Wilder, Edward Albee, Gwen Ifell,  
Fidel Castro, Carrie Fischer, and her mom Debbie Reynolds..

But knowing that nothing loosens the hinges on the doors of the heart like  
music,

We also said goodbye to Prince and his Purple Rain,

David Bowie and his ch-ch-changes,

And George Michael, whose songs we can't ever sing in church

Because have you heard them?

And, of course, Leonard Cohen, whose Jewish, Buddhist roots

And lyrics have shed so much light into my life, and yours, too,

And wrote not only Hallelujah with its 65 stanzas (and I hope TNT

Can cover before June comes),

But also 'Come Healing,' which one of you, on the morning after the  
election,

Sent to me, reminding me of these lyrics:

And let the heavens hear it

The penitential hymn

Come healing of the spirit

Come healing of the limb

Behold the gates of mercy

In arbitrary space

And none of us deserving

The cruelty or the grace

O solitude of longing

Where love has been confined

Come healing of the body

Come healing of the mind

And, of course, who can forget the spiritual and maybe religious Mr. Dylan,  
Who I saw in concert with Van Morrison back in '98 in Birmingham,  
England as he mumbled his way through the set and me thinking:

*We paid 80 pounds a ticket for this?*

But whose Jewish upbringing led him to be one of the only 60's artists

To sing about the Holocaust,

And after his brief born-again period, wrote a number of religious-tinged

Songs, including this:

In the time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need  
When the pool of tears beneath my feet floods every newborn seed  
There's a dying voice within me reaching out somewhere  
Toiling in the danger and the morals of despair

Don't have the inclination to look back on any mistake  
Like Cain, I now behold this chain of events that I must break  
In the fury of the moment I can see the master's hand  
In every leaf that trembles, in every grain of sand

In the fall, Dylan won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his 50 years of  
songwriting, many featuring Jewish and Christian imagery.

Thank you, Mr. Robert Zimmerman.

## 7) The Bathroom is on the left

Emily Heath, who is a UCC minister up in Exeter, NH

Shares a regular joke with her wife.

Whenever they are out in public and Emily needs to use the bathroom,

She says: *'Okay honey, if I'm not out in 5 minutes, come look for me.'*

Emily says they always laugh, but actually, it's not funny.

And that's because the joke plays on the fact that Emily is a gender

Non-conforming person,

Who is female-bodied, but dresses in a way that trends masculine.

Dressed down she wears jeans and oxford shirts and baseball caps.

Dressed up she wears khakis and dress shirts and bow ties.

Her hair is cut short enough that the woman who cuts her hair charges

Her for the men's cut.

And even though Emily is not a transgendered person, she does dress in a way that is stark contrast to what the world expects.

And in the current political climate when states like North Carolina and

Texas are passing laws regulating the use of bathrooms by trans and gender non-conforming people,

Public bathrooms are not safe spaces for Emily.

Here's what happens: she walks up to the bathroom, with its picture of a woman in a dress. I push open the door, but a woman comes out and looks me, saying: *"I'm sorry, sir, this is a woman's room."*

To which Emily says: *"yes, I know,"* and keeps walking in not waiting for a response.

Emily reports that she's lucky that the worst that has happened to her

Is that she has been embarrassed,  
 But friends have reported coming out to find someone standing with a police  
 Officer who demands to see their ID.  
 And sometimes she gets lucky. She'll find a place with a gender-neutral,  
 Single-stall bathroom, which she says is like '*hitting the bathroom lottery.*'  
 Why is why we have two gender neutral bathrooms here in our church.  
 But Emily reports wishing she could spend a whole lot less time thinking  
 About bathrooms than she does,  
 And why the rest of us need to spend more time thinking about creating safe  
 spaces for trans and gender non-conforming people.

### **6) Year of Mercy**

Two years ago I asked if Pope Francis was actually a Universalist  
 In Pope's clothing.  
 This the Pope concluded his Year of Mercy by urging pastoral care  
 For divorced and remarried Catholics,  
 Of which I have quite a few in my St. Louis extended family,  
 Held a mass at the U.S.-Mexico border to support immigrants,  
 Spoke of Donald Trump's proposed border wall as 'un-Christian,'  
 And in a Historic Easter first,  
 Commemorated Jesus' washing of the feet of his disciples  
 By washing the feet of three women, three Muslim refugees and one Hindu  
 man,  
 A first for any pontiff in church history.

Francis concluded the year by publishing his book, *The Name of God is  
 Mercy*. Listen here to his words in the prologue:

*Mercy, he said, is God's identity card, and is applied as a healing balm  
For the seemingly irreparably shattered heart.*

*The fragility of our era is that we seem to doubt the chance for redemption,  
For a hand to raise you up, for an embrace to save you,  
Forgive you, pick you up, flood you with infinite, patient, indulgent love,  
To put you back on your feet.*

*We need Mercy.*

Pope Francis, praise.

### **5) Christian conviction in the age of Trump**

For those of you who may be inclined to paint Christians and Christianity  
with a broad brush,

Who confuse white evangelical Christianity with all Christianity,

This story is for you.

Because while it's true that white evangelicals voted for Trump by a 4-1  
margin,

Primarily because of his plans to nominate Supreme Court judges that will  
Overturn Roe vs. Wade,

What's also true is that the majority of evangelicals of color opposed him.

The whites cited pledges of conservative policies for their support,

While the black and brown evangelicals cited Trump's racist comments

And his treatment of women as reasons why they could never support him.

Friends, can I be honest?

One of the saddest things to me in my role as minister is how Christianity

And the ministry of Jesus has gotten conflated and confused with  
conservative politics,

A confusion and conflation that in large part progressive religious people like us have let happen by allowing conservative evangelicals to claim Jesus for themselves,

And co-opt the Bible all for themselves,

And we all too happy to read Mary Oliver poetry instead, thinking we are doing something radical.

I said I was gonna be honest.

Because the truly radical thing, actually, in the time of Trump Is, is to assemble some Christian convictions to share with people Appalled by, or thrilled with, Trump's victory.

Coming from Peter Marty, editor of the Christian Century,

These are:

*Practice the beatitudes of Jesus and you'll never be tempted to bully.*

*Speak truth to power.*

*Weak and vulnerable people need our embrace, not our mockery.*

*Welcome the stranger, build bridges of hospitality, and cherish grace.*

*Remember that once you speak a word, it's impossible to unspeak it.*

*Never view yourself as above forgiveness.*

And, says Marty: *Mr. Trump, please look for a new Bible verse to serve as your favorite. Because an 'eye for an eye' just doesn't cut it.*

*Did you know Jesus' whole life was a repudiation of vengeance?*

*Well, Mr. Trump, the good news is that yours can be too."*

Halfway there – time for an intermission:

Best epitaph on a gravestone: *I'd rather be reading this.*

Best quote for the year: *The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.* - Gloria Steinem.

Best bumper sticker: *Giant Meteor 2016. Just End it Already.*

#### **4) We don't consume the news; it consumes us.**

A poll – by show of hands, who checks their smart phones for headlines

Within 30 minutes of going to bed? Within 30 minutes of waking up?

Peter Marty says, and I agree:

I am troubled by my diet of news, as if I miss a headline

I might have missed the chance to save someone or something.

What's going on? Is there a desire in us experience catastrophe vicariously?

It is possible we year for something big to happen, but not so big it will overwhelm us?

Alain de Botton, a British philosopher and author of *News: A User's Manual*,

Believes that in our contemporary culture news has largely replaced Religion as 'our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority.'

The news, he says, not scripture or tradition or inspired ritual or sermons

Or a meditation practice informs how we handle suffering and make moral choices.

In so doing, he says, a desire to know what's going on all hours of the day,

And a fear of missing out, makes us more shallow and fearful than we may

Want to admit.

Because...*how often does hearing the news prompt us to take action on a big issue?*

*How often does taking on tragic stories paralyze us instead of motivate us?  
How often does the preponderance of negative stories lead us to forget local  
goodness and beauty?*

I think we can afford to miss all kinds of news, which I know is ironic given  
The nature of this sermon.

But will you take a challenge with me this month? Try containing your  
consumption of headlines to a specific time of day, and use the other times  
To listen to music, read a book, sit in silence, take a walk.

### **3) What Drives Hate?**

Two-hundred and thirty-six years before an election season  
That saw Mr. Trump vilify Muslims and illegal immigrants  
And receive backing from white supremacists,...

And Secretary Clinton refer to some Trump supporters as  
Belonging in a basket of deplorables who are ‘Irredeemable,’

President George Washington wrote to a Jewish congregation in Newport,  
RI saying: *“Happily the government of the United States gives to bigotry no  
Sanction, and to persecution no assistance.”*

And even as we laude Washington for writing that, it’s important to  
remember that he owned slaves, ok?

If you got to Mt. Vernon outside DC you can see where they lived.

But Washington’s aspiration for our country feels especially aspirational this  
year as post-election assaults and vandalism targeted Muslims and  
minorities...

And I endured a phone call from an angry passerby about how there is no place for our BLM banner because it is ‘*Trump Time Now...*’

And someone dropped hate letters off at the mosque in Wayland....

And more than 300,000 members are now registered members of the largest white supremacist forum, Stormfront,

And the explosion of hate in America is directly connected to the skill

Of individuals and groups to use the Internet to acquire followers, masquerade as think tanks, and raise big bucks.

*Hatred, wrote CS Lewis, is often the compensation by which the frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of fear. The more he fears, the more he hates.*

Good thing, says Peter Marty, that people of faith don’t play the reimbursement game. We’re focused on showing courage in the face of fear,

And wearing down acts of hate with beautiful acts of love.

## **2) Daniel, College Graduate.**

Who is Daniel? Daniel is the inmate in Norfolk prison

That Jon, Bob, Diane, Eileen, Brian, Mark and I have mentored since

2011 as he sought to get his college degree through the BU Prison Behind Bars program.

On Saturday, Dec. 17<sup>th</sup>, he wrote us, UUAC, this letter:

*Dear Sherborn UU Community,*

*I come before you today, with Nathan as my avatar,*

*To express my profound gratitude for the unmerited grace which*

*Has been extended to me via you your community.*

*The truth is that I'm a convicted felon with a violent record who has not lived an honorable life. With that said, I've been working for my self-improvement for a long-time now...enrolling in 2011 into the BU college Program, which is how I was matched with a team from your community. Despite my initial fear, I opened myself up because I knew I needed some positive support.*

*It turned out to one of best decisions I have ever made.*

*Because before this team built a bridge of humanity to me,*

*I had endured an eight year period of isolation without a single visitor.*

*Now I had a team of people coming to see me every few weeks.*

*The group never faltered, and they made sure I never did either.*

*Since connecting with this team,*

*I have accomplished far more from a prison cell than I ever did out on the streets.*

*I've not received a single disciplinary report, I've published a book captained our debate team to a win over Boston College, and made the Dean's list.*

*And on Dec. 15<sup>th</sup> I completed my Bachelor's Degree with a 3.8 GPA.*

*Education has changed my worldview, and you and your team*

*Have changed me.*

*You see, this letter isn't really about me.*

*It's much more about you and the often unseen impact*

*You can have on the lives of people like me every day.*

*My successes are your successes, because as my team has taught me,*

*The best investment you can make is in the humanity of others.*

*Thank you all for investing in me.*

*With friendship, gratitude and respect,*

*Daniel Throop*

### **1) Other stories you didn't hear in 2016 (to help us become intentionally tender)**

\* Of Jim Estill, CEO of a Canadian appliance company, who personally sponsored 58 Syrian families at a cost of \$1.5 million by bringing them to Canada, finding them homes, and giving them jobs.

\* Of the Islamic Society of Greater Lansing, MI that offered a temporary home to the UU congregation in Lansing after delays from construction threatened their ability to hold worship services, for free.

- Of the Muslim Community in the Bethlehem, PA Township Community Center who in September held its 6<sup>th</sup> annual blood drive in honor of 9/11 victims, giving over 40,000 pints of blood that will save over 100,000 to date.
- Of Jiva Akbor, who while traveling to Spain from Scotland, was confronted by a woman, Beverly, in the seat next to her after she saw Jiva type the word 'Allah' in a text message, saying she had asked the air hostess to intervene.

When Jiva told Beverly that Allah simply means God in English, and that she was texting her friend whose car had just been broken into, Beverly apologized profusely and said, *'it's so scary what the media led me to think,' and 'I just panicked.'*

Jiva and Beverly ended up having a three-hour heart to heart for the rest of the flight.

If you've been tempted to curse away 2016, as I have, remember these other facts you may have missed in your newsfeed:

In 2016, wild salmon spawned in the Connecticut River for the first time since the Revolutionary War.

Crowdfunding raised a million bucks for the kids of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile to go to college (both of whom died in police shootings this year).

Denmark became the first country to stop defining transgender as a mental illness.

Black incarceration went down.

Death penalties became illegal in half the world's countries.

In 2016 you tried your very best to call yourself religious,

And not be ashamed or quiet or shhh of our UU gospel.

**(Conclusion)**

And, my friends, my congregation whom I love and that renews me

Again and again,

There are so many other stories of tenderness and hope this year

To help bring some shine to a world that, according to the headlines,

Can seem dark and hate-filled.

Darkness is everywhere. Anger and bigotry are loud.

The shouting drowns out the quiet;

Tragedy and disaster block the view of the good.

Yet there are always signs of progress toward a better future.

Look, or we may miss them. Happy New Year. Amen.

