

WHO WILL HELP?
SUFFERING AND SERVICE
A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I wanted to title this sermon, “Who will Sacrifice?” - but I was afraid you wouldn’t show up...who wants to be told they need to make a sacrifice? Besides, can’t we help those who suffer the world over without personal sacrifice? Can’t we change the systems of greed and domination within our own country, without personal sacrifice? Can’t we end the war in Iraq and global warming without personal sacrifice?

After all, isn’t sacrifice one of those guilt-producing words we left behind in our former religion? Aren’t we Unitarian Universalists precisely so we can be free...and comfortable?

I know, I know, these are intense questions to be raising so close to the season of joy...but we all know they are exactly the questions we should be asking. For this is also the season of compassion.

I had wise guidance in preparing my sermon this morning from three books and many scholarly activists before me. My first source is a 2004 publication edited by Paul Loeb, a Seattle writer and thinker...the book is ; “The Impossible will Take a Little While”. Loeb chose his title after a Billie Holiday lyric....”The difficult I’ll do right now. The impossible will take a little while”.

My second source of hope on the big questions of suffering and sacrifice and world change...is Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine, a liberal Christian evangelist and an organizer of religious coalitions around issues of racism, economic justice and peace-making. I re-read sections of his 1994 book, “The Soul of Politics”.

And finally, a 1992 book of theology by Walter Wink, professor of Biblical Interpretation at Auburn theological Seminary. A book worthy of constant re-reading and reflection; “Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination”.

Sometimes I think sermon writing is like cooking a big breakfast... you keep an array of cookbooks on the shelf, you read a lot of recipes, you break a lot of eggs, you borrow some sugar, you try not to burn the toast... and you stand or fail on the quality of your skillet...what you learned in seminary, or what your mother taught you.

So Paul Loeb gets us started:
In his introduction he wrote: “We live in a time fraught with uncertainty and risk. From terrorist threats, pre-emptive wars, high-level corporate crime, skyrocketing health care costs, mounting national debt, and an economy that appears rigged for the benefit of the greedy and ruthless, the world can, at times, seem overwhelming, beyond our control.” And of course in 2007, we must add to this list; “the rapid advance of environmental degradation through global warming.”

The world and its disasters do feel overwhelming and beyond our control. Each of our families struggles with some small piece of one of these disasters...whether it's financial struggles, health and mental health care struggles, education struggles, housing struggles, employment struggles, child care struggles, elder care struggles...most of us feel overwhelmed and without the means of control.

Who will help? When we are all struggling, when we are all suffering- who will help? How do we help ourselves, our own families and also help those who are in truly dire circumstances?

How do we love our neighbor as ourself? How do we share the burdens of our brothers and sisters when our own seems so heavy.

And where do we turn for hope and encouragement and spiritual resources?

Presidential candidates on both sides of the aisle have opinions about the role of religion and churches in solving these secular issues. But the boundaries are clear to me...we always and in every way honor the separation of church and state...and we acknowledge that moral and ethical action can flow from either religious or secular sources.

Walter Wink reminds us of two important facts- that we live in a world of dominating powers and that we are meant to stand in resistance to

those powers. He means the powers of evil- the “beast” of our reading...the beast who is never far away.

There are many ways to resist structures of domination. Or as Unitarian Universalist minister The Reverend Victoria Safford puts it, “There is always small work within the great work.”

We tend to think of Martin Luther King, Jr, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Jesus, and Vaclav Havel as role models...and we foolishly believe that only the great work matters...that our small work will not make a significant difference. Sometimes this debate is cast as a choice between working to change individuals or working to change systems or structures. Which is just another version of looking for the beast.

The beast is here all around us. Our small work is necessary. All of our small works are necessary. The answer to who will help is obvious. All of our efforts matter. We need a wider lens...a deeper appreciation of our past as well as a stronger trust in the future.

History reassures us that we are part of a community of conviction. We are not alone. The great work of compassionate resistance goes back generations upon generations. We have innumerable cook books and recipes...we have a rich array of ingredients at hand, we have tools of the resistance trade to draw upon...we have the wisdom of our spiritual and ethical ancestors. We have the stories our mothers and grandfathers told to us. We have the promise of the next generation. We have every reason to hope. Every reason to trust in the community of compassion of which we are a part.

Sometimes we err in thinking our work, our plan must be perfect before we act. But when we are really hungry, we don't need a perfect omelet, when greed and vice is rampant, we don't need a thorough cleansing of the temple. Organizer and writer, Michael Lerner wrote: “Dreams of perfection are fatal to social change movements.” Gandhi insisted that “we never accept evil, even if we cannot change it.” We can't wait for the perfect organization, the perfect action, the perfect non-profit...we must continue our small work.

Two women in this church have recently seen a problem and they are addressing it. There are so many families affected by mental illness, they are starting a second evening Nami meeting, a support group for care-givers. This is their crucial “small” work.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville is a link in the chain of influence for a more just world. Many of our personal and family stories as well as the history of this congregation support the truth of our influence.

Our small works matter because we act in concert, because we do not act in isolation.

Let me share a little of my personal story here. Some of you know how I met my husband, Dave. Yes, it’s true, we met at a political demonstration. An action against a Chicago policeman to be exact. A small band of us marched around in front a downtown hotel, where this policeman was to receive an award...we didn’t think he deserved it...so we joined this small work. Dave had come to the action with his political friends, he had grown up understanding work for a better world from a secular perspective.

I came with my Methodist church group...I had grown up learning the social gospel, joining in ecumenical work with other liberal Christian churches. Dave and I came from two different worlds, with the same values....and the rest, is history.

We have continued, for over thirty years to build on these two communities – the secular ethical approach and the religious social gospel approach to social change. We have felt supported by both. We have worked closely with both. Our roots and friendships extend into both worlds. We have raised our children to appreciate both.

From both we have inherited hope...and questions about sacrifice.

My thoughts on sacrifice are these...when someone is suffering and you see a way to help...or when a system is blatantly unequal and cruel, then helping is a gift, not a sacrifice. Even when you’re tired, even when you have your own problems, even when it seems a very small work indeed, doing the right thing...having the free will and the advantages that enable you to do the right...is a gift. Sharing someone’s burden is a privilege.

Since the beast is everywhere, the beast of poverty, war, disease, inequality, hatred, greed, is everywhere, and even buried in our own hearts...

Then perhaps what is needed...needed even before sacrifice, is humility...an admitting that the beast lives in us as well. We share responsibility for the cruel conditions in the world.

Here within this religious community we find the strength for service to others. Here we find the compassion, love and help with our own burdens. Here we acknowledge the ever-present beast of suffering and also the ever-present hope of beloved community.

Advent is a season of preparation, so how do we prepare ourselves to contribute more effectively and more energetically to the great work? How do we prepare ourselves to confront the beast of domination and the powers that our tearing people's lives apart?

Think a bit more about sacrifice. I don't know where your reflections will take you. But in the meantime, work on keeping spiritually alive. Whether you act from ethical commitments or religious commitments you need a strong and vital spirit.

My thoughts on sacrifice, humility and the work of saving lives... takes me to a consideration of spiritual discipline.

This is a good time of the year to consider adopting a meaningful spiritual discipline.

- Light a candle one morning a week and sit in contemplation or prayer.

- Make a regular monthly practice of volunteering in a meaningful way.

- Keep a journal that keeps the tough questions alive in you.

- Read poetry regularly and find hope in the stories of people's lives.

- Listen to the stories of friends and neighbors. Ask them...what small work within the great work of saving the world have you participated in? Share what matters most to you.

-Practice loving your neighbor and your enemy. Monitor your inner violence. Don't ignore or excuse that mean, cynical voice.

-Once a week around the dinner table share a joy or a hope or a prayer of thanksgiving.

-Stay connected to those you love.

Remember, doing good is not at all a sacrifice.

Helping is not something so distant as the word service implies...it is a heart thing, a spiritual practice, a precious gift.

This helping, this serving, this compassion is our shared ministry.

Believe in the unseen benefits of your actions.

Take your hunger for hope and make it part of your life.

Keep your spirit alive and strong.

And know that, in all you do, you are held in the loving embrace of this community of faith.

So May It Be/Amen