

Sermon

Remind Us Again, Brave Friends

[The Reverend Victoria Safford speaking]

Would you harbor me? Would I harbor you? What is this work we are called to?

In her novel, *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson gives voice to one answer. Her main character is a minister, the son and grandson of ministers. In his old age, near the end of his life, he remembers a long ago afternoon when, as a young boy, he baptized a litter of kittens. He had a doll's dress in which he swaddled each one in turn for as long as they would stand it, which was about momentarily. "I moistened their brows," he says, "and repeated the full Trinitarian formula..."

I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time. I don't wish to be urging the ministry on you [the old man is speaking to his own son, who is a little boy], but there are some advantages to it you might not know to take account of if I did not point them out. Not that you have to be a minister to confer a blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It's a thing people expect of you.

We are expected, we are called, to be about the work of blessing. We have placed ourselves in that position. Like most callings, this one has its share of loveliness, and more than its share, especially when the subject to be blessed is a kitten at its baptism, or a rosy round baby on her dedication day, or a joyful couple joined in union, or a life well-lived, recalled in gratitude and grief by loved ones gathered at a graveside. This is lovely, hard work. And there are times when it is lonely hard work, when the blessing we're called to bestow won't come, easily; the words of our mouths, the meditations of

our hearts, aren't fully formed, aren't ready, however urgently they're needed. They're not elegantly crafted – and so we make our blessings clumsily, and they are the outward and visible signs of our absolute and inherent imperfection, and sometimes, for this reason (because they come sputtering forth out of our humility and not out of our pride, *precisely* because we don't know yet exactly what to say, nor how) these can be the most holy sacraments we make.

We are met here, at this Assembly, at this service, in an awkward, awful circumstance: within a fenced perimeter, within an historic moment of crazy, dangerous, demeaning, imperial fear. Guards are posted at the gate. Someone has decided who belongs here and who doesn't, and by what means, by what sign (or card) this will be determined. We are gathered within a state of emergency – and you know, this is true now no matter where we gather, no matter whence we come, or how or whither. Every day, at every turn, if you have any love of freedom or democracy at all, you have to be asking, “At what point does our orderly, responsible compliance become complicity (our compliance here and everywhere we go)? At what point do we take another small step into the gathering twilight of repression?” Will you harbor me? Will I harbor you? The questions are not theoretical. The times call out for a blessing. (*“Not that you have to be a minister to confer a blessing. You are simply much more likely to find yourself in that position. It's a thing people expect of you.”*)

Naomi Shihab Nye has a beautiful poem in which she remembers the great singer Paul Robeson, in whose devotion to liberty and justice the State Department perceived such a threat to national security that he was forbidden to travel. His passport was revoked. In May 1952, on his way to a concert in Vancouver, he was detained at a checkpoint in Washington State. Her poem, called “Cross That Line,” tells the story.

*Paul Robeson stood
on the northern border of the USA
and sang into Canada
where a vast audience*

*sat on folding chairs
waiting to hear him.*

[5,000 were gathered on the American side; 30,000 in Vancouver.]

*He sang into Canada.
His voice left the USA
when his body was not allowed
to cross that line.*

*Remind us again, brave friend!
What countries may we sing into?
What lines should we all be crossing?
What songs travel toward us
from far away
to deepen our days?*

The work of this service each year seems so simple: we gather to remember our beloved dead, to welcome proud new colleagues, to honor good work well done, singing our thanks through our tears— but in complicated times even the simplest act requires all our heart and mind and soul and strength, all of our imagination. We are here to hold and behold each other, comrades in a chosen work, this lovely, lonely living. We hold in our midst, in our love and gratitude, those colleagues who felt they could not come this year, whose integrity has called them to bless this moment and this gathering with their absence, and the witness of their powerful, articulate silence. We are here to hold and to harbor each other, all of us, present and not present, as each of us struggles to hear and to answer our true calling. We are clumsy and imperfect. We are brave, and we're not always brave. I know that I have come to be reminded again by you, brave friends (*precisely* by you), what countries I may (and must) sing into, what lines I should be crossing, with my body, with my heart. These are not discernments I can make in solitude. I have come to be reminded of, and blessed by, certain sacred covenants —

which are the chosen context of my life. I think to some extent it's for a similar reason that our people come to church each week, to be reminded of those things they know by heart.

Not long before he died, William Sloan Coffin, the great preacher of Riverside Church, asked a beautiful question: "Who tells you who you are?" - which is another way of asking what covenants you're bound by, who harbors you and whom you harbor. He said some people rely on money to tell them who they are, and it's a desperate standard. Some rely on status or power or position, and some need enemies to tell them who they are. ("Whatever I am, I am not *that*" - a small and cynical defining.) Too many of us, too often, he said, allow our own mistakes to tell us who we are. We look through the murky lens of shame or regret at our own shabby jumble of stumbles and sins and define ourselves by these alone. No other measure will convince us. There is grandiosity in such delusion. *Who tells you who you are?* Coffin responded by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "I have called you by name. You are mine, saith the Lord." For him, a Christian preacher, this meant, "For one thing, you never have to prove yourself. God's love is poured out universally on everyone, from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; God's love doesn't seek value, it creates it. Our inherent value is a gift, not an achievement. So you never have to prove yourself, with money or power or perfection. You only need express yourself, and abundantly return the love you've been given so abundantly."

He was preaching the core of universalism, the radical and not so new idea that everyone is worthy, everyone belongs, not by virtue of anything we've done, or anything we've earned or own, but by virtue of what we are, which is human, which is inherently dignified, which is *beloved* - which is easy to forget. And so we do this naming, this blessing, this reminding, for each other, and for everyone within earshot of our voices.

Who tells you who you are?

The worker at the gate who approves your government-issued ID? The theological

school that conferred your degree? The UUA? All of these are part of it. The congregation that ordains you – those women and men who will rise in their places to behold you and to hold you, and out of the silence and into it, shattering it, they will speak your name, they will call you out. They will bless you, that you might bless them in turn, and that you might bless this world, with all of its awkward, awful circumstances, in all its brokenness and beauty, in whatever brave, tender, fierce, faithful way you find to do it.

Who tells you who you are? Many voices. Many brave friends. I remember the first time that someone (now a young woman) called out in the night a word her mouth had never spoken and my ear had never heard: *Mama*. We are named by every covenant we choose to make and keep and honor.

This past year I joined the Youth Director at our congregation in guiding our 7th and 8th graders through a whirlwind tour of the bible. We met with them on Sunday afternoons, packing plenty of pizza to wander with them through the desert of the ancient world to see how these sacred stories speak to their lives as young Unitarian Universalists. Jill, our Director, gave them a beautiful gift in the first session: she translated the meaning of each of their names into ancient Hebrew, and spoke their names in that beautiful, strange language. She wrote each one out for them to copy from right to left on their nametags. In the second session, she told them their names in ancient Greek, and again wrote out the elegant, unfamiliar letters. They were enchanted by this, to hear that Gavin may come from “Gabriel,” which means “angel of God,” or that Rachel means Ra’quel, or “ewe,” the mother of lambs that give life to the people, or that Veda indicates “the gathering of great wisdom,” or Erin, which means “peace” in Gaelic, the language of her ancestors, must translate to “shalom.” It was like giving them a blessing, this naming, reflecting back to them a bright glimmer of who they are, whom we see when we look at them. It’s what all our work with youth and children tries to be about. It’s what all our work, yours and mine, tries to be about.

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably

leads to a deeper one, “*Whose am I?*” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose am I?” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder, *Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?*

Whose song is traveling toward you from far away to deepen your days?

What countries may we, must we, sing into? What lines should we all be crossing?

How wide is the circle of your caring, the circumference of humanity, the bright ring of life, the holy perimeter, within which you live and move?

“There is a reality in blessing,” says the old minister in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. “It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.”

Remind us again, brave friends: what is this work, this blessing, this mysterious life we are called to?