

Light in Darkness

One of the most memorable things I learned when I was in seminary is that when I step into a pulpit, I have a responsibility to tell good news. This is sacred space, and I have to come to it with the confidence that the message I've brought is gospel; that is, good news. In mainline Christian churches, people preach out of the Bible, and there are specific texts designated for each Sunday of the year. Sometimes the text for a particular Sunday is challenging enough to make you want to skip it and use something else, and you can't do that. As my New Testament professor taught us, our task is to study that text and live with it and look at it from as many angles as we can and keep at it until we find the good news. Then once we find it, we tell it. That, I believe, is what makes people of faith different from other people...our absolute commitment to finding and telling good news.

Our Unitarian Universalist text these days is not from the Bible, or from any other religion's sacred writing. Today, for so many people in pulpits all over the country, the text is in the news on tv and radio. So my job, as you can imagine, is not easy. Where in the world do I find good news in the devastating stories I hear every day? Well, I find it in the Christian sacred text, and I find it in other religious texts, and I find it in what others believe and write about. I find it in my friends who hold on to me when I give up, and whom I hold when they give up. I find it in the gas station and the coffee shop, at the farmers' market and the library. I find it

here, with you. There *is* good news, and even though that's hard to believe sometimes, I know it for sure,

As I was writing this, it was in the context of several very terrible things that were happening in our country, and I realized that by August 12, more terrible things would probably have happened. I know ministers who, over the past few years, have had to revise their Sunday sermons as late as Saturday night in the face of some devastating event that occurred that very weekend. For me, the tipping point was listening to the coverage of children being separated from their parents at the border. Hearing about that maliciousness smashed my heart to bits, and I did not know how to bear it. People said write to your representatives, sign petitions, go to demonstrations, and I didn't want to do any of that. I wanted to gather crowds of stout-hearted people and charter hundreds of buses and go to the centers where immigrant children were being held and I wanted to break them out and steal whatever records were there. I wanted to load the children on the buses and go all over the place and gather their parents and break them out, too. And then I wanted to drive around the country taking these wounded families to churches. Big congregations would take five or six families; small congregations would take one or two. The congregations would give the families cots and toys and food and safety in their social halls or worship spaces, and if the feds came to interfere, all the able-bodied members of the congregations would surround the buildings and say NO. These people are children of God and they're seeking sanctuary in this church and that's an ancient principle, a lot older than your law, and we're going to protect them. And in my vision, when anybody tries to interfere with that ancient practice of sanctuary, the God of the Old

Testament will smite them, smite them hard. Today I long for the Bible to be literal. I want justice to roll down like water, and I want it to happen the way things happen in the Bible-- quickly, immediately, suddenly, instantly. And I want some hardcore smiting to happen.

I'm not going to get what I want; I don't need to tell you that. There's no organization or movement I could join that's going to fix all this fast enough to satisfy me. So what do I do? What do we do? Where do we find good news in times such as these? Here's what I know, and it might not be enough, but it's what I know and it's been true throughout the ages. The good news is that although we are facing unthinkable damage and harm, perpetrated by our own government, none of us has to accept it, and none of us has to face it alone. Clarissa Pinkola Estes emphasizes that in the reading we heard this morning: now more than ever before, social media lets us know how many people, people who are total strangers to us, are struggling and resisting along with us, supporting us as we support them, all of us knowing what we're up against, and all of us standing together.

Estes says in that reading this morning, *“Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it. If you would help to calm the tumult, this is one of the strongest things you can do.”*

So we stay fully lit, as long as we can, and show it. And when our light falters, we'll catch light from others. We show our light, not our despair. And it doesn't have to be the light of the sun—the light of a match has a little bit of power over darkness.

What do we do when we haven't got a match? I think you know...each of us has a story we can tell about somebody who lit the way for us, even a little bit, when we were in darkness. Light shines for me in some events I've heard about recently, things that religious organizations are doing. I expect you know about First UU in Richmond—they're not just fantasizing about sanctuary, as I was. They're involved with Central Virginia Sanctuary Network to actually provide sanctuary for a woman from Honduras who's trying to avoid being deported after she came to the U.S. fleeing her abusive husband. She has been living at the church since June, and the church has offered extensive training for volunteers who want to commit to this ancient practice of sanctuary. I understand that they have a plan in place in case I.C.E. does try to come into the church. According to the plan, three volunteers—and there are many who have trained for this--will be ready: one will go down to be with the woman who's being protected, to make sure she's not alone. One will talk to the I.C.E. officials and insist on seeing their warrant before they're allowed in, and one will make a video recording of everything that happens from the time I.C.E. arrives. This is a serious commitment that First Church has made, and although not every church has the physical space to be able to actually offer sanctuary, everybody can support Central Virginia Sanctuary Network in some way, and I'm sure there are ways to support First Church. Financial support for the lawyer who's acting on this woman's behalf has been sought, and certainly messages of encouragement and concern for the woman they're protecting would do good.

We're singing today about building a land where the captives go free, and although we can't release all the people in the world who are unjustly

deprived of their freedom, we can be inspired by what the Presbyterians did at their General Assembly in St. Louis in June. They wanted to bear public witness to concerns around racism and poverty in the city where they held their G.A., and one of their acts of witness was to take up an offering at the opening worship. They raised over \$54,000, and later they marched to the City Justice Center. They gave their offering to a faith based organization called ArchDefenders, whose mission is to provide cash bail for non-violent offenders who are in jail for misdemeanors because they are too poor to pay the bail, which is sometimes as low as \$200. So the Presbyterians raised money, marched, and set free almost three dozen captives. Just as the Bible calls us to do.

Every one of you can tell a story about somebody who has bound you up when you were broken, who has helped free you from some inner captivity that you couldn't escape by yourself. These were not necessarily elaborate or newsworthy deeds, but they did, as Clarisa Estes says, let you catch light when your soul was struggling—light from other souls who were willing to show their light. You can do that, and you can do it every day in ways that are not dramatic, but they count. They multiply, they build up, because you and I are not the only ones shining our light.

Here's a poem by Marge Piercy that you may be familiar with; it's called The Low Road:

The Low Road

What can they do to you?
Whatever they want.

They can set you up, bust you,
they can break your fingers,
burn your brain with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember.
they can take away your children,
wall up your lover;
they can do anything you can't stop them doing.

How can you stop them?
Alone you can fight, you can refuse.
You can take whatever revenge you can
But they roll right over you.
But two people fighting back to back
can cut through a mob
a snake-dancing fire
can break a cordon,
termites can bring down a mansion

Two people can keep each other sane
can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.

Three people are a delegation
a cell, a wedge.
With four you can play games
and start a collective.
With six you can rent a whole house
have pie for dinner with no seconds
and make your own music.

Thirteen makes a circle,
a hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity
and your own newsletter;
ten thousand community
and your own papers;
a hundred thousand,
a network of communities;
a million our own world.

It goes one at a time.
It starts when you care to act.
It starts when you do it again
after they say no.
It starts when you say we
and know who you mean;
and each day you mean
one more.

I believe every one of us knows who we mean when we say “we”. The fact that you’re sitting here today tells me that. I am confident that every one of us has light to shine, and we understand the task we have ahead of us. This is not the first time in our history that we’ve been in dark times, and it’s not going to be the last. The good news is this: we are strong enough, we are tough enough, we are brave enough to shine our light in this darkness. Our light is going to keep others from despair, and their light is going to shine for us when we’re exhausted. Nobody has to do any of the work alone, and we will be there to see it when the tide turns.

And so may it be.