

June 7, 2020
Poplar Ridge Zoom Worship
Revolutionary Love

Welcome and Invocation: Howard Thurman: Safety, Wholeness, and Love

Readings: George Fox, Valerie Kaur, John 15:12, Genesis 1:27 Joys and

Concerns

Pastoral Prayer: In the name of the Divine within us and around us

Message: Black Mamas, White boys, and the Power of Revolutionary Love

Waiting Worship

Benediction: Howard Zinn: To be hopeful in bad times

Introductions, Announcements and Afterthoughts.

Welcome Howard Thurman was a 20th century African-American author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and **civil rights** leader who mentored Martin Luther King Jr, whose theology of radical nonviolence influenced a generation of activists, and who studied with the Quaker mystic Rufus Jones. In 1944, he helped the Fellowship of Reconciliation establish the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, which he served as co-pastor, along with a white minister. Reflecting on his experience building and pastoring a multi-racial faith community he wrote: *What had I learned about love? One of the central things was that the experience of being understood by another was of primary importance. Somewhere deep within was a “place” beyond all faults and virtues that had to be confirmed before I could run the risk of*

opening my life up to another. To find ultimate security in an ultimate vulnerability, this is to be loved.

Last Sunday as we worshiped together, we considered the query: ***What would the world be like, if everyone felt safe in it?*** And we made note of the ancient meaning of Wholeness in the linguistic roots of words like salvation and safety. This week, a reporter asked a young woman protesting the extrajudicial police killings of unarmed citizens of color how long she intended to protest, and the young woman answered, ***“until I feel safe.” Until I feel safe. She said, she would stand and march and witness and protest. If being safe carries in its deepest meanings a sense of belonging and wholeness, it also, as Howard Thurman suggests, has something to do with love. “To find ultimate security in an ultimate vulnerability,” he said, “this is to be loved.”***

Over this last week, as a nation, as white people, -- maybe even as a species, as solidarity has spread over the globe -- we have stumbled, marched, been led, been pushed, been pulled, walked on our knees through the desert **toward**and finally knelt together **before** some form of that very query that guided us in worship a week ago and challenges us a week later still to dare to imagine what it would take to bring forth a world in which everyone feels safe, in which everyone belongs to the thriving whole, feels whole, and feels loved in this ultimate vulnerability that is our shared human condition. Today as we worship, let us find rest and refuge, solidarity and hope with those who dare to imagine What it would take to create and live in **that** world -- the world of mutual safety, the world in which we bear together the risks of life and love.

Readings To inspire us in imagining that world, I offer three readings today.

George Fox Statement of 1656 Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless

you.

Valarie Kaur, a civil rights activist, filmmaker, lawyer, leader in the Sikh faith, and founder of The Revolutionary Love Project, which believes that love can be harnessed as a shared practice to fight for social justice, and that “the way we make change is just as important as the change we make.” --- A SIKH PRAYER FOR AMERICA ON NOV 9, 2016

In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark. But my faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and sexism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are standing behind us now, whispering in our ear: You are brave? What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future? ...Let us make an oath to fight for the soul of America — “The land that never has been yet — And yet must be,” as Langston Hughes wrote. — with Revolutionary Love and relentless optimism, I pray this Sikh prayer: “In the name of the Divine within us and around us, In the name of the Love within us and around us, we find everlasting optimism. Within your will, may there be grace for all of humanity.”

John 15:12-14, 17¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you.¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Genesis 1:27²⁷So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them.

Pastoral Prayer:

Holy God, In the name of the Divine within us and around us, in the Name of the Love within us and around us, we pray for mercy, for peace, for the courage to reach out to one another in our need, to see one another in our sorrow and anger, our love and joy. We pray for the moral imagination and the necessary bravery to cry, to speak, to stand, to kneel, at last, in love together, to bear together the risks that love and life bring. We give thanks

together that our friend Ann Burch is resilient and strong, and healing. We give thanks for resilient hearts far away and near, for hearts and lives in the midst of life's transitions. Together, we hold Bill and Tom and their family in the Light and pray for their strength and for the Spirit to sustain them. We pray for the clear sight to witness and answer that of God in Everyone, to make the witness of God in them a blessing upon this Good Earth, to honor the image and likeness of the Holy in all Created Being. We pray that we learn at last to follow and be led by that greatest of commandments, to Love one another, as Friends. Amen.

Benediction Howard Zinn, who died in 2010 was an American historian, writer, socialist thinker and chair of the history and social sciences department at Spelman College, America's oldest private historically black liberal arts college for women. He wrote *A People's History of the United States*. *To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness... What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction...And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.*

‘with Revolutionary Love and relentless optimism,’ ‘In the name of the Divine within us and around us, In the name of the Love within us and around us,’ may we : “Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you.”

Message: This week was the week that my two boys and I had a long ongoing conversation about whiteness, about blackness, about the kind of white men I hope they will grow up to be, about racism, about the historical use of violence, usually by white men, to enforce an economic system that has long depended

on racism and white supremacy to divide and rule. It was also the week that my 12 year old son Cyrus experimented with defiance. For the first time he said to me, "I don't have to," with a low, adolescent danger in his voice, daring me to make him. I was trying to explain to him why I felt it was important for us to make signs and to attend a local women's rally for racial justice, organized by an inter-generational group of women of color, in Ithaca. The anger I felt when he said that -- "I don't have to" -- was like a white hot wave -- and I had an irrational image of myself compelling him to hold a magic marker and forcing him to move it across the poster board to make a sign. The word that had been repeated by our president flashed behind my eyes: "dominate." I noted my desire to dominate -- to impel my 12 year old son's compliance with my wishes, and I'm sure he saw that impulse move across my face, as he was watching me very closely. But I turned away and busied myself in the refrigerator, and said, trying to keep my voice neutral but not quite succeeding, "you're right, Cyrus, you don't have to. I can't make you. I won't force you." With as few words as I could manage, knowing he would soon tune me out and that being succinct is a challenge for me, I told him that I hoped he would be the kind of white boy, white person -- the kind of person -- who is concerned and caring enough to make an effort, who even goes out of his way occasionally, who tries even and especially when he doesn't have to. And then I walked out onto the deck with magic markers to start making my own sign, with Caz, Cyrus' nine year old brother. We got busily to work, Caz chattering in a way that is both heart-clenchingly endearing to me, and also probably nefariously pitched for maximum older brother annoyance. Cyrus eventually stomped out onto the deck, took all of the markers, went over to the other side of the deck, as far away as he could get from us, snarled and muttered and refused to say what he was creating, and snapped at Caz that he could get up and come get a marker himself. When he was done, he clomped sullenly over and flung the cardboard poster at me with a gruff "here." And it said: "What if We Were the Poor Ones?" in small, careful, plain letters across the top of a piece of cardboard. I almost cried in relief and gratitude. But instead, I told him that it was a beautiful, and empathetic sentiment, that he had a good heart, and a keen intuitive sense, asking people to consider what it would be like if our lives were less safe, if we were less fortunate. He shrugged, but I saw his scrunched shoulders relax just slightly, and his big, inchoate, non-specific, man-sized anger softened, shrunk a little, to fit a bit more comfortably into that 12 year old boy's body.

Maybe it's always been hard for mothers to raise up boys who become good, kind, gentle men in a world where the dominant norm is dominance, where power and capacity to harm are equated. Maybe it's always been hard for good, kind, gentle boys to figure out how to be men in that world. When we made it down to the rally, I stood in awe at the strength of the black and brown women who dared all who would listen to hear their rage and exhaustion, who testified that George Floyd summoned all mothers when he called out for his Mama in those moments before he died, who spoke in poetry and song of the ways a heart and a body can be broken, can heal, can be the fertile ground of some new and daring bravery. My boys and I listened as one woman sang Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*. We could not see her, where we were standing, near the back of the crowd, but we could hear her voice as it keened: *Southern trees bear a strange fruit ...Blood on the leaves and blood at the root...Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze...Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees...* Caz asked what the song was about. And so I explained to my white boys what black mamas have to teach their black boys, about lynching, a word that they had not heard before, a word they had not had to hear. At 1PM, the 300 or so people present knelt on the hard pavement, and observed, with health care workers all over the country, 8 minutes and 46 seconds of silence, to mark the time it took for George Floyd's heart to stop beating. Cyrus sat off to the side, with his sign face down so it couldn't be read. Caz tapped his sign on the ground in an absent-minded kind of rhythm, punctuating the solemn silence. It read "Black Lives Matter to me" with a heart below the words. The silence was long, even for a Quaker. The pavement was rough, and hot. Again Caz asked about what we were doing and why. And so, again, I explained. We were honoring and remembering a black man who had died, by kneeling, all of us together in silence, for the same amount of time that a white police officer had knelt on his neck, until his body had finally stopped working. It is like praying all together at the same time, I said, and all over the country people are right now doing the same thing, hoping that we will find a way to make a world where nothing like that happens again. My sign was a take off on a t-shirt that my husband George frequently references, seen 10 years ago on a Quaker man at George's first Friends' gathering, which read, "I will not raise my children to kill your children." My version of this statement for this rally was "This White Mama will not raise my white boys to desecrate Black Bodies." And then it occurred to me that I should ask my boys if they understood what my sign meant. So, I

queried them, "Do you guys know what desecrate means?" They didn't, so I explained that it means to violently disrespect, to violate something Sacred. Their silence made me press further: "Do you know what Sacred means?" Again, they didn't, so I brushed off my working definition: "*Sacred means something is so important and valuable that there's no possible way to describe or calculate or measure HOW important and valuable it is within our current methods of assigning value. It's beyond the words and the concepts of buying or selling or price. Even if you had the most money in the world it would not express its worth.*" They thought about that, and then Cyrus said: "So basically you're saying Black Bodies are Sacred?" I exhaled, not realizing I had been holding my breath. "Yes." I answered. "Yes, that's what I am saying." Just like yours. Just like ours.

When Quakers affirm the statement of our founder George Fox, who advised Friends to Walk Cheerfully over the World, answering That of God in Everyone, we mean Everyone. Black boys. Black men. White boys. White men. Republicans, Democrats, Policemen in Riot Gear shoving peaceful protestors. Angry Protestors. Those who seek to dominate. Those who seek to understand. When we say there is That of God in Everyone we mean that it is our faith and our practice -- to search for, to seek and to have the intention of finding in everyone -- the imprint of the Sacred, the image and likeness of the Holy, the hidden wholeness, complete and belonging unto God -- birthright of all Being, toward which we turned together during last week's worship. We mean that there is Here, Now, among us, with us, in us, in the present time, in the current age, in this moment, in these bodies, on this Earth -- even in all its desecration, its cruelty, its ugliness -- something that's so important and valuable that there's no possible way to describe or calculate or measure HOW important and valuable it is within our current methods and concepts of assigning value. We mean there is in everyone a divine "*place*" -- *a seed, an indwelling Light -- as early Quakers called it -- beyond all faults and virtues as Howard Thurman wrote, that can be confirmed and answered, in one another.* And it is in this confirmation that it is possible to meet one another, to look with the eyes of love, and so to find ultimate security within this human experience of ultimate vulnerability. We mean that we can

practice embodying this pattern, being this example, because we believe, we know, we witness, and we testify that such a practice carries a power that is revolutionary. Revolutionary Love.

Because to be loved is to feel safe, finally. It is to have one's Sacred-ness confirmed. It is, at last, the way we experience wholeness, and safekeeping, in a mortal body. It is ultimately what that protester is so poignantly seeking, in her quest for safety, and what Cyrus is seeking, and what I am seeking. What black men, white men, white mamas, black mamas, black boys and white boys are seeking. what everyone is seeking. Each of us longs for wholeness, for safety -- which is to say, each of us longs to be loved.