

Order of Service – December 6, 2020
Hoping Against Hope

Greeting

Invocation -- Serenity Prayer

Hymn: O Come O Come Emmanuel, Green 54, 1st and 2nd Verses

Readings : Romans 4:17-18; Parker Palmer, Richard Rohr

Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer Grant us Wisdom, Courage, and Peace

Pastoral message: Hoping Against Hope

Silent worship

Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel, G54, 3rd verse

Benediction O Come Emmanuel

Afterthoughts

Introductions /Announcements

Welcome/Invocation

I begin today with a famous prayer. Known as The Serenity Prayer, it was written by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932-33. Its most common and well known version goes like this: *God Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*

Niebuhr's prayer originally asked for courage first, and specifically for changing things that must be changed, not things that simply can be changed. So, here is the original text of the prayer that came to be known as The Serenity Prayer: *God give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other.*

As we worship together today on the second Sunday of Advent, let us consider change. Let us consider the courage it takes to change the things that must be changed, let us consider the serenity required to accept what is not ours to change, and let us consider how we might come by the wisdom to know the difference.

We will begin by singing the first and second verses of the Hymn O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Readings

Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness: Journey Toward an Undivided Life As Wendell Berry has reminded us, big problems never have one big “fix.” They yield only to a million-million human scale answers to the question, “Under these circumstances, what’s the right thing to do?” The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in the hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love.

brief quotation from Franciscan priest Richard Rohr: “The only way out and through—for either side of any dualism (or paradox) ,...—is a kind of *universal forgiveness of Reality for being what it is*; it thus becomes the bonding glue of grace which heals all the separations...”

Romans 4:17-18 —in the presence of the God in whom he believed, the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not yet exist, Abraham hoped against hope...

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

O Come, O Come Emmanuel. Come Thou Wisdom from on High, and to us the path of Knowledge Show. Grant us the courage to change what must be changed. Give to us the serenity to accept what cannot be altered. Help us to discern and live into the wisdom -- your wisdom, divine wisdom -- to know the difference between those two. In discernment grow our capacity to forgive, to hold paradoxes with grace -- to forgive this world for being what it is, and ourselves for existing as best we can within it. With hope against hope for all that is, and for all that has not yet been called into being, we pray together today. Amen.

Pastoral Message

Two years ago, I took my then 10 year old son Cyrus out of school for the day and went on a road trip with him to my alma mater, Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, where we attended a workshop and lecture series

led by Micah White, one of the young activists who organized the Occupy Wall Street movement, and the author of the manual for social change *The End of Protest: a New Playbook for Revolution*. Cyrus was the youngest attendee of the workshop by at least 15 years. As an ice breaker, we went around the room saying one thing that we would change about the world if we could wave a magic wand. There were many great ideas, from ending mass incarceration, to forgiveness of debt, to changing the way corporations are rewarded for externalizing the costs of their industries. When Cyrus' moment came, he paused, and then he lifted his arms up and called out joyfully, 'Kids would be in charge!' Everyone laughed, and Mr. White, charismatic and thoughtful, affirmed my son, saying with seriousness, "that's the most truly radical suggestion we've had yet." he went on to assert that the youth-led movements concerning climate change and gun violence were the vanguard of what he predicted would be a successful campaign to lower the voting age. Affirmed and taken seriously, Cyrus sat back in his chair, very satisfied to be on the cutting edge.

Now 12 years old, he is on the threshold of adolescence, and is entering a new territory of growth and autonomous thinking. He is currently given to proclamations of his opinions that carry sweeping generalizations, and a certain petulant yet imperious force, as if they are calling reality into being by their decree and establishing immovable facts by their utterance. With statements like 'Religion is Stupid,' or ' Our Democracy is Useless,' I hear him grappling with the systems that are the givens of his world -- the economic, social, political, national, familial, philosophical, technological, religious, ecological, biological systems that people have been gifted, or inherited, or developed and carried, refined, passed down, or codified for all of us to live inside and over which he has very little influence. As he grows and comes of age and becomes a man, he will have to figure out how he fits within these given systems, or how he does not, what his place is, and what his role is. At the moment, he seems to feel that his place is a critic's corner, and his task, his mission, is critiquing and passing succinct judgements. He seems to have a natural aptitude for it. His pronouncements have prompted long discussions, conversations in which he is coached to present evidence and back up his sweeping theses. So I find myself not defending the systems he critiques, but trying to explain why they exist as they do, how we got where we are, as a species, as a country, as a planet -- what's changed, what could be changed, what should be changed. And this week, in trying to articulate to him how we got here, I had a vivid memory of myself as a 12 year old, in transit, on the way to where we were headed, to the here and now. I remembered being

on the Auburn City School District school bus, as it lumbered up Standardt Ave in Auburn toward East Middle School. And as it crossed over Grant Ave, I remember gazing out at the -- to me -- bleak expanse of sprawl toward the East. At that time there was not as much development as there would be -- no Walmart yet -- but still, in *my* 12 year-old critic's estimation, it was a terribly ugly part of town. Like a strip mine, or an open pit, it was, to my eye, a sacrificial zone for squat concrete boxes and acres of parking lot wastelands where people told themselves that this was what progress looked like, and how wealth was built. And I knew, with the total certitude and absolute moral clarity that my son now wields, that the wealth which was surely being built, just as surely brought with it the denuding of wealth -- the denuding of the wealth of indigenous cultures, and the wealth of the earth -- the wealth of soil, water, air, habitats all over the earth, there in that hard place, and in the far away places where the earth was also stripped bare -- to extract the resources necessary to make that spreading grey desert. I remember sensing the enormity of the thing that I was a part of, the thing that was happening, the big and inexorable changes, the movement of a whole species' efforts and ingenuity, and also its cumulative collateral damages and exploitations. If I could have put what I was certain of into words when I was 12, in that one glimpse of the sprawl that led away from the school bus and out into the future, it would have been a furious treatise about how the aggregate of billions of choices seemed to show that these losses of beauty and of non-monetary kinds of wealth were considered acceptable trade-offs, warrentable side effects of human progress, economic growth, and technological advancement -- simply The Cost of Change. Of course we know now from this vantage point that The human progress on Grant Ave in the Auburn NY, of 1988 would replicate itself in town after town after town across the country, and if it brought wealth and opportunity, it also brought loss -- loss of open space, of simplicity, of quiet. loss of darkness at night, loss of the witness of unharmed land, loss of a place's seasons and all the stories and teachings that that place had to give to us, loss of our own graciousness in receiving such gifts....loss of other possibilities for a place, and of the culture of particular places. I was never so articulate as that of course, in 1988. Like Cyrus, I probably would have said something pithy and passionate, like 'Capitalism is Cannibalism,' without really being able to offer cogent supporting evidence other than my sputtering and inchoate feelings. But, there would have been some truth in that oversimplified and deliberately provocative critique. And so I understand and appreciate why Cyrus declares things like Religion is Stupid and Our Democracy is Useless. Like my 12 year old self, my almost teenaged boy is displeased with the systems that are on offer for him to grow up in, and he can't do anything about it. The systems are

too big for one prophetic tween to alter, and there isn't another world to be a part of. The need to change the things that must be changed is way past urgent, for him. Finding serenity would for him be a capitulation to stupidity and uselessness. The enormity of the losses in this pandemic year are difficult for adults to fully grasp, much less for a seventh grader, and ambient loss looms large, all around him. He's too angry to forgive reality for being what it is. This kind of prophetic rage is present also in activists who call for the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or for the Defunding of the Police. They want a different world to be part of. They want systems governed by different assumptions and values, with less rationalized trade-offs and justified losses. Of course they do. They should. They must. God, grant them the courage to change the things that must be changed, *serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other*. And grant those virtues also -- God of Abraham, Who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not yet exist -- grant those virtues also to the more moderate among us, and to the conservatives as well.

In Cyrus' developing brain, reality is categorical, black and white, set in binary terms. 'Nothing's changed,' he proclaimed, when we talked about last month's election and its aftermath. In a certain way, he's right. We have the same old brittle dualisms -- us and them, red and blue, trump supporters and trump resisters. we're still polarized, and the pandemic is not abating. we are beset by the same metastasizing misinformation and toxic media bubbles, the same sense that this is not working for us, the same culture war doom loop, as one columnist put it this week, and the same dire news of the faltering planetary life-support systems, as the UN Secretary General warned humanity on Thursday.

But, in another way, as prophetic and morally righteous as he is, Cyrus cannot see that ambiguous though it may be, change *has* happened, change *is* happening -- in the last month, in the last year, in the last 500. It's not as satisfyingly definitive as he, and frankly I, would have hoped for. But it's also not a binary -- with appreciable change on one side and no change at all on the other. While the lines of our country's division have sharpened and clarified, so has our appraisal of what's wrong, and what we could do about it. As people who work with 12 step programs and pray the serenity prayer know, we can't address any problems we don't first acknowledge that we have. And we **are** recognizing the problems -- more and more of us are acknowledging the long and deep systemic problems, the profound losses, the legacy of sufferings that have been exposed in this revelatory year. Our democratic system of governance has come through a near death experience. It's not by any means

out of danger, but neither has it capitulated completely to Stupidity and Uselessness. We've shown ourselves this year, this month, that we have some resilience even when we're exhausted and stretched to the limit. Enormous challenges lie ahead, possibly insurmountable ones, and just as possibly they will be ones we will yet find the capacity to meet. We have built some skill, this year, in Abraham's practice of hoping against hope -- hoping *even though we know* the full extent of the harm and the wrong that can and has been done. We have felt the presence of the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not yet exist. We have built some skill in experiencing loss. These are not insignificant lessons on the way to serenity and insight.

And so, tired, sad, confused, relieved, ambivalent, we come to the second Sunday of Advent, and the last month of this bruising year. In past years, during Advent, we've sat together in our meeting house in silence, holding in our hearts and in the collective heart of our gathered meeting this season's themes of waiting, of uncertainty, of vulnerability, of hope in the darkest of the years' days, knowing that it is the darkness that calls forth the light, that invites our faith and our practice, that gives rise to the stubbornness of our hope, that holds in its velvet shrouds all that we hope **for**.

This year, everything has changed, and everything is the same. Loss is, as ever, easier denied and ignored than allowed to work upon our hearts, to break them open and to tender them. Courage and change have never come easily. It takes work to live in the tension between being in the world as it is and being led by a vision of what it could be. It takes a willingness to forgive reality for being what it is. It takes the kind of hope that has no illusions. It takes a prayer: *God give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

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Hymn O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, Verse 3

Benediction

big problems never have one big "fix." They yield only to a million-million human scale answers to the question, "Under these circumstances, what's the

right thing to do?” The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain loss will bring: these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings.

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