

Transcript 08/02/2020 "The Writing on Your Wall"

00:08

i can't wait to show you where i grew up

00:15

walk you round the foothills of my town

00:21

probably feel like you've been there

00:29

i've been before you for six months now we'll probably have to sleep in separate bedrooms

00:42

pack a shirt for church because we'll go

00:49

i'm not trying to scare you off but i just thought that we should talk

00:56

few things out before we hit the road

01:03

if i bring you home to mama i guess i better warn you she falls alone a little faster than i

01:14

do and my dad will check your tires pour you whiskey over the rice and take your

01:34

i'll be fine but you'll be breaking more hearts than mine

01:48

my sister's gonna ask a million questions say anything she can't tell me

02:02

and when you meet my high school friends they'll buy you drinks and fill you

02:08

in on all the crazy nights i can't outlive if i bring your heart to mother

02:18

i guess i better warn yet she falls in love a little faster than i do

02:28

and my dad would check your tires for you whiskey holder i

02:46

i'll be fine but you'll be breaking more

03:14

i guess i'd better warn you she feels every heartache i go

03:21

through and if my daddy sees me crying or some whiskey over i said

03:41

i'll be fine but you'll be breaking more hearts than mine

03:52

you'll be breaking more hearts than mine

04:11

welcome to the unitarian universalist church of utica i'm carol gable a member of the board and

04:16

worship committee whether you are visiting for the first time or have been a member for many years

04:21

you are welcome here whatever faith you have known if any you are welcome here whoever you are

04:28

and whoever you love you are welcome here we are invited to bring our whole selves to this worship

04:33

service our doubts as well as our convictions the pain and joy we have known our longing for

04:39

connection and understanding every part of you is welcome here if you are signing in today for the

04:46

first time we are glad you have joined us and hope you will stay for informal conversation

04:50

and breakout groups after the service we have a couple of announcements today our congregation is

04:57

co-hosting the showing of a documentary called the condor and the eagle this friday at six o'clock

05:02

our co-hosts include the uu ministry for earth and the uu young adults for climate justice

05:08

the documentary is about climate justice particularly in regards to indigenous people

05:12

the makers of the film will be hosting a discussion after the screening and the

05:16

entire event is scheduled to end at 8 pm this is being sponsored by our climate justice committee

05:22

so it's free to those of you who would like to participate and we hope many of you will
more info

05:27

about how to register and get the zoom link is available in this week's newsletter or
last week's

05:33

next friday from 4 to 6 at oneida square in utica there will also be a protect

05:38

the people rally in support of the local black lives movement this is partially in
response to

05:43

recent legislation proposed in albany by the sheriff of oneida county which many fear
will

05:47

repress people's ability to protest police actions lastly a session of small groups that
will meet

05:53

weekly begins meeting this week so there is still time to sign up i think online and
commit to five

05:59

weeks of listening deeply and speaking from your heart with a group of five to eight
people

06:04

you will form deeper connections with others in the church than you might expect

06:08

and more information is also available in the newsletter

06:12

let us open our hearts and minds to the experience of community and the wisdom of
love

06:25

so

06:36

so

06:54

so

07:22

so

07:31

so

08:04

so

08:56

so

09:08

so

09:31

welcome to our time together and before we move to the call to worship i want to be sharing with

09:38

you a little bit about who i am i'm randy becker i'm here as your guest minister this morning i'm a

09:44

child of this congregation i grew up in the church of the reconciliation universalist unitarian in

09:49

utica new york from about the age of one and a half and i'm now back again as a member of the

09:56

congregation so i bring ancient greetings present greeting and even greetings to a future that we

10:02

will share together come let us join in this spirit of worship into this time let us let go

10:10

of the fears that we may be having in these days that we might be with each other not fearfully

10:17

but hopefully let us let go of those angers we may feel about having to be in these kind of times

10:24

that we might be in companionship with which with each other without being wrath with each other

10:31

may we let go of all those demands that we may have on us that we might be together openly and

10:41

how to say it in a way that we aren't feeling like we're demanded from somewhere else

10:47

and so we're invited to worship a time that moves out of the ordinary time to a special time

10:54

where we can look after deeper things look for more important things look farther into ourselves

11:02

and to each other in this spirit may we join together in this worship

11:08

now we have a hymn of the month coming up number 354 we laugh we cry and of course this being the

11:15

first sunday of the month it may be new to some of us i have to tell you this is one of those hymns

11:20

that i always find myself swaying to so if you do too as you sing along please don't feel afraid to

11:28

get a little motion into the song oh not quite like that um so number 354 we laugh we cry

11:50

we laugh we cry we live we die we dance we sing or song we need to feel there's something

12:01

here to which we can belong we need to feel the freedom just to have some time alone

12:14

but first of all we need close friends we can call love everyone and we believe

12:37

we have our hearts to give we have our thoughts to receive and we believe

13:18

we dedicate our minds and hearts to the spirit of this child

13:26

and we believe in life and in the strength of

13:42

and with the grace of age we share the window of youth and we believe that showing

14:01

of is and our time is very brief the death of one among us

14:14

but fears we live so shall we die and when our lives are done

14:38

we have found our place to be together

15:11

we seek to put him into all the waste of human strife

15:19

we search for truth equality and blessed peace

15:31

make sense of what we find and we believe in life

15:39

and in the strength of love and we have found our joy being together

15:50

and in our search for

16:03

is the flaming chalice is the symbol of unitarian universalism it is an everlasting flame
for this

16:16

community it offers its warmth to those who are cold it provides light to those who
would see

16:22

it purifies and transforms the sanctuary in the sacred space

16:27

this congregation in the sacred community may its flame burn true and high and
strong

16:41

i want to think together a little bit of all ages across all sorts of ways of being

16:46

about how we communicate with one another and specifically about how often if we
think about

16:52

well we'll tell someone but if what if the person isn't there

16:56

or we'll write someone but what if that person can't read or we can't write or

17:02

what if they're at a distance how do we communicate things of importance in the
world

17:08

where we might not be able to speak to people we may not be able to write them
anything about it

17:13

we can't write a letter to the editor perhaps but one of the ways we do that often is
what i call

17:19

public art or the handwriting we see on the walls of our lives so for example we might see this

17:30

i remember when all this was trees someone trying to tell us that all the world we built up

17:38

has been so affected by what we built that we no longer get to see the beauty of nature

17:44

or all that is around us or we might see a this which comes out of our present day life

17:55

an image of george floyd in minneapolis painted so that everyone in the community everyone in

18:01

the state everyone in the world in fact could see the face of george floyd and the names of others

18:08

who died upon the streets of the united states at the hands of police it was a way of saying

18:15

something to the public it was a way of taking the feelings of one person and transforming them

18:22

into something more we see similar public art in things like a black lives matters

18:31

mural painted upon a street so not just saying it to one person but everyone who drives by

18:37

sees it we even have this wonderful example in which an entire street took on black lives

18:43

matter so that from the air people could see it people could know that there was a sentiment there

18:51

you know in these times we also see other ones this is one of our covid times

18:57

a mural painted to remind us that love is still possible even in times when we have to wear masks

19:04

and then there's also this delightful one of our dear friend greta and painted underwater

19:12

and on top of water on a side of a building so the message is she's trying to work with climate

19:18

change and the issues of sea level rise and all that for all of us she doesn't have our addresses

19:25

she's not going to suddenly show up in our living room but through public art

19:30

we get to see a message that is larger than ourselves and so in this i want to bring us

19:37

to attention to what public art is some call it graffiti but i call it public art the way in which

19:43

hearts and hearts and minds and minds and mouths and mouths and ears and ears and eyes and eyes

19:49

can communicate with one another in a way that is both personal and very public and so a thought if

19:58

you were to have and work that you created out in public what would it say what would you want

20:06

to put on a wall somewhere that you would want others to see and know what you had to say in life

20:14

and what message have you ever seen on a wall somewhere in your life that you took home with you

20:22

and has become a part of you may these thoughts be with all of us in all of our times and all of our

20:29

ages remember that though we cannot collect our plate offering in person if you would

20:37

like to continue to support our mission to nurture spiritual community honor diversity

20:42

and advocate for social justice please donate online you can see the link there and in a

20:47

moment i'll put it in the chat or uh send a check and and please remember or send a check

20:53

every month or so to the church with plate in the memo line so we can continue to support our

20:57

community and now we practice community candles which is an opportunity for the congregation

21:08

to be with one another as we mark notable things happening in our lives

21:13

if you'd like to light a candle where you are please do so and in frame if you would like if

21:18

you'd like to briefly share about a significant event in your life and have me light a candle

21:24

i'm ready please unmute yourself or type into the chat you can also privately message me in the chat

21:32

to light a candle in silence for you and i want to choose the opportunity to begin this today

21:39

i want to acknowledge my father bill becker this would have been his 100th birthday today he died

21:46

six years ago in 1948 bill and my mother gladys found that beautiful church you see

21:53

in the background that is the church of the reconciliation universalist unitarian

21:57

down on oneida square and for both of them it was like coming home

22:04

my father was raised an episcopalian my mother a methodist but they had always

22:09

had many many questions in their lives about religion so they found a home in that church

22:15

then in 1978 my father was very instrumental in building the building that you're now

22:21

seeing is our worship home on highway so i want to light my candle today for my father bill becker

22:30

and also for all those visionaries who across the decades

22:35

have meant that liberal religion lived here in utica well for all that has been shared both

22:43

in words here but also in the chat and in our hearts and our minds we give thanks

22:50

that we can be here with each other for each other in the spirit of our community candles

23:16

is

23:31

of compassion

23:46

giving of life

24:12

well now i invite you to turn your attention to a story and it's a story

24:19

out of the hebrew scriptures out of the book of daniel and i'm going to basically tell

24:25

you the version of it because whenever you get it out of the scriptures itself

24:29

there's always problems with it because of the language or all kinds of theological overlays but

24:36

this is the story as i learned it in the sunday school at this congregation when i was a child

24:43

long long time ago there was a king in babylon and his name was balthazar and he was a very proud man

24:54

and he loved to party and so one point he called together a thousand of his lords and all of his

25:03

top ranking officials and he was drinking wine with them in fact he drank so much wine he thought

25:09

he ought to be good to others so he suddenly commanded that his servants bring in all the

25:16

various things that his father nebuchadnezzar had brought from jerusalem which included all kinds

25:23

of goblets and bowls and everything else and soon there was all kinds of wine drinking going on and

25:31

people were raising up praises to various gods the gods of gold and silver of bronze and iron

25:38

and wood and stone everything they drank from they were praising but then suddenly a hand appeared

25:48

and the hand began to write upon the wall of the chamber and it was mysterious writing that

25:59

belgium couldn't understand he couldn't figure out what it was so he said you know we need to have

26:04

someone who can come in and interpret this for us he said bring in all the wise people we can find

26:10

all the magicians all the chaldeans all the various people that might interpret this and

26:16

whoever can give me an interpretation of this i will give them a gold necklace i will give

26:21

them purple robes i will make them the third most powerful person in the entire empire well in came

26:29

all the enchanters all the magicians and looking at the writing on the wall they said

26:36

i haven't got a clue don't know what it means don't even know how it got there all very

26:42

mysterious well suddenly the queen broke in and said oh my king what are you doing you've got

26:48

someone in your midst his name is daniel and he is very very good at interpreting all manner of

26:56

things and so in interpreting all manner of things he might be able to tell you what these words mean

27:04

well daniel was summoned and he took a look up at what was on the wall

27:09

and he said you know first of all i hear you're making promises about giving necklaces and

27:15

robes and power keep those for yourself you're gonna need them and then he said

27:21

here is what i see up on that wall there are four words and there are var very simple words

27:32

parses whoops got to get this way parson now what does this mean and at this point daniel

27:38

said very simply the first two have to do about the division of things the taking away of things

27:46

one is that your power is going to diminish and your kingdom is going to fall

27:54

your days are numbered the days of your kingdom is numbered and then tackle you have been weighed on

28:02

the scales of justice and been found wanting and parson your kingdom will be divided up

28:11

among foreigners and strangers now balcazar didn't like this he was willing to give all sorts of

28:18

stuff to daniel but he didn't like what he heard so he heard it and then he put it out of his mind

28:26

and at that point however maybe he could have made a better choice and we'll talk about that because

28:33

by that nightfall balazar was dead and by the next day his entire kingdom was divided up among

28:41

others and so the story of balthazar's feast and that wonderful axiom of the handwriting on the

28:51

wall so i want to go back to this story as part of my sermon reflections i want to go back to what

29:00

we know is going on in this story and you'll see why i'm thinking of it in a few moments because i

29:06

think these times have called this story back to mind so remember we talked about nebuchadnezzar

29:13

he was the great king and well he thought he was a great king and the more he thought he was a great

29:19

king the more and more he took pride in himself oh i keep moving my screen i'm sorry he he would

29:27

take pride in himself and then when he no longer thought he had to give any allegiance to god

29:34

or to anything of value other than himself when he saw himself as more important than the law more

29:40

important than any kind of spiritual thing he fell from grace he fell from power he became it says in

29:47

the original scripture like an animal living among the animals but then he had an enlightenment that

29:55

his low status was because he didn't revere things of value that he saw himself as more powerful than

30:01

everyone else and so the first part of the story is about how nebuchadnezzar

30:06

upon realizing that he had to have something larger than himself something he remembered always

30:13

that was more important than just his own power and his own glory was restored to power

30:20

but then following his death we get balthazar and mothers are has this strange occurrence

30:28

in which a hand shows up and writes on the wall we get that wonderful phrase the handwriting on

30:34

the wall out of this and he doesn't know what to make of it and so he has to call

30:40

in this boy from jerusalem basically daniel to tell him what it means

30:46

and in the end even when he is told what it means he doesn't take it to heart he's more interested

30:54

in wine drinking praising all the gods of gold and silver and stone and wood and glass and all that

31:03

than to talk about the most meaningful things in life now one of the questions is why would i think

31:10

about that well one it takes me back to when i was in the sunday school in this congregation

31:15

and i would think about such things because we were told these stories i think one of the goals

31:21

of our religious education in those days was to make sure that we universalist unitarians

31:26

were some of the most religiously literate among the youth in our community so we knew

31:31

all these stories and we knew where those common phrases came from like handwriting on the wall

31:37

but i've been thinking about it more recently for another reason and this is it

31:42

more and more we're having people talk to us about what's going on in the world

31:48

and in all the screens what do we see they're always in front of bookcases

31:56

bookcases which are sort of a form of handwriting on the wall you know it's you can see what's out

32:02

there you get someone standing there and i don't know about you but i find myself doing something

32:08

when they're talking in front of the bookcases i find myself turning my head and wondering

32:16

what have they been reading in fact i stopped hearing them and i start thinking about what

32:22

books are on their shelf what is there there that they're trying to talk about

32:28

that they're not really talking about and so i think about what libraries look like

32:33

those backdrops we often get the idealized backdrop that looks like a simple everyday

32:42

library one of things we discover in this modern world is that white bookcases

32:46

are very important and they need to be filled with books and books that we might wonder about

32:51

what it is this person has been reading okay i'll fess up i'm going to show you one of my bookcases

32:58

yep there it is it's um we've got the uh there it is that's the uh meditating buddha dog there's a

33:06

picture of my daughters they're in that frame there's volumes of poetry that my wife edited

33:17

many things up on that bookcase but why am i talking about this

33:23

because all of us probably have bookcases or the equivalent we have the cases in which we

33:31

keep the things that are very important to us and we put them behind us as a backdrop to who we are

33:38

we use these things as sort of a proof of here's all i've read here is all i know

33:45

here's everything that you need to know about me summed up by the things that are behind me

33:52

sort of like our handwriting on the wall and so the question is if you stand in front of

34:00

your bookcase what am i going to see what books are going to be there what books will tell me

34:08

about you but that's only half of the question i may see the books you put in your bookcase

34:17

i may see the books you claim to have read i can see the books that you actually probably have read

34:24

but i want to suggest for all those people who are pundits on tv

34:29

all those people sitting in their well-appointed libraries and to us that that's not enough

34:37

you know i'm sure there are people who walked by that wonderful public art for george floyd

34:45

looked at it said they were moved by it but then went home and didn't change their lives at all

34:55

i'm sure there are people who have seen greta thunderberg and her plea for climate awareness

35:03

we've seen public art like the one we saw of her

35:07

but then went home and didn't do much about the climate i'm sure there are those who have

35:14

seen the black lives matter painted outside lafayette square on the street in washington

35:21

and said yeah that's how it ought to be but then the question is have they gone

35:25

home and changed anything in their lives have we gone home and changed anything in our lives

35:35

to show that our reading the black lives matter to show that our seeing greta's image to show

35:44

that seeing george floyd on that wall to see an awareness of all that has changed us in any way

35:54

the bookcase i really want to see is not the bookcase filled with everything you've ever read

36:03

i don't want to see a set of slides of every piece of public art you've ever seen

36:08

but rather the more select one what books would be behind you if there were books that you have read

36:18

and you have so read them and learned from them that your life has been changed by them

36:26

what is it that's been so important that you have not only learned from it

36:32

but you have remembered it for days and weeks and months and years take a moment

36:41

think in your life what book could be on your bookcase what handwriting could be on your wall

36:50

that you have not only taken to heart but taken to spirit and moreover taken to action

36:59

this i think is the real challenge of these times it's very easy to sit in the midst of

37:04

all kinds of commentary whether it be from a foolish governor like the one i have in florida

37:11

or maybe from a wiser one like the one you have here in new york

37:15

or maybe a leader in the world or maybe a scientist like dr fauci who do you listen to who

37:25

do you take to heart who teaches you the things you need to know so that you change your life

37:34

that's why i was thinking about that story about balthazar's feast because nebuchadnezzar in the

37:40

story the great wise king who fell from grace and then learned and remember returned to the throne

37:47

with a better understanding of what it meant it wasn't just about himself but belthazzer

37:54

on the other hand he is told fry daniel very specifically what's going to happen

38:00

kingdom gone him gone everything divided up he'll be a nothing and he hears it and he rewards daniel

38:09

ford he says oh yeah i've read that like the handwriting on the wall but nothing changes and

38:17

that night he dies and by the next day his kingdom is divided up among foreigners and strangers

38:30

what books have you claimed have made a difference in your life but which in fact right now you can't

38:38

even account for what differences they made and by contrast what book or books

38:47

have you in your life read and so taken into your spirit that you are different because of it

38:57

i'll share a couple that should be on that back bookcase back there

39:01

for me and maybe it'll awaken in you some other books as well somewhere back in that bookcase is a

39:10

copy of henry david thoreau's walden when i first read that and read it slowly and thoughtfully

39:19

i glimpsed another way of looking at the world of taking in the natural world as an important part

39:27

of who i am that i'm not just the one that dominates that i'm not just the one that

39:32

creates but i'm also the one that co-creates and coordinates and lives with a much larger world of

39:41

being i remind myself of this every time i sit and do nothing in front of a beautiful sunset and feel

39:51

the awe of it i remember what was in that book every time i look at a single tree and think about

39:59

its magnificence i think about it every time in a stillness i hear the eternal chime of all meaning

40:09

book that's up there and it's actually on the shelf let me see if i can point to it

40:15

there it is is that thin gray volume the great dissenters it was a book that was in the church

40:22

library back when we were on oneida square and i read it too it was a story about those people

40:28

who in their own times were willing to stand up take a stand even as it was not

40:34

socially or culturally welcomed they were the great dissenters oliver wendell holmes for example

40:42

ralph waldo emerson susan b anthony those who were willing to take a position

40:49

that was not popular but which expressed the values they knew were important to them

40:57

to me that was so so important and still is to know that there are others before me

41:04

who have rather than be counted among the many are willing to be accounted just by themselves

41:11

because in their descent they speak a larger meaning that they know in their heart

41:16

and their spirit also somewhere up there is mary oliver's poetry i know it is because it's a book

41:23

i've traveled with for 25 years so in those moments of despair those moments of doubt those

41:30

moments of question i can take it out and read again and be reminded of what i learned from her

41:37

what i learned from her about seeing grace in every moment possibility in every hour

41:43

and the shaping of a life as being a task worth living these are the things i remember there's

41:51

a lot of other books up on that shelf i've read i couldn't tell you what's in them they

41:57

didn't do much for me obviously and they didn't stick with me in a powerful way

42:03

but there are the few the important ones that we learn from and then we remember our learnings

42:11

so what are the books that have shaped you and how have they changed your actions

42:17

and your lives this becomes the great question we have to deal with

42:22

how will we be together and will that changed person the one that has learned and remembered

42:28

make a difference in this world or will we walk past the murals of public art

42:34

will we see the people in front of all their books on television will we in ourselves glory in what's

42:42

on our bookshelves and what we have read in our lives but not be any different because of it

42:49

what is the handwriting on your wall how are you changed by it and will you remember those changes

43:00

as you live out your life in relationship to others i hope we all can do all of that

43:11

now in just a moment we're going to sing a hymn it's number 150 in the hymnal all whose boast

43:17

it is and this is a hymn i remember growing up with because it basically promises the fact that

43:25

you may espouse something you may say you believe something but if you are not taking action

43:31

all those beliefs are for naught hymn number 150 all whose boast it is

43:51

oh it

44:06

free and brave if we do not feel the chain when it works on mother's pain

44:18

are we not based in indeed slaves unwilling to be freed it is

44:44

no true freedom is to share all

44:58

to make others free they are slaves who feel to speak for the fallen and the weak

45:10

they are slaves who will not choose

45:26

must think they are slaves

45:40

and now we come to the time of closing of our gathering we extinguish the flame of

45:46

our chalice but not the light of truth the warmth of community or the fire commitment

45:52

these we carry in our hearts until we meet again blessed be

46:03

life continually provides us with more than we have ever known before we are invited into

46:11

knowing in deeper and wider ways and it's so easy to watch a program here a movie there

46:17

pick up an article here or see something on facebook and say ah i know that now

46:24

but the real knowing in life is the knowing that becomes so much a part of you

46:31

that you are it and it is you and you act from that core of who you are

46:39

may we proudly not fill our bookcases with so many volumes that we never will know which ones we've

46:46

read but rather have at least the focus to know what it is that we've seen and heard and learned

46:54

and remembered so that the writing on our wall leads to true action blessed be and amen

47:22

when it rains it pours but you didn't need to notice

47:29

it ain't raining anymore it's hard to breathe

47:48

well the sky is

48:04

you hold tight to your umbrella well darling i'm just trying to tell you

48:12

that there's always been a rainbow hanging over your head

48:22

if you could see what i see you'd be blinded by the colors yellow red

48:34

and at least a million others so tie up the boat take off your coat and take a look around

49:13

there's always been a rainbow hanging over your head

49:34

oh tie up the boat take off your coat and take a look around everything is all right now

49:49

cause the sky is finally opened the rain winds stop

49:57

but you're stuck out here in the same old storm again

50:05

let go of your umbrella darling i'm just trying to tell you there's always been a rainbow hanging

50:17

over your head yeah there's always been a rainbow hanging over your head it'll load me all right

51:00

you