

Inner Peace

Second Sunday of Advent, Dec 5, 2021

Rev. Sarah Campbell

“There comes a moment”, Howard Thurman preaches, “when we are in utter revolt... Something deep within us becomes tired, weary, exhausted and finally outraged”.

I know someone who was feeling all of this recently. She was furious about people not caring about others, especially not caring enough about those in the medical profession who are exhausted, by getting vaccinated and wearing masks... and also about the growing billionaire class, more and more during this pandemic and the implications of this with Citizens United.... and about the Governor and the President allowing Line 3 to restart in the midst of the climate crisis.... and about the reality of children in the school where someone she cares about is the principal, about how these children are living in a gang war zone, not feeling safe at all... and about a half a century of hard won battles for women’s choice being undermined... and about increasingly demonic and clever voter suppression methods being devised some 100 years after Jim Crowe... really??? Oh yes, and all of this in addition to a hard year personally with family deaths and illnesses.....

She found herself in the airport for the first time in almost two years. She was flying to be with a loved one who was ill. How strange to be in this world again, the world of the airport. Humanity contained. All of these life stories. Where are you going? Where are you coming from? And is there more vitriol in the air these days?... Menacing tribalism? In their hearts and in their eyes? At first the space is larger, the main terminal, and then these human beings are shepherded into smaller and smaller spaces, not spread out, until they are finally funneled into a tube. Many bodies, close together physically....

The calf and the lion and the fatling together....

She gets on the plane with great anxiety, double masked. Most are following the rules to keep everybody safer. But there at the very front of first class (also business class for people who travel so much and do deserve more comfort) but this day I saw “first class”, and there right in the front were two rich white men with their masks off, just hanging from an ear... She spoke to them, can’t remember the tone or her the exact words... Was it “why aren’t your masks on?” or “you really should have your masks on.” Did she conceal her outrage or no? After she chastised them, they said something back she didn’t hear, but the young women behind her, defending her, jumped in “don’t be jerks!”: they spat out. Nothing more happened, fortunately. Her moment of outrage could have affected even more people, especially, unfairly, the hard working airline stewards.

It was just one moment among many, a snapshot of our times... outrage, anger, at the ready... “It’s electric, exhilarating. It fills the veins up with purpose. It flows through the entire body, stem to stem, but its source and center is the mouth. The angry person knows without a doubt she is alive.” (Gordon) But it’s not good. Not good for anybody...

I know her. I was that person. A few weeks ago.

On the return flight home, something else happened... something very different...at the end of the flight this time. The plane, again packed to the gills, packed with peoples stuff, their bodies, their stories, were they leaving or returning?, eagerly anticipating a reunion with a loved one?, or going home for a funeral?.... So many stories of humanity packed into that metal tube with the cloud of Covid concern ominously hanging over all of it... People were anxious to get out of this tube, out of the airport, to spread out, to breath fresh air.... And the wait, once the plane landed, felt endless, unendurable: Get me out of here!, they thought...! And then a voice came over the intercom, a kind, calming voice... I later saw who it was, as I was departing, a young black man, this steward, East African descent I wondered... Somali or Ethiopian?... And I said "thank you for your words", and he smiled with his eyes, and gave me an ebullient high five.... (There was hand sanitizer everywhere... 😊) His words were the usual at departure, about luggage and connecting flights and how it was good to serve us today, etc. But then, in closing, he said something like what we often say at Mayflower, he said it in his own words... "And everyone: remember to be kind because you never know what the other person is struggling with".

Was it just me?, or was there a profound shift in feeling, as we were given this reminder of who we really are as human beings... I don't know if this steward is religious, if he does his prayers or meditation, but he was a messenger. Kindness pushed outrage out of this little tube filled with humanity. His words remind me of this prayer spoken often in air raid shelters in England during the blitz....

Increase oh God, the spirit of neighborliness among us, that in peril we may uphold one another. Grant us brave and enduring hearts that we may strengthen one another, till the testing of these days be ended and thou dost give again peace in our time....

Yes, this young man, this airline steward, with his unusual words to humans trapped in a tube-- yes we are grateful for this tube with wings that flies us to loved ones, but still it's a tube... and grateful, we are, for the excellent ventilation but still it's a tube stuffed with humans-- his words tapped into something deep...

Whatever the mass of voices of today, in these times, the mighty river of outrage and suppressed in rage, he tugged us down into a deeper current of life... He evoked a remembering. It was like a holy incense of words he released... a perfume redolent of all of the religions of those on that plane, or the religion of their ancestors, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Indigenous... a perfume, from the heart of all of these religions.... Namaste, shalom, peace be upon you..... perfume from the wisdom of the universe... hidden or misplaced during this time of anxiety and outrage.... But it's still there and occasionally we get a whiff of it and this triggers a deep memory in us of this ancient wisdom Which is the desire for peace.... The commitment to peace... The longing for peace....This longing for peace which is deep within the human heart even though we so often live in exile from this longing...

Our holy scripture today is about the peaceable kingdom. It is our ancient religious poetry that speaks to and feeds our deepest human longings. It tells the truth that there can be no peace without justice.

But there is more in this Bible passage; more to a peaceable kingdom than a righteous ordering of society. The people must also fear God, that is, reverence God, that is know God... The spirit of God will rest upon the people and the people will rest in God. There can be no peace without justice *and* there can be no peace without rest notes... no peace without regularly resting in God... no peace among and between without peace within, inner peace. Even with a justly ordered society, life is still hard. There is still suffering and so human beings need to return to God over and over and over again... to lay their burdens down and rest in God...to just be... to marinate in the peace that passes all understanding. Sabbath, prayer, meditation, breath prayers.... All of these wonderful religious practices... Remember the words of the psalmist: "Be still and know that I am God" ...

The author Julia Alvarez, remember her? She wrote the novel How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents.... She writes in Sojourner's magazine in an article entitled "A Thousand Opportunities to Return to God: Poetry and Meditation in a Chaotic World", she writes about our need to rest in God... to consent to God's presence and action within... to allow time for the rest notes in your day. She knows well the objections to carving out those 10 or 20 minutes for prayer or meditation. "I confess", she writes," I often say no. I don't have the energy. I'm busy writing. Besides, when I sit and pray or meditate so many feelings and thoughts come to me. It isn't always peaceful." But then she says, she remembers the story about the old nun. An elderly nun attended a retreat on centering prayer (the Christian term for meditation). After two days, she tearfully confessed that her mind must have strayed a thousand times. The meditation leader beamed: "Wonderful! A thousand opportunities to return to God!"

I don't know about the other worship leaders today, what they most want for you from today's worship, but what I most want for you, for us, is that you awaken to your longing for inner peace in this time of great anxiety and vitriol... that no matter what the news is you get a whiff or a feeling, even for a moment, of the peace that passes all understanding...

May this candle we light for peace in tempest tossed days, ignite in you a deep longing for inner peace.... May this chant we are about to sing, as one voice, release your longing for inner peace.... May the bread we eat today, make you hunger even more for inner peace.....

Let us pray, in the words of St. Augustine of the 4th century, a time of great turmoil:

"I commit and commend myself unto Thee, in whom I am, and live, and know. Be Thou the God of my pilgrimage, and my Rest by the way. Let my soul take refuge from the crowding turmoil of worldly thoughts beneath the shadow of Thy wings; let my heart, this sea of restless waves, find peace in Thee, O God." Amen

Benediction

What a gift it can be to bring a peaceful heart to the world around you.

May you be filled with lovingkindness.

May you be peaceful and at ease.

Sources

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