

Diving into the Deep End

October 2, 2016

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

READING

Genesis 3:8-19 New International Version (NIV)

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?"

10 Adam answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

11 And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

14 So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals!

You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.

15 And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel."

16 To the woman he said,
"I will make your pains in childbearing very severe;
with painful labor you will give birth to children.
Your desire will be for your husband,
and he will rule over you."

17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it,' Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it
all the days of your life.

18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

19 By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food
until you return to the ground,
since from it you were taken;
for dust you are
and to dust you will return."

READING

“Life Lesson,” the Rev. Katie Lee Crane

Jonas and I went to a Moth story slam earlier this month. Neither of us told a story on stage. But we were invited to tell a Tweet-sized story on the theme of doubt.

I wrote something like this: The first time I stood at the edge of the high diving board, I was paralyzed. I couldn't jump. I couldn't back up or turn around. I knew how to swim. I knew how to dive. But ... I couldn't take that leap.

It was read on stage and someone from the audience yelled: "What did you do???!!"

"Dove," I said. It was a life lesson for me.

SERMON

Diving into the Deep End

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Before we get to the heart of the matter this morning, let's do a little content review. And maybe this is one reason we chose today to be paper-free, so that you would not be distracted by a reminder of how many threads we've got going! I invite you to simply sit with what comes, knowing that you can always reference what may have caught your ear on the website.

First – Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year – beginning the days of atonement – a time to look back at what has been so as to be better prepared for what is ahead, perhaps to better plan for or create what will come; next, the Buddhist story about our overfilled cups, and the wisdom of coming to the table with any empty cup if we truly seek something new. How can we have room for something new when we are filled with what we already assume? We visited Genesis briefly, reminding us of our human tasks at labor – that life has never been simple, or easy; and – oh yes – Katie Lee is out there on the diving board! Hers is the only story that literally connects with today's sermon title, Diving into the Deep – but I'm going to do some weaving and see what we can fashion together.

Discovery. That's our theme this month. The **ability** to discover anew, more importantly, to be **willing** to discover anew, feels especially important to our capacity to connect with our year's overarching question – how to “respond, individually and as a faith community, to the scale and intensity of challenge we are faced with” in these days.

I used the metaphor of “diving” before Katie Lee shared her story with me. Water is a familiar environment in my life so maybe that's why it came so quickly to mind – the idea of the deep end referencing those places when we feel “in over our heads,” deeper than our capacities to manage, or

places that are just a bit more work than usual. Do any particular situations or events in your life come immediately to mind, when you may have been in over your head?

Some of you know that I swim with a Masters Team, which is not to say that I'm a fast swimmer, but only that somebody tells me what to swim and when. Sometimes at practice, we have what are called vertical workouts, where you go into the deep end, put your hands up out of the water and keep your head from sinking by working your legs; not just treading water, like an egg beater, which would hopefully be relatively easy, but flutter kicking or a fly kick.

My point is that the deep end can be a lot of work. It's where we recognize the parts that need to be strengthened, for one thing . . . so . . . one might ask . . . why would we go there, exactly? Why not stay in the shallow end, or on the shore where it's safe and easy? Unless, of course, unlike swim practice, it's that we don't always have a choice about the depth of the waters we find ourselves swimming in.

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The Book of Genesis is curious text. I was talking to a friend recently who is taking a class in Hebrew Scriptures. He was bemoaning how much time they were spending on who might actually have written the Pentateuch, the first five books that Jews know as the Torah and Christians know as the pre-history Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Genesis gets us started, of course: the creation story and then the first people. Who was it, we wonder – and certainly those in the academy try to discern – who was it that decided we human beings needed a roadmap to explain why life is hard, or how it got to be that way: why the labor that brings a child into the world is painful, and why food on our table requires the sweat of our brow? It's creative story-telling, likely drawn from parallel Babylonian mythology but shaped in its own particular way. Can you imagine a time when life was so simple that nudity was not recognized? Oh, well – that would be childhood, right?

There is an attraction, I think, to the innocence of childhood that offers us that time before knowing, before our eyes are opened, before we recognize, as the Bible suggests, good and evil: before we are forced to know the difference between joyful and sad, between found and lost, between connected and broken. Like the shallows, the safe places, this precious time, this **construct of innocence** feels like something we want to protect the way we try to protect our children from harm.

Too soon, we discover our nakedness and feel afraid, embarrassed, and self-conscious. **And perhaps we begin to understand discovery of life as it truly presents itself to us as a risk we would rather not take.**

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I want to share a bit more of Katie Lee's story: "I stood there a long time," she wrote to me. "I

remember. People were screaming for me to dive. People were waiting to dive. I was a very strong swimmer and good diver but I was afraid of heights. So when I got up there, I froze. It was an awful feeling: doubting that I could dive and also doubting that I could turn around and climb down. I just froze.”

And then she wrote, “The dive was exhilarating!”

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I know there are deep places in our lives that we would likely rather not be required to visit: places of pain and loss; places of disillusionment, disappointment, of hurt and confusion. When we look back at our year or clean out our proverbial cups, we see and feel the impacts of choices we made that we may wish we had not, OR choices foisted upon us that we had hoped to avoid. We struggle with illness, or death. We suffer broken relationships, or the advent of age that we don’t recognize. There are some days, as Michael reminded us, of heartaches and weeping, pictures of souls in need. None of us is so outside of life that we have not experienced elements of this in the course of our days.

AND it may be that in those places, whether we would have chosen to be there or not, we have discovered things about our lives and ourselves that are quite remarkable. We may have found strengths we barely knew existed. Challenged to adapt and adjust, we may have found resilience that – on reflection – surprised and amazed us.

Sometimes, in fact, what we discover in the deep places can be quite exhilarating, despite our fears.

The deep end, when we manage to keep our heads above water, is what makes us stronger; and when we’re stronger, we’re less fearful and less anxious, perhaps, so that discovery becomes a wonder, sometimes a miracle!

In those deeper places, what is it that helps us stay afloat? Imagination, I think – the ability to envision our capacity not just for survival but something more.

Teacher and writer Marianne Williamson reminds us: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.”

Sometimes we need to imagine ourselves into the places so overwhelming, turning the deep and uncomfortable “over our heads” into places of depth AND adventure because we know it’s a place we need to be and a fear we can overcome.

I think it takes a good dose of curiosity about how it will feel to be other than we have been; and, a good dose of courage to face that which was previously unknown. The deep end can be quite a powerful and amazing place for each of us, and for all of us.

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I discovered something recently in the text of history written by Mary Ann Millsap (thank you!) about the ministers who served this congregation between the time that the Parish Hall was built, 1891, and 1969 – the year that the Rev. Gordon Gibson – who visited us last October – completed his service as minister of this congregation. “In 1967,” Mary Ann writes, “Gibson wanted the church to list the church’s parsonage, now empty, with Fair Housing, Inc., that sought to help black families move out of Roxbury and Dorchester by listing houses that sellers in white neighborhoods would sell to non-white families. **The church agreed** (let me repeat that, “the church agreed”) and a black family looked at the house and bought it. The sale did not go unnoticed. In 1968, Gibson saw a neighborhood child playing with matches in dry leaves in front of the former parsonage’s garage. Gibson went with the child to the child’s home, rang the bell, and tried to explain what was going on. When Gibson identified himself as the minister of Theodore Parker Church, the woman said, ‘I know who you are. You’re the one who brought the niggers in,’ and slammed the door in his face.” (Mary Ann Millsap, September, 2016)

This small piece of discovery reminds us that Theodore Parker’s anti-slavery work is not the only time that this congregation has been involved in the deep waters of racial justice efforts.

So, then, how is it that we find ourselves, again, struggling to manage the depth of discourse around racism when we know that these waters have been a part of our history, as a congregation, for so many years? Theodore Parker, whose name we hold up as a defining piece of our identity and whose passion inspires our own, served this congregation from 1837 to 1846 – that’s 170 years ago! And, then, this congregation’s decision to sell the parsonage to a family of color happened in 1967 – we’re three months shy of nearly 50 years ago! Fifty years!

And, then . . . I don’t know how to finish that sentence. Other things distracted us? Yes, I know . . . life got in the way.

I am so grateful that we are diving again into those particular deep waters – that we, as a congregation, are working to discern our own biases and misunderstandings, AND our capacities to continue to work for change and be a beacon for this community and the Boston area. The upcoming film series that members of our Racial Justice Task Force have created is inspired – thank you to all who put that together. I hope they are sell-out crowds, especially since they’re free!

I attend webinars every Monday at 12:30 with a mixed-race group of colleagues in a conversation called We Say Enough! Last Monday, the Rev. Dr. Melva Sampson spoke about our need to have

“communities that are strong enough to hold truths,” difficult truths, deep and long-standing truths. She suggested that our path to that holding begins by refusing to look away, and I would suggest that whatever it is we discover, together, as we move forward with this conversation, that we commit to never looking away. Let us have the imagination, the curiosity and the courage to keep our nose to this particular grindstone as long as it takes to bend the arc forward towards justice in our time. Can you imagine 2066? Let’s not have them say . . . life got in the way again, or they were afraid of the deep.

Our capacity for discovery is limitless. We only need to be willing to dive into the unknown, and that is no small decision. Rev. Dr. Melva reminded us last Monday to “do what you can until you can do what you want.”

Racial justice is just one of our discovery areas. There are so many – as we care for each other and the world around us. But we know it is one we must return to again and again. As we imagine ourselves forward, we know that turning back is not an option. Let’s not be frozen on the edge. Let’s dive and see what we discover!