

Theodore Parker Church
The Work of Christmas (early)
November 8, 2020



Opening Words adapted from Howard Thurman

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
(and by angels, we mean everyone who has literally helped to facilitate and count votes)
When the star in the sky is gone,
(which is to say, the time and date of our choosing a path that is guided by light)
When the kings and princes are home,
(all those who have been major players in this unfolding drama)
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
(meaning, of course, the caretakers who have traveled far and wide)
The work of Christmas begins: (Christmas - the time, of course, when a new story is brought to life; when the
forever work begins . . .)
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers, (all beings)
To make music in the heart.*

Story for All Ages

The Cracked Diamond story (as told by Susan Frederick Gray) <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/president-fall-2019>

This morning's story is called the Cracked Diamond — it comes originally from Jacob ben Wolf Kranz, a Jewish preacher of the eighteenth century. There are many versions of this story, but the version I'm sharing with you is roughly as I've heard it told by Rev SFG, the current president of the UUA, who offered it in a recent post-election online vigil.

The story begins with a beautiful diamond, owned collectively by members of a small town. The townspeople are so proud of this diamond, they even put it on display — to them, nothing about this diamond could ever be improved or broken, it's simply perfect.

One day, though, the townspeople awake to find a long deep crack running through their previously perfect diamond. This crack must have started long ago, but it seems like it happened all of a sudden, that overnight everything changed.

Shocked and heartbroken, the townspeople ask every jeweler and craftsman they know, but each one says this diamond cannot be fixed. To try polishing it now would risk breaking the diamond into pieces. The townspeople are dejected, almost ready to give up.

Then someone new speaks up — maybe it's a stranger passing through the town, maybe it's a young person that no one had noticed or taken seriously before (the story is told different ways) — and this new person says, "I can fix your diamond."

The other townspeople are wary, worried about taking this risk. But their hope at having their treasure restored outweighs their fear. They give the diamond to this new person to repair. Two weeks later, they return.

When the townspeople see the returned diamond, they are amazed. Rather than polishing away the crack, the stranger carved a beautiful flower into its face, using the crack as part of the flower's stem. The people exclaim, "You have taken something that was cracked and broken and made it even more beautiful than before!"

This story reminds us that neither imagined perfection nor brokenness is the end of the story. When the stranger looks at the diamond, they don't just see the flaw. They see in the brokenness the potential of the flower.

It's easy to always see what is broken, what is lost, and to think — oh, if only we could just return to how things were before before these cracks showed themselves to us. Fixing it now would be too impossible, things will never be the same as that idea of the past. It would be easier to abandon the work and withdraw, just take care of ourselves.

But in this story, the townspeople instead choose to take the risk in trusting the stranger with their beloved treasure. The choice to trust that even if they can't see what's to come, this risk is worth it — the risk is required for the transformation.

Reading **This Is America** By Roxane Gay, Contributing Opinion Writer, NYT's

For much of the 2020 election cycle, many of us wanted anyone but Donald Trump as president because literally anyone but Mr. Trump would be an improvement. The bar he set was subterranean. As the Democratic field narrowed, there was time to consider who would best serve the country, but even as we found our preferred candidates, it was clear that getting Mr. Trump out of office would only be the beginning of the work. That's where things stand. The state of this country will improve if and when Joe Biden is inaugurated as the 46th president of the United States, but a great many things will stay exactly the same unless we remain as committed to progress under his administration as we were under Mr. Trump's.

This is America, a country desperately divided, and desperately flawed. The future of this country is uncertain but it is not hopeless. I am ready to fight for that future, no matter what it holds. Are you?

Meditation **Courageous Love** – (adapted from Amy Freedman/Peter Bowdoin)

I want to invite you to a time of quandary, friends - a time of wondering together, and a time of recognizing how often we are called to make a choice - like letting the damaged diamond go, or seeing in it the possibility of something new. Let us imagine together - in these quiet moments - a time when Love has called us to respond to such a choice. Our hearts reach out to try to heal what is wrong, what is divided or appears broken; and then . . . Fear rises up within us. Hush, it says, don't get involved. It's not your business, it's not your fight.

And Love replies, Oh, yes, sweet pea - you can do this. Your courage is needed here and you have it to give.

But fear steps in again . . . you don't even know what to do, fear suggests, and it wasn't that big a deal, after all. Sit back and relax. Let nature take its course;

but, Love will not be silenced in your heart. It reminds you that Courageous Love is a practice, a way of life. And that we are here together to call it forth, time and time again.

Homily **The Work of Christmas (early), a.k.a. Courageous Love** **the Rev. Anne Bancroft**

Breathe.

I was watching the responses to the election results yesterday - Joy Reid talking to Rachel Madow, who was not on site since she is in quarantine, having been exposed to Covid. Regardless, over the tv lines, she said, **“I’m glad to see so many people celebrating, and I know how much hard work is ahead.”**

Indeed. Many of us in the progressive community are excited about the election results - a statesman many trust to bring integrity to the office of the President, and an historic choice in a woman Vice President and a person of color. I confess it made me so happy to imagine my granddaughter growing up *experiencing* a woman in such high office - not that it CAN happen, but that it HAS happened.

And yes, as important to remember, there is hard work ahead.

I was reading the sermon I offered four years ago. It was Sunday, November 13, 2016, just after Donald Trump was elected president. It was the day we dedicated then-baby Rhys Mechem to our community and faith. I talked about Moses - some of you may remember - how he was the one called upon to lead his people to the promised land, and I invited us to imagine if he had been elected instead of chosen, and to remember how many people HAD elected the one they wanted to be their leader that week, believing he was the right one for where they wanted this country to go.

For those among us who felt differently, it has been a very long four years, at the end of which it’s still true that for their own reasons, whatever they be, many of those who voted for the current president four years ago still believe in him. We are hearing it all over the place - this was not a crushing defeat, right? It was not exactly a groundswell, so we cannot claim an enormous national imperative of change having been displayed. Less a blue wave than a blue breeze, perhaps.

Once the dust settled a little, and in an effort to hear a voice of calm, I started spending time with Parker Palmer this week - many of you may recognize this Quaker voice of wisdom who offered us books like *Let Your Life Speak*, and *A Hidden Wholeness*. I have been reading one called *Healing the Heart of Democracy* because it feels like that is the most daunting of our ongoing tasks - to heal the heart of our country. It has been broken in different ways for a very long time.

Palmer suggests, “For those of us who want to see democracy survive and thrive . . . the heart is where *everything* begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation.” (p. 10)

(rediscover that we are members of one another . . . what a concept.)

Parker quotes Abraham Lincoln, 23 years in advance of the Civil War, in January 1838, long before the eloquence of his inaugural addresses were known. The 28-year-old Lincoln was speaking to a Lyceum in Springfield, Illinois about what we needed to protect our democracy from. (18 years shy of 200 years ago)

At what point shall we expect the approach of danger, he asked? Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! . . . I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. (Danger, that is - the threat to our democracy.) It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, (so to speak) we must live through all time, or die by suicide. (p 8-9)

It's sobering, isn't it? Lincoln knew that our greatest threat is from divisiveness within, and that nothing of our democracy is guaranteed success. We are a people who - with the highest ideals in front of us - have made and continue to make mistakes all the time.

Parker concurs: *"Government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' is a nonstop experiment in the strength and weakness of our political institutions, our local communities and associations, and (Parker adds) the human heart."* (p.9) That is - government 'of the people, by the people, and for the people' is an experiment in the strengths and weaknesses of the human heart.

If that is not an idea that calls us to participate, I don't know what is.

"If we cannot talk about politics in the language of the heart - if we cannot be publicly heartbroken, for example, that the wealthiest nation on earth is unable to summon the political will to end childhood hunger at home - how can we create a politics worthy of the human spirit, one that has a chance to serve the common good?"

Politics that serve the common good . . . a defining question in and of itself. Parker defines politics as "the essential and eternal human effort to craft the common life on which we all depend." The big question has always been who is the "we all" that depend on it? Who is included in the "we all" that defines common life? And that informs "common good"?

That IS the question, is it not, that we have been struggling with since our inception - to figure out what we mean by "we all." (Sometimes, actually, I think we have not struggled nearly enough!) We put a LOT of pressure on our system of government to answer that question. We want our government to reflect our personal values of "common good" . . . that is what it means to be "of, for, and by" the people, right? But we have not, in the past, and do not presently agree on who "we all" are. Or indeed how to achieve the common good.

Four years ago I included the words of Ann Friedman, from an article in New York Magazine: “the hard work of making change in America is very different from electing a president. Elections have endpoints. Social progress does not. . .”

That’s why Thurman’s words came back to me, I think - that at the end of the political day, when we have chosen the path we’ll be trying to follow for the next period of time, the work truly begins again, if it ever stopped, that is. And for “the work,” which is to say finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, releasing the prisoner, rebuilding the nations, bringing peace and music to ALL beings, “the work” continues. And it IS work of the heart - it requires the Courageous Love that is willing to set aside fear . . . that knows that in some way, shape or form, we are ALL lost, broken and hungry. We are all prisoners of our own limitations.

What an amazing experiment we are blessed to be a part of. Let’s not lose sight of that. Let’s also not lose sight of the intention to heal what divides us, even as it is a long-term aspiration.

Let us dedicate ourselves to the spiritual practice of that courageous love so that “we all” is a function of an ever more inclusive and open awareness. The election is over. Our practice begins again.

Benediction (words of Theodore Parker)

Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere;

Its temple, all space;

Its shrine, the good heart;

Its creed, all truth;

Its ritual, works of love;

Its profession of faith, divine living.

Go in peace, lifted up, and committed to keeping your feet on the ground!