

## 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021 – ‘Walking in another person’s moccasins’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

**GATHERING MUSIC** Intermezzo in A, Brahms

<https://youtu.be/cqBzK5tKFVc>

### **WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING**

Welcome. Come in to the light of the spirit. Come in to the warmth of community.

Come in to this place of forgiveness and understanding. You are welcome here.

Lay down your troubles, for now. Put aside your differences, for a while. Open your minds to fresh insight, and your hearts to newfound love. We are each welcome here.

The theme of our service today is ‘Walking in another person’s moccasins’, an idea that’s usually attributed to Native American tradition.

I’ll start, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice, which is the symbol of our free religious faith. *If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.*

May this flame mark the beginning of our shared worship, in which we offer ourselves up to the god of our understanding, by whichever name we use.

**PRAYER by American Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton** who uses the name ‘Lord God’.

Some of you will know this – it feels fitting for the times.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.

I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself,

and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that, if I do this,  
You will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore I will trust you always  
though I may seem to be lost  
and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

And may we wish courage and strength for all those currently in hospitals all over the country, whether as patients or as staff. May they know they are not alone.

**HYMN: 43 (Purple) Gather the spirit**

Gather the spirit, harvest the power.  
Our sep'rate fires will kindle one flame.  
Witness the mystery of this hour.  
Our trials in this light appear all the same.

*Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again.*

Gather the spirit of heart and mind.  
Seeds for the sowing are laid in store.  
Nurtured in love and conscience refined,  
with body and spirit united once more.

*Gather in peace, gather in thanks.  
Gather in sympathy now and then.  
Gather in hope, compassion and strength.  
Gather to celebrate once again.*

Gather the spirit growing in all,  
drawn by the moon and fed by the sun.  
Winter to spring, and summer to fall,  
the chorus of life resounding as one.

*Gather in peace, gather in thanks.*  
*Gather in sympathy now and then.*  
*Gather in hope, compassion and strength.*  
*Gather to celebrate once again.*

**STORY: The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10: 25-37 (NRSV)**

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

**READING: Judge Softly, or 'Walk a mile in his moccasins'** by Mary T. Lathrap, 1895.  
Which may be the original of the phrase?

“Pray, don’t find fault with the man that limps,  
Or stumbles along the road.  
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,  
Or stumbled beneath the same load.

There may be tears in his soles that hurt  
Though hidden away from view.  
The burden he bears placed on your back  
May cause you to stumble and fall, too.

Don’t sneer at the man who is down today  
Unless you have felt the same blow  
That caused his fall or felt the shame  
That only the fallen know.

Don’t be too harsh with the man that sins.  
Or pelt him with words, or stone, or disdain.  
Unless you are sure you have no sins of your own,  
And it’s only wisdom and love that your heart contains.

For you know if the tempter’s voice  
Should whisper as soft to you,  
As it did to him when he went astray,  
It might cause you to falter, too.

Just walk a mile in his moccasins  
Before you abuse, criticize and accuse.  
If just for one hour, you could find a way  
To see through his eyes, instead of your own muse.

I believe you’d be surprised to see  
That you’ve been blind and narrow-minded, even unkind.  
There are people on reservations and in the ghettos  
Who have so little hope, and too much worry on their minds.

Brother, there but for the grace of God go you and I.  
Just for a moment, slip into his mind and traditions  
And see the world through his spirit and eyes  
Before you cast a stone or falsely judge his conditions.

Remember to walk a mile in his moccasins  
And remember the lessons of humanity taught to you by your elders.  
We will be known forever by the tracks we leave  
In other people's lives, our kindnesses and generosity.

Take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins.”

### **REFLECTION: Silence and candle lighting**

Pause in silent reflection. You might like to light a candle for a joy or a concern in your life or in the world. The silence will be followed by music.

**MUSICAL INTERLUDE** Gabriel's Oboe, Ennio Morricone

[https://youtu.be/5Gvvp20\\_WXM](https://youtu.be/5Gvvp20_WXM)

### **COMMENTARY**

In the final programme of Radio 4's recent series 'The Death of Nuance' presenter Oliver Burkeman spoke to the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway. Their conversation led them to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The parable is, on the surface anyway, about helping a stranger who has fallen on troubled times. It's a parable that's likely to be familiar to most of us, whatever our beliefs. But Holloway offered an interpretation that went deeper – and further.

He explained that the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan would all have followed the codes for ritual purity, or cleanliness, of the times. These codes are set out at great length in Leviticus, in the Hebrew Bible, should you be interested to read them, but as you may know, they are strict and precise rules – laws indeed – governing behaviour in all the

fundamental aspects of life such as menstruation, sex, childbirth, death, eating and more. And you may remember that the parable is a response to a question from a lawyer.

According to Holloway, the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan would each have made a calculation when they encountered the man who was bleeding (and possibly already dead) about whether touching him would make them 'unclean' according to these laws. This would have meant them having to return to the temple to purify themselves. However, the Samaritan is described in the translation we heard earlier as being 'moved by pity'. Holloway says the original Greek is closer to 'churned by compassion'. But whatever the translation, it's clear the Samaritan was deeply affected by presence of the bleeding man in front of him, and this visceral human connection transcended any religious rules, and so he acted with compassion.

Maybe we think we'd all do the same – or at the very least would call an ambulance and sit with the man, and hold his hand perhaps, until it came. But then we don't have strict 'religious codes' so how would we know? Maybe we too would walk on by, like the priest and Levite, rather than risk making ourselves 'unclean' in the sight of God, if that's what we believed. We've never walked in their moccasins.

The ancient Hebrew purity laws sound absurd to us now, though they made more sense in the culture at the time. But isn't it true that we have our own modern versions of 'purity', which still divide us today? For example, don't we too have strongly held beliefs and opinions that just might lead us to dismiss, hold in contempt, or in some way think less of anyone else who doesn't share them? Who doesn't think like we do?

Dogma is often associated with religions, but it doesn't stop there. Hardline positions infect all our politics, ideologies and moralities, and they show up too in the ordinary everyday judgments we are quicky to make on others who think different, who perhaps don't adhere to the same 'purity' of line that we do. We see this played out everywhere we look: whether it's over issues such as Brexit, vaccination, climate change; or between political parties, and also within them, whether left or right, as various factions bicker and split. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* made us laugh at the 'People's Front of Judea' and the 'Judean People's Front', perhaps most of all because we recognize them in ourselves. That tendency to adopt a hard line - an imagined 'purity' of position, or the need to 'right',

whatever it's about - only ever divides and prevents us from seeing each other. We only need to look across the Atlantic so see whether that ultimately leads.

But in smaller ways it happens in families too. I may have mentioned before that my father and I drifted apart when he didn't approve of my lifestyle or my politics, and I was similarly dismissive of his. For some years neither of us seemed able to transcend our differences – every opinion expressed was like a red rag to a bull to one or other of us. What a waste, each of us believing we were morally superior to the other, rather than taking the time to 'walk a mile in each other's moccasins'. But later, towards the end of his life, when I eventually grew up a bit and he developed dementia, we both – finally and thankfully - forgot to care about such nonsense and were able to see each other's goodness again.

Part of the problem seems to be the way we human beings are apt to *identify* so strongly with our views and our beliefs, so that any perceived sleight on them can feel like a personal attack on us. It's as though we almost *become* our beliefs, and grip them ever more tightly in the hope they might save us from...what exactly? Existential crisis? The abyss? The fear we don't belong, that we don't matter, we're unloved or unworthy?

In which case the solution is clear. Wake up! You already DO belong! You already ARE something worthwhile. You already DO truly matter! You are a child of God, of the Universe! And you are loved.

What Jesus was teaching in the Parable of the Good Samaritan seems to be that while our religious and moral codes may help us and guide us, they can also very often imprison us. They can stop us from being compassionate. Holloway describes this as a 'devastatingly radical insight', which is 'asking us to be wary about the impact *all* our convictions have on the way we respond to other people.' What Jesus wanted, he says, was the 'imaginative, explosive possibility that we [should] feel the humanity of every other person on the planet and respond to each other as humans. Needy, weak, perplexed humans.'

Has there ever been a more important time to do exactly that?

I'll finish with a short story from the Jewish religion...

A rabbi asked his disciples, 'How do you know that the night has ended and the light is returning?'

One disciple answered, 'Is it when you see an animal in the distance and you can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?' 'No,' the rabbi replied.

Another disciple asked, 'Is it when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig or an olive tree?'

'No,' replied the rabbi. 'It is when you look on the face of another man or woman and see that he or she is your brother or sister. If you cannot do this then no matter what the time, it is still night.'

Blessed be.

**HYMN: 87 (Purple) Leave behind your bags and baggage**

Leave behind your bags and baggage.

Throw all caution to the air.

Let the wind blow through the cobwebs.

Cast aside all anxious care.

Let the God of all our mercies

breathe around you everywhere.

Journey onwards never doubting

God will speak a kindly word,

looking forward, always trusting

what your heart feels will be heard.

Love your sister and your brother:

kindness will not be deterred.

In the face of war and hatred

peace and justice we extol.

Share the warmth of fellow-feeling

urging us onto our goal.

With your confidence enthuse us,

God, the life in every soul.



## **CLOSING WORDS**

Rum, Sufi: Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

Jacob Trapp, Unitarian Universalist: May we find the world so beautiful, and life so richly and meaningfully shared, that we shall want this to be true, more often, for more people, everywhere. Amen

**CLOSING MUSIC** Bach Prelude in E flat major, BWV 998, Sean Shibe

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p07t8gvp>