

Sunday May 22nd, 2022

Faith(less), Hope(less) and (defenceless) Love

Music prior – Birds flew over the spire – Craig Ogdon

Welcome

Welcome, one and all. Thank-you, each of you, for bringing yourself here – bringing your living, thinking, feeling, and wondering self to this time of shared space and reflection. My name is Michael Dadson, (my wife Julie is sitting just there) and I am / we are delighted to be back here with you in Plymouth. Please do stay afterwards (those who are here in Plymouth!), for refreshment and conversation – a chance to connect with one another, and perhaps to compare notes about what you might be taking away from this service.

Opening Words *from Be Ready by William Stafford*

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?
Starting here, what do you want to carry through the day and into evening –
From this interval spent here . . . together?

Chalice Lighting

Sing (unaccompanied): Gathered here – P 227

Here, we step out of time and out of the traces of our tethered living
Into the timeless and untrammelled life of the soul.
Here we rediscover yet again the identity of soul
Which allows us to live in a complex world without fearing it or fighting it.
Here we come to drink from the source that nourishes
The core being who is living at the centre of our lives.

(after David Whyte – Leading from Within, afterword of)

*In quietness, let us each drink from that source – bringing our truth, our joy, our pain, our living
into this timeless and untrammelled welcome . . .*

Sing (unaccompanied): Gathered here – P 227

Scene-setting *Windows on to our world*

The Tao Te Ching, in one of its more challenging moods (Chapter 29), says:-

‘Do you want to improve the world? I don’t think it can be done.
The world is sacred; it can’t be improved.’

Well *that* could be an entire service, or a workshop, or even a series of discussions, but I’ve shared it here to focus our minds on the question I want to explore with you this morning:- How are we to look at the world around us as it is – ranging from delight to despair, from beauty to horror, from loving-kindness to heartless cruelty?

I’m going to consider three ways of looking; three windows if you will:- Faith, Hope and Love . . . but as I do that I’m going to keep touching on an underlying theme, an accompanying strap-line – ‘Less is More.’

On that note, I should warn you that this is a sermonless service! Please don’t wait anxiously for a sermon or address to come along, cos it won’t! (Sorry about those sweeties . . . !)

1. Faith

Many of you know that I am involved with Unitarian College, helping to train new Ministers for our congregations, and that work is based on what are called the Ministerial Competences – developed some years ago by the Ministry Strategy Group.

There are 33 of those competences, and the second of all asks that students should “Clearly understand and be able to articulate a personal theology in the light of current and changing thought.”

The very first time we meet new students, at their Orientation Retreat, we ask them to do just that, writing what we often refer to as their personal Credo . . . “This I believe”

(In passing, I wonder what each of you would write if I asked you . . . perhaps you will go home and give it a try . . . ?)

But that is not the end of it; indeed from that point on we regularly ask the students to reflect on their Credo, and be willing to revise it whenever they realise they need to do so. And that happens, I can tell you!

This process offers two messages to us about how we as Unitarians look at faith:-

Faith, in our tradition, is understood to be individual, personal, and therefore various amongst us – rather than fixed and ‘corporate’

Faith, in our tradition, is understood to be subject to change – as prompted by events and changing circumstances, or by ongoing personal reflection and formation

In this setting, where we celebrate open-mindedness and welcome changing thought, I have a couple of worries about holding a fixed, formal, collective faith system:-

One is that it can be easy to slip into making comparisons between different systems, and then into competition about which works better . . . or best . . . about which is more right than any other; so division and opposition can arise – in the name of . . . what!?!)

My other worry is that a faith which seeks to explain life, the universe and everything – which purports to offer a solution to the puzzles and challenges of life – can easily become a comfort blanket in which to wrap up against the uncomfortable realities of the world around us – a form of protection, and a reason or excuse not to engage with the world and all that therein lies.

- In those terms then, in terms of A Fixed and Defined Faith, I urge us to be faith-less; rather to be courageously open to the realities of the life we really have, the world we really inhabit, and to Be faithfully true to it and ourselves – to keep good faith with life and our living of it.

Sing: Praise the source of faith – P 136

2. Hope

How to look at this world with hope? I hope that Exeter Chiefs have a better season next time around. I hope for good weather on my birthday tomorrow . . . in neither case can my hoping, however fervent, have any effect.

When we look at problems and situations around us, don’t we long for some hope to hold onto? When those are problems over which we have no control, and situations in which we simply have no agency, what hope can we realistically hold? How are we to look at that? What do we do with our feelings of helplessness?

To set up a hope to hang onto, though again comforting, is to create expectations which may not come to fruition, but instead bring disappointment and regret – and when our hands are gripped tightly around that chosen hope, they are closed to other possibilities, to the responding touch of other hands which may bring hope to us.

- In those terms then, in terms of A Cherished Outcome to which we may become wedded – to the exclusion of other possibilities – may we endeavour to be hope-less;

rather to Be hopeful people – courageously open to hope which is not limited by our specifications and expectations. In our way of being, let us simply be of good hope.

Let us hold a reflective space now in which to open up to the unlikely possibilities of hope unknown, unrecognised, unpredictable . . .

“Hope” is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops – at all –

Emily Dickinson

Music:- Swan – Patrick Hawes

If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel (hope or) joy, don't hesitate.
Give in to it.
There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be.
We are not wise, and not very often kind.
And much can never be redeemed.
Still, life has some possibility left.
Perhaps this is its way of fighting back –
That sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world.
It could be anything . . .
Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty.
It is not made to be a crumb.

Mary Oliver

Sing: Winds be still – P 217

3. Love

And what might it mean to look at our world and feel love, when there is so much to be seen that is more detestable than lovable?

Does love imply acceptance – just glossing over things we don't like in someone or something because we're trying to be loving? In our friendships, families, and communities there is acceptance of less lovely traits in one another because we are being loving, but is that 'glossing over'? By trying to look lovingly at this world, does that mean we need to look with tolerance . . . acceptance . . . approval?

But the word approval there bespeaks thought; it is a reaction, a verdict, coming from the mind. And my thought about love here is that it is not a matter for the mind to understand – not a matter of thought at all.

- I want to urge us to seek a way of being which is open-hearted as well as open-minded and open-handed – not being Love-less (which is what you may be waiting for me to say!), but a way of being loving in the world which is not intentional, not artful, but artless.

No not heartless, but flowing from an open and defenceless heart – a loving way of being which is undefended against the realities of pain and suffering, disappointment and rage, just as it is undefended against dignity, generosity, beauty and joy.

I feel I could use some help in exploring this third window, so I turn to the poet Naomi Shihab Nye. Before we hear from her, some words of introduction by William Sieghart, in The Poetry Pharmacy:-

There are times in life when everything we thought we could rely on fails, and everything we have wanted for ourselves dissolves in front of us.

There are times, too, when we are confronted with the same suffering in others. Faced with the sheer scale of the misery in this world, it can be agonisingly difficult to engage meaningfully – and all too tempting to harden our hearts against it.

In her inspiring poem 'Kindness', Naomi Shihab Nye tells us that such moments, hard as they may be, are also an opportunity, if we will only dare to open our hearts. For it is only by reckoning with true sorrow and desolation that we can come to understand how necessary, how life-preserving, kindness really is . . . and then move towards it.

First, however, we must learn true empathy.' 'Kindness', after all, is simply another word for 'Love' – and once we've acknowledged that the pain of others is exactly as searing as our own, what can we do but love them? As Nye so touchingly suggests, nothing else makes sense.

Before you know what kindness really is, (what love really is), you must lose things,
Feel the future dissolve in a moment
Like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
What you counted and carefully saved,
All this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be
Between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the gravity of kindness (of love),
You must travel where the (dispossessed refugee wrapped in salvaged rags)
Lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
How they too were someone who journeyed through the night with plans
And the simple breath that preserves life.

Before you know kindness, (love), as the deepest thing inside,
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows
And you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness, (love), that makes sense any more;
Only kindness that ties your shoes, and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread;
Only kindness, (love), that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say
'It is you I have been looking for' –
And then goes with you everywhere like a shadow . . . or a friend.

*(I should acknowledge that I did make a few small changes to that poem –
which I fervently hope the poet would accept with kindness)*

Sing: Just as long as I have breath – P 83

Announcements

Closing Words *There Is Hope – Responsive reading (Michael Dadson)*

*Introduce refrain:- MD – In you, in me, in what we will
ALL – there is hope.*

In a voice raised against injustice,
In a voice lowered to offer encouragement,
In a voice silenced, simply to listen, may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

In ears which listen with interest,
In ears which listen with discernment,
In ears which listen with compassion, may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

In a hand punching the air in excitement,
In a hand waving in recognition,
In a hand joining with another, may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

In eyes courageously open to life,
In eyes honestly open to truth,

In eyes tenderly open to tears, may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

In a mind which dares to be un-made-up,
In a mind which wonders what lies behind the obvious,
In a mind which embraces the realities of other people,
may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

In a heart undefended against pain and sorrow,
In a heart undefended against joy and delight,
In a heart which can do no other than give and receive love,
may we notice hope . . . Pause . . . Refrain

Closing Music:- The World Was Waiting – Dreamers Circus