

Claire Feingold Thoryn
June 15, 2014
Theme: Sent Forth
Homily: A Steady Center

Call to Worship:

Good morning. I am Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn. Thank you for that beautiful song. Our worship theme this month has been “Sent Forth” and truly we are sent forth on this day, our last Sunday of the church year.

May we find in this hour together
faith, hope, and love
may our souls gather peace and strength
so that we can go out and strengthen the world.

Our opening hymn is a personal lifelong favorite; the words were written in 1908 by a Unitarian minister, but the tune was written about forty years prior to that, by a man named Arthur Sullivan...as in, Gilbert and Sullivan. Please join with me in our opening hymn, number 114 “Forward Through the Ages.”

Reading: “Cutting Loose” by William Stafford

Sometimes from sorrow, for no reason,
you sing. For no reason, you accept
the way of being lost, cutting loose
from all else and electing a world
where you go where you want to.

Arbitrary, a sound comes, a reminder
that a steady center is holding
all else. If you listen, that sound
will tell you where it is and you
can slide your way past trouble.

Certain twisted monsters
always bar the path -- but that's when
you get going best, glad to be lost,
learning how real it is
here on earth, again and again.

Homily: A Steady Center

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you sing.

a reminder
that a steady center is holding
all else.

There is a story, an oldie but a goodie, by the Unitarian Universalist minister Jane Rzepka. She writes:

A one-paragraph newspaper article describes a subway platform during the morning rush hour at Grand Central Terminal. A train pulls in; a well-dressed woman gets off. Before the doors close, the woman realizes that she is holding only one of her leather gloves. She looks back into the train and spots the matching one on the seat. It is obviously too late to dash back in to retrieve it, so with a cavalier shrug, she flings her arm out and, the doors about to close, tosses her glove onto the seat alongside its mate. The doors shut, and the train pulls away. [...]

Rev. Rzepka pulls that image into a metaphor, writing:

In New England at least, our pattern is to cling, as we cling to our gloves, to routine, hard work, and obligation, all fall, all winter.... But in the summertime, there is a letting go. We close up our schools and our churches, put our overcoats in mothballs, and dust off the swan boats, the lobster pots and ...the grill. We need that. We need to cast that glove of responsibility back into the train. We need a vigorous and decisive toss ... to free ourselves of the confining gloves of life, even if we love them.

And the train's about to leave.

I love the image of the cavalier toss, of letting go. And maybe one reason I love it so much is because that is so not me.

First of all leather gloves are expensive. If that happened to me I'd probably rush back on the train, grab my other glove, see the doors shut me in, realize I was going to be late to whatever I was going to, and start cursing.

In part the woman in this story can let go and share her nice gloves so generously with whoever might come along to claim them is because she apparently is wealthy enough that gloves are easily replaceable. She can let go from a place of abundance, rather than a place of scarcity.

There are other ways we can experience abundance in our lives. And I feel in this place, in this community, an abundance of love, of spirit, of generosity, of hope and faith. It is the loving that makes the leaving possible.

The abundant gifts of this community give us the steady center from which to leap. It is, truly, a privilege.

Our summer journeys have a place from which to begin
and a place to return to:
our spiritual home, ever present, ever strong.

It is easier to be cut loose,
glad to be lost,
when we know we have a place to come home to.

I know that many folks experience their spirituality best in nature. Out there—rather than in here. I admit I am not really a “nature person”—I like air conditioning and a bug-free environment. But I do understand the power nature has in connecting us to the Holy.

My first whole body spiritual experience happened during summer vacation, not at church but at the ocean.

I was probably about six years old, we were at the beach, and I looked around at the long stretch of sand behind me and on either side of me, filled with people, a sea of seemingly infinite sunbathing humanity;

and I looked out in front of me at
the seemingly infinite ocean,
the waves crashing, the sea air blowing,
the blue water meeting the blue horizon.

And I felt God in that moment. A universal loving Spirit, connecting all of us, human, sand, air, and water; a steady center.

The horizon was not the end, but simply the limit of my sight.

Except I didn't call it God. I didn't know I could. I was 6, and the Unitarian church I grew up in hadn't given me the word God as an option in my vocabulary—I had to figure out on my own that I was allowed to use that word to mean whatever the hell I wanted it to mean.

And at six I hadn't yet read Wordsworth, who described “a sense sublime, of something far more deeply interfused, a motion and a spirit that impels all things and rolls through all things.”

And so the words that my six year old self came up with to describe my experience of God at the ocean that day were that I could feel “the roundness of the earth.”

The roundness of the earth.
A steady center holding all else.

I do hope this summer—and beyond, for our youth venturing forth—that you have a chance to feel the roundness of the earth. At the ocean, or in your backyard, or from the top of a mountain hike, or wherever you happen to be.

And I will tell you that the place I most often feel the roundness of the earth these days, the place where I feel most connected to God, to humanity, to Love and Possibility— is right here.

Right here in this sanctuary. With you.

These walls are not the end, but simply the limit of our sight.

And so as we scatter, like gloves to the subway, I am already looking forward to the day that the train returns to the station. Here, to our steady center.

Sometimes from joy,
We cry.
Sometimes from sorrow,
we sing.

Amen, and may we make it so.