

Intern Minister Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick

May 31, 2015

Theme: Heroes

Homily: All in All

Call to Worship

Good morning and welcome. In 1819 on this day in May, Walt Whitman was born. On this humid morning, after this summery week, during which gardens, and leaves, and grasses grew leaps and bounds, it seems only right to read a lush and exuberant song by Walt from *Leaves of Grass*.

“I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,
And the ant is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg
of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

I find I incorporate mica, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits,
grains, esculent roots,
And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
But call any thing back again when I desire it.”

This morning into the season ahead, may we soften into the world around us.
Amazed by the perfection of all that is green, blue, flesh and rock.
Distancing ourselves from the cold winter, but calling back again and again,
the need we felt in that cold for love, warmth and community. May we find
it here together this morning.

Reading A Reading from the *Prayer Journal* of Flannery O'Connor:

My Dear God,

I would like to write a beautiful prayer but I have nothing to write it from.
There is a whole sensible world around me that I should be able to turn into
Your praise, but I cannot do it. Yet at some insipid moment when I may

possibly be thinking of floor wax or pigeon eggs, the opening of a beautiful prayer may come up from my subconscious and lead me to write something exalted. I am not philosopher - or else I could understand things like these.

If I knew all of myself, Dear God, if I could discover everything in me, what would I be then? What would I do about those feelings that are: -now fear, - now joy, -that lie too deep to be touched by my understanding?

I am afraid, Oh Lord.
Will I ever know anything?
Can't anyone teach me how to pray?

Sermon *“All in All”*

Last year, right around this time, an article was published in the Harvard Journal of Theology by Karen King, a scholar and professor at Harvard Divinity School, no less, who discovered an ancient piece of papyrus. The old leaf of paper measured 4cm wide and 8cm long, and included the line “Then Jesus said to them, my wife... she will be able to be my disciple.” As a student at HDS at the time, I remember the article making national headlines, “FROM HARVARD: JESUS’S WIFE IS REAL” the sensational Huffington Post announced in capital letters on their homepage. This relic, however, was not news because it had been found, King uncovered over a year before, it was news because the relic had officially been proven not to be a forgery. After a year of scrupulous testing, the papyrus, script, and ink had been found to be compatible with the styles and resources of the 2nd century.

Of course findings such as King’s leave all of us, divinity students or otherwise with many questions, many pertaining to historical events – Did Jesus have a wife?! Who was she? Was she an apostle? Did they have kids?!, Does Jesus have a whole family tree of bloodline relatives wandering around the world? Can they all perform miracles?!, Are any of them single, wealthy and attractive?!

From a spiritual perspective, though, the question that arose for me with the news of the papyrus, was not “who was Jesus?” but rather, “Who wasn’t he?”

Despite the proof they offered last year, Karen King and her research team are still subject to plenty of criticism, and even personal threats for their findings. Many scholars, religious lay and clergy members, and - the Vatican, denounced the findings and remain convinced that the papyrus is forged. King, a Biblical Historian familiar with the many social outcries resounding through history over interpretations of Jesus Christ, remains fairly undaunted by the critics, though. For her, New Testament scholarship, it seems, is not so much about radically upending commonly held Christian beliefs - throwing a wrench into commonly held notions regarding the place of women in church leadership, the celibacy of Jesus, or the accuracy of the Gospels – for King it is rather about opening possibilities of understanding. She has said all along that the papyrus “should not be regarded as evidence that Jesus was married, only that early Christians were actively discussing celibacy, marriage, and discipleship at an early age in time.”

Whether or not the papyrus was written from actual events is actually beside the point, there are, in truth, many papyri like this one floating around describing events of Jesus Christ’s life not mentioned in the Gospels. Some state that while being crucified he was laughing hysterically, others discuss his siblings, others his love affairs, others explain that Jesus Christ was not one single man but many who wandered the middle east preaching and leading followers. The hard work that Karen King did and continues to do is teaching people to resist their desires to know FOR SURE what really happened, to narrow down the life and figure of Jesus Christ to a single thread, a single series of events and words that are the ONLY true events and words of his life.

I see her work as permission to play– to make known that religion is meant to be interpreted, and re-interpreted, and re-interpreted, and re-interpreted dependent on the events of your own life, and events in the world around us.

There are many understandings of Jesus Christ. If you simply Google Image his name, just a hint of vastness of these understandings will appear before you, in picture form. There is the African American Jesus, the Elvis Jesus, the Cat loving Jesus, the Female Jesus, the Biker Jesus, the Luke Skywalker Jesus, the Gay Jesus, the Blond Jesus, the Jesus in a Burka, the Hispanic Jesus, The Drag Queen Jesus, the Obama Jesus, and of course, the Zombie Jesus.

Just scrolling through these various versions of Jesus I was moved to see the figure of Jesus Christ, the one I think Karen King is promoting anyway, taken to such heart. While undoubtedly some of these depictions of Christ were meant to be jokes, many, especially those that depicted Christ as different races, classes, or sexual orientations, were legitimate holy images. In these pictures there was no single thread, single story, single Christ, He was unlimited, being discussed, re-interpreted, and arguably, resurrected for the constantly changing needs and issues of present people in the present day.

In many ways, it should not be so surprising that a piece of ancient writing was discovered about Jesus's Wife. While history rarely is entirely 100% accurate, it is relatively certain that there were some serious religious stirrings occurring in the middle east about 2013 years ago that revolved a lot around these people who were calling themselves Christians and following someone called the Christ. Undoubtedly, just as we debate now what is morally compatible with our religious beliefs – gay marriage, abortion, gun rights, wishing calamity on certain Massachusetts drivers – back then religious followers had to have been doing the same thing. And since pretty much everyone was married then, it would seem a little odd that a) Jesus Christ wasn't married or b) at some point following his death someone would write something about him being married so followers didn't all leave their spouses or refuse to get married.

Findings like Karen Kings give us permission to do, actually what Unitarian Universalists do best, which is keep our faith open to what comes, what changes, what is happening right now, to veer away from a single thread of religious understanding, but rather weave a great web of many understandings, that are religious, secular, social, natural, which are ever knotting, ever tightening, ever loosening, and ever breaking. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning, you might call it.

A few months ago I went to a lecture given by Temple Grandin, a Doctor of Animal Science and Professor of Engineering at Colorado State University. She is arguably one of the most influential people in America working towards animal welfare rights, designing and engineering slaughter house facilities that ease the pain and fear of animals to the minutest degree. Along with her many achievements Temple Grandin is also autistic, and is quick to explain that she learns through pictures rather than words, that words are actually like a second language to her. Grandin describes her ability to

replay memories “like watching full length movies in her head.” She can recall slightest details, shifts in light and shadow, the looks in the eyes of people and animals. It is this neurological ability that has allowed her to work so closely with animals, as she can notice elements of their behavior patterns that others, without a mind of such detail and a memory with such clarity, cannot.

Of course, Temple Grandin’s Autism has come with its own set of challenges, aside from struggles with illiteracy, she is also hyper sensitive to touch and noise, and easily made anxious in social settings. While pursuing her bachelors in psychology at Franklin Pierce –she designed one of her first inventions, “the hug box,” essentially a deep pressure machine that provides relief from over stimulation. Think of it kind of like just getting a nice, calming, hug.

When I saw her, Temple Grandin was speaking primarily to youth educators. She was not discussing her work with animals, but rather her work with autistic children. She explained, bluntly, as is often her way, that, “We need to stop over generalizing every body and speaking in this constant BS abstract twaddle!” Grandin proposed re-orienting our tendency to regard the society from a bottom up perspective, that is to say, one that looks at the big picture and over simplifies everyone to fit in one category or another – rich/poor, white/nonwhite, male/female, depressed/happy, Christian/nonchristian, - and rather start considering the world around us with a top down perspective, one that begins with specifics, and is all inclusive of the many aspects of each individual person.

Grandin’s belief in this top down approach was demonstrated at the conclusion of her lecture when she invited audience members to ask her any lingering questions. A woman stood up and was handed a microphone: “Thank you so much for coming, Prof. Grandin,” She spoke, “I have a son who is autistic...”

“Why is he autistic,” Grandin interrupted.

“What? Because he’s autistic, doctors told me he’s autistic.” The woman responded, startled.

“Why is he autistic,” Grandin repeated.

“Whaa? The Doctors,”

“Do you love him?”

“Yes, very much,” Her voice cracked.

“Is he in school?” Grandin interrupted again.

“Yes.”
“What grade?”
“6th Grade”
“Does he have friends?”
“Yes”
“Does he do well in school?”
“Yes”
“Does he have hobbies?”
“Yes”
“What does he like to do for hobbies?”
“He draws maps.”
“Is he good at math?”
“Yes, very good.”
“Can he read?”
“Yes, well no, not well.”
“What?”
“He’s at a 2nd grade reading level.”
“And so that makes him autistic?”
“Well doctors said because of his difficulty reading and with words.”
“Yes, he probably has it, but why is he your autistic son?”
“Because, he...”
“Why isn’t he your son, who you love, who has friends who love him, who can draw maps and is good at math? Why is he your autistic son?”
The woman sat down, and the audience was quiet. It was uncomfortable, but changing our minds is always uncomfortable.

Why limit ourselves, and others to one thing, when we are all, all things.

Tomorrow I am driving down to Virginia, where I will remain for the summer to complete an internship as a hospital chaplain, a required step in the ordination process. It’s an internship many of my friends are familiar with, and many have done it themselves. They know that it can be a confusing, humiliating, sobering, sad time. When I tell people about my summer plans who are not familiar with the internship, they look at me like I am some kind of hero – not taking a vacation this summer, but rather going into the trauma unit, or the children’s oncology unit, or the mental health ward to “minister” to people in need. It’s like they think I have some divine skill and can handle it, that everything I am about to do is going to be right and good. At least that’s what it feels like. It’s a bottom up approach, looking at someone like they are a hero, it doesn’t factor in their humanity,

and the likelihood that they will screw up, that they are scared, and that yes they want to do good and help people heal, but really they would much rather spend the summer going to the beach, working on their tan, and eating soft serve ice cream.

Titles such as hero or coward, autistic or normal, messiah or husband, can be transformative yes, but more often than not they're restrictive. They are a bottom up approach, generalizing and relegating a person to one of the many, many, many aspects of their unique, individual experience of being alive.

In her talk, along with encouraging parents and teachers not to rename children with a diagnosis, "my autistic son, my ADD daughter," Temple Grandin stressed that children must be given a time every day for, what she called, "Free Play." "Just open up the door and let 'em rip!" She shouted laughing. "When children are playing they are creating, it's a way for them to make the world beautiful and to make it their own."

As spring turns to summer let's play, freely. No matter what our plans. May our spiritual needs be met through practices and teachings of our own interpretation and creation. Maybe we look at ourselves and those around us from a top down approach. Seeing all in all. May we be blessed to know all of our selves – right now, as we are, and understand that we will change, and soon be something slightly different. May we learn to pray, and may nothing that feeds us emotionally, spiritually, and lovingly be limited. May we be open to it all.