

January 12, 2020
Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: Perspective

Music for Gathering
Welcome, Widening the Welcome: Rosemary Trowbridge
Prelude: Praeludium in E minor (Felix Mendelssohn) - Vivian Montgomery, piano

Call to Worship: “Inventory” by Dorothy Parker

Good morning.

During this month of the worship theme Perspective, we are getting a new perspective on January, because as some long time church folks might have realized, usually January is Stewardship month and so usually we spend the month talking about money and what it takes to will this church community into existence, year after year.

But this year, we are beginning our pledge campaign in February, so today I will offer you a different sort of accounting.

The witty poet Dorothy Parker took stock of her life, in a poem title “Inventory.” I wonder what sort of inventory each of us would take—or what our inventory would look like as a community? Here is Dorothy Parker’s:

Four be the things I am wiser to know:
Idleness, sorrow, a friend, and a foe.

Four be the things I'd been better without:
Love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt.

Three be the things I shall never attain:
Envy, content, and sufficient champagne.

Three be the things I shall have till I die:
Laughter and hope and a sock in the eye.

Thank you Dorothy! Let us worship together. Please rise in body
or in spirit for our opening hymn:

Opening Hymn: Teal 1003 “Where Do We Come From”

Chalice Lighting - Cas, Robert Frost's “The Road Not Taken”

Anthem: “A Rose Touched By The Sun's Warm Rays” (J. Berger) - Adult Choir

Prayer Sequence

Centering Hymn: Balm in Gilead (same as last week)

Offertory: “My Shepherd Will Provide My Need” (V. Thomson) - Adult Choir

Reading: “Sweet Darkness” by David Whyte

Listen.

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone,
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your home
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.

The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of your aloneness

to learn

anything or anyone

that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.

Sermon: Embracing Darkness

You are not beyond love.
The world was made to be free in.

I turn 40 in less than a week. Turning 40 in 2020 has really made me take stock of life, as Dorothy Parker does in her poem “Inventory” that I shared in the Call to Worship.

This personal milestone has been informing my perspective on this month’s worship theme of perspective.

As I mentioned in a meeting recently, we are as far from 2060 as we are from 1980.

Yeah, let that sink in a minute.

So please indulge me in a few personal reflections.

I began ministry in 2006 at 26.

I served just down the road in Lincoln as an Associate minister under a senior minister who looked exactly the way a minister *should*:

male, tall, white hair, white beard, deep voice, twinkly kind eyes, kind of an Alec Guinness as Obi Wan Kenobi demeanor, except in a blue button down shirt instead of Jedi robes.

I’ve never quite achieved that aspect of the job description.

It is interesting to finally be emerging from the “young woman minister” category.

I was single, dated, married, had babies, nursed babies, did IVF, went through medical crises, went through a job search pregnant, moved house, parented toddler to tween, changed hairstyles, all in front of a congregation.

It definitely changes a person to live one's life so...observed.

This is my seventh year of ministry here,

so I'm not your new minister anymore,

and after fourteen years of ministry

I'm not a new minister at all.

Many if not most of the people I was in seminary with

have left ministry, or at least traditional congregation-based ministry—

I've heard it said in our tradition that most new ministers leave the ministry after five years.

The fact is that Divinity School is all about theology and exegesis and deep conversations and reading Karl Barth for fun.

And actually ministering in a church,

in the 21st century, is about running a non-profit.

And parish ministry is not a growth industry; religion, church attendance, embracing spiritual community in Northern

American culture has become practically counter-cultural, and not in the cool way.

But here I am.

My perspective on many things about ministry, congregational life, spirituality, relationships have all grown and changed over the years. I hope they keep on changing.

Someone once told me that to stay fresh in parish ministry, you have to reinvent yourself every seven years.

I hope I am learning and changing more often than that.

I hope we all are, no matter what our vocation is.

Going into sabbatical my eyes were tired
and the world was tired also.

My vision needed a time of darkness, rest,
a new horizon that was further than I could see.

The world is still very tired, tired and frightened,
and that fear and fatigue eats at all our souls.

I have seen how congregational life is affected by the anxieties
and traumas of the wider world;

how hard it is to understand and withstand
the daily press of horrors in our nation and world,
to feel how it affects our lives and the lives of those we love,
and still get through the day with some measure
of compassion and openness and even the thing that takes the
most strength of all: vulnerability.

Sallie McFague, the feminist theologian who taught us so much
about ecological justice, said: “Be careful how you interpret the
world; it *is* like that.”¹

¹ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis, Fortress 2001), 181, quoting German philosopher Erich Heller.

“Be careful how you interpret the world; it *is* like that.”

Our perceptions are our reality.

With apologies to Dorothy Parker, who thought

“Four be the things I’d been better without:

Love, curiosity, freckles, and doubt.”

I actually think love, curiosity, and doubt are the things that will get us through these strange and stressful times.

Freckles are neutral, I have family with them and family without.

Love, curiosity, doubt, and darkness.

When your eyes are tired

the world is tired also.

Time to go into the dark.

There you can be sure

you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your home.

The dark reminds us, if we are tired, the right thing to do is *rest*.

We are still in the darkest part of the year, the days are short, the nights are long. Stay in.

Turn off the bright lights inside, turn off the tv with news so blindingly painful we have to squint to get through it.

Don't hide your head in the sand,
but also don't think that to become a better person
you must personally take it all in,
eyes unblinking, like Alex at the end of "Clockwork Orange."
Take a break.

Embrace the gentle darkness, and also, curiosity. Not knowing.

David Whyte writes that his poem "Sweet Darkness"
...was written out of that very physical and almost
breathless giving away most human beings feel when they
must let go of what seems most precious to them,
not knowing how or when it will return,
in what form or in what voice—
[sometimes] through simply not recognizing
the person looking back at us in the mirror."

The story I learned recently about the incredible scholar Ibram
X. Kendi really is a powerful example.

When Kendi was a teenager, 20 years ago this month, he was a
finalist in a high school speech competition.

The competition was in honor of Martin Luther King Jr.
and the theme was: "Dr. King's Message for the Millennium."
As he spoke, he got lots of applause, the crowd was loving it!
But when he looks back, Kendi says, he flushes with shame.

For his speech, Kendi adopted the persona of an angry King come back to life to scold black youth for their supposed failings. Kendi preached:

“They think it’s okay to be those who are most feared in our society!

...They think it’s okay not to think!

...They think it’s okay to confine their dreams to sports and music!”

The audience reacted with “whoops of agreement.”

When Kendi watched that speech again a few years ago as an adult, as a scholar of racism and history, he saw that his speech

“had been a litany of blame, implying that there was something wrong with young African Americans as a group and that they could conquer white racism by behaving differently.”

He wondered,

“How did these perspectives get lodged in [his] brain? Why did the African American crowd respond with such enthusiasm?

To his chagrin, Kendi realized his own experience was a prime example of how racist ideas quietly worm their way through the culture.

It also showed all too clearly how one can be anti-racist in some contexts yet sick with racism in others.”

Through love, curiosity and doubt, he became the scholar who has written the definitive history of racism, “Stamped from the Beginning” and new practical and personal book “How to Be An Anti-Racist.”

Kendi’s book is open and bravely vulnerable about his own struggles with racist thinking.

At first he didn’t want to share personally.

But his perspective changed as he kept writing.

He told one reporter,

“[T]he more I thought about it, the more I realized:
How can I ask other people to share those shameful
moments, to free themselves of their baggage,
to confess the most racist moments of their lives,
if I’m not willing to do that, too?”

His question reminded me of one of my own cringe-worthy racist behavior, when I high school not so far away from where Kendi was a student at the same time.

I was the editor of the school newspaper,
and I remember writing a terribly self-righteous,
and now I realize terribly racist,

editorial about how the cure for racism was
everyone should be race “colorblind.”

I feel a sick relief that unlike Kendi,
whose moment was captured both on video and in the
Washington Post,

my little high school editorial is lost
to that big Recycle bin in the sky.

I do remember, however, that another student, a student of color,
wrote a rebuttal that was basically, “Um, no, that’s dumb.”

And I, such a self-righteous white girl,
responded with doubling down on my original message,
rather than being open to actually learning something.
Like Kendi, oooh I cringe at that memory.

That memory does help me see how far I’ve come in
understanding race, racism,
and what it really means to be an anti-racist in America.

But more importantly,
that memory spurs me to avoid self-righteousness,
and to stay open to all I don’t know.

It spurs me to keep examining things and ideas and behaviors
I’ve thought were okay or good or just “how things are”

And go deeper, be open to learning a new perspective,
rather than defensive.

To stay loving, curious, doubtful, in the dark.

Now, 20 plus years later,

I get how being race colorblind is just not a thing.

If we have eyes that can see, we can see people’s race.

It is bizarre and unhelpful and even white supremacist to say
that we should pretend we don’t see people’s differences,

negate those differences,
and insist everyone should be treated the same
regardless of existing inequity that needs to be righted.

Stephen Colbert even made fun of this concept a few years ago
in an ongoing shtick where his character “Stephen Colbert”
is portrayed as literally being unable to see race;
he blusters:

“I just want to say that I am not a racist.
I don’t even see race, not even my own.
People tell me I’m white, and I believe them,
because I just spent the last six minutes
explaining how I’m not a racist.
And that is about the whitest thing you can do.”

Part of what Kendi was going through as he wrote this book was
treatment for Stage 4 Cancer.

He couldn’t help but braid together those two insidious evils in
his mind, cancer and racism.

At one recent book talk, someone asked Kendi where he finds
hope. Kendi went through the history of anti-racist progress,
then added,

“In order to bring about change,
you literally have to believe in the possibility of change.”
Belief helps us take action, helps us seek out the medicine we
need for healing—healing bodies, healing cultures.

He is cancer free now, and so I pray he will continue as the compassionate and curious leader of anti-racist change for many more years to come.

In a reflection in his poem, David Whyte writes that
“Sweet Darkness” was written in a kind of defiant praise of this difficult time of not knowing, a letter of invitation to embrace...the foundational human experience of not being able to see [...] as perhaps the only horizon out of which a truly new revelation can emerge.

And then he writes this, which really got me, it was a new revelation of the meaning of this poem:

The last line cuts both ways, of course:
we ourselves have often helped make everything and everyone one around us far too small,
by our lack of faith
in the midst of a necessary not knowing,
by all the ways we are not holding the conversation.

How have we helped make everything and everyone around us too small?

What time of sweet, dark, curious not knowing do we need to lean into?

What conversations do we need to hold?

When you are tired, I pray you rest in sweet darkness.
When you awake, I pray you remember:
 You are not beyond love.
 The world was made to be free in.

Amen.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2019/10/14/anti-racist-revelations-ibram-x-kendi/?arc404=true>

Closing Hymn: Grey 368 Now Let Us Sing

Benediction Response: "New Year" (trad. Shape Note) - Adult Choir