THE SECOND ONE
Rev. Mark Ward, Lead Minister
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Asheville
January 26, 2020

READINGS

The Fountain

by Denise Levertov

Don't say, don't say there is no water
to solace the dryness at our hearts.
I have seen
the fountain springing out of the rock wall
and you drinking there. And I too
before your eyes
found footholds and climbed
to drink the cool water.
The woman of that place, shading her eyes,
frowned as she watched — but not because
she grudged the water,
only because she was waiting
to see we drank our fill and were
refreshed.
Don't say, don't say there is no water.
That fountain is there among its scalloped
green and gray stones,
it is still there and always there
with its quiet song and strange power
to spring in us,

up and out through the rock.

From “Just Mercy” by Brian Stevenson

“It took me a while to sort it out, but I realized something sitting there while Jimmy Dill was being killed at Holman prison. After working for more than 25 years, I understood that I don’t do what I do because it’s required or necessary or important. I don’t do it because I have no choice. I do what I do because I’m broken, too. . . .
“Being close to suffering, death, executions, and cruel punishments didn’t just illuminate the brokenness of others. In a moment of anguish and heartbreak, it also exposed my own brokenness. You can’t effectively fight abusive power, poverty, illness, oppression and injustice and not be broken by it.
“We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . .
“Sometimes we’re fractured by the choices we make; sometimes we’re shattered by things we would never have chosen. But our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis of our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing.”

SERMON

THE SECOND ONE

It was probably a half century ago amid the tumult of social protest that the Rev. Harry Meserve, a Unitarian Universalist minister, author of the meditation you heard earlier, posted a sermon topic that went viral, or at least as viral as things could go in that pre-Internet era:

“If you were arrested for being a Unitarian Universalist,” he wrote, “would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

It was a clever turn of phrase that resonated at the time because social activists in our movement were being arrested for such things as protesting the Vietnam War or joining Civil Rights campaigns. And we were aware of people overseas in places like the then-Soviet Union or eastern Europe who were being swept up by policesimply for witnessing their faith.

But it was also a phrase offered tongue in cheek: A dramatic way of challenging his hearers to reflect on just how seriously they took their faith and what each of them was doing to live the values they proclaim.

This is what our UU Second Principle asks of us. Our first principle calls us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But just proclaiming that doesn't take us very far. The second principle points to the consequences of that commitment. We covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

It gives us our marching orders, and it connects us to admonitions we can trace back centuries to the Hebrew scriptures. In the 16th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, where God charges those in positions of power, he warns that they must deal with everyone fairly: "justice, and only justice you shall pursue." It is not enough just to think good thoughts: We must act on what we know to be right.

"I don't want your sympathy for the needs of humanity," writes my colleague the Rev. Robert Fulghum in his book It Was On Fire When I Lay On It, "I want your muscle. I do not want to talk about what you understand about this world. I want to know what you will do about it. I do not want to know what you hope. I want to know what you will work for."

But justice, we know, can be complicated. That is why we have judges and lawyers and meditators to weigh the many factors that go to deciding who is in the right and who in the wrong. And even then, as anyone who has ever dealt with the courts knows, true justice can be hard to find.

But no one denies that it remains our aim. As my colleague the Rev. Ken Collier puts it, "it is a goal that moves us forward in the ongoing struggle to become deeper and more fully human."

But the writer and philosopher Cornel West may have put it most succinctly: "Justice," he said, "is what love looks like in public."

We agree. It's what we proclaimed on the yellow T-shirts that many of us wore at the march last week honoring the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as you can see in the photo on the cover of your order of service.

"Side with Love," the shirts declare. For it is love that is lacking in the attitudes, laws, and policies that keep many African-Americans oppressed in this country a half-century after

King's death. It is also love that is lacking in the nation's broken immigration laws that led us to offer the sanctuary of shelter to our friend Maria. It is love that is lacking in our market economy that chooses winners and losers and powers the cycle of poverty and abuse that leads us to be ongoing partners with other communities of faith to provide shelter for homeless women in the program, Room in the Inn.

Time and again, love calls us to action that we may be agents of justice. And central to the notion of justice are the principles of equity – that each person shall be treated fairly and equally – and compassion – that we are not neutral observers to all this pain. The pain touches us. We cannot always fix the ills we find, but we can open our hearts to those savaged by injustice.

Bryan Stevenson's book, Just Mercy, and the current movie of the same name tell the story of Stevenson's journey into the most brutal recesses of our criminal justice system: the capital punishment mill in the South.

Arriving a newly minted lawyer from Harvard, in the 1980s Stevenson discovered a system that was chewing up the lives of black men, many of whom had been railroaded onto death row as a result of prejudiced courts, poor counsel and law enforcement that manufactured trumped up cases against them.

What is especially compelling about the story is how Stevenson finds himself pulled into the system. We learn how he experienced the very degradation that his clients complained of – threats and abuse by authorities – and not infrequently feelings of impotence and despair, despite whatever privileges he felt that his position as an attorney should have given him. In the end, race dictated all.

That he nonetheless succeeded, that in the last 30 years his Equal Justice Initiative has saved the lives of dozens of men otherwise facing execution is the powerful, feel-good culmination of this story. But before joining in high-fives for Stevenson's victory I think it's important for us to attend to the message that he invites us to find at the end of his story.

"You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, illness, oppression and injustice and not be broken by it," he says. I sometimes think that this hard learning keeps many of us from diving more deeply into the work of social change than we might.

Let's not pretend that entering the narratives of lives of people suffering from injustice

won't affect us. Being so close to the horrific stories of his clients, Stevenson tells us, "exposed my own brokenness." He goes on: "We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness."

How are you broken?

It's an uncomfortable question. We present ourselves to one another as capable, competent people, and, well, frankly, we'd rather not dwell on those wounds that we carry. There may be wells of shame surrounding them, or histories we'd rather not revisit, and we'd prefer to just put them behind us. Yeah, I get that.

And yet, consider, as Stevenson puts it, that "our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis of our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing." In the tenderness that we touch by recalling our own wounds we are given an opportunity to open our hearts in a deep way to truly feeling with: compassion in its most elemental form.

If we act out of our second principle from a position of perceived privilege, where we place ourselves above those we are serving, we might as well not bother. Because as important as the work itself may be, even more important is how this work changes us. For that is how it changes the world, how person by person we build the beloved community, where justice, equity and compassion are a matter of course.

"Don't say, don't say there is no water to solace the dryness at our hearts," Denise Levertov tells us. "I have seen the fountain springing out of the rock and you drinking there." Each of you. Even with our wounds and flaws we have, each of us, touched the living water of love and compassion. Let it be our work to help it flow.