

Fragments of Wholeness

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

October 20, 2013

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Like many of you I breathed a huge sigh of relief this week when the government shut down finally came to an end. While I can't say that I was dramatically affected in my everyday life by the shut down, I was relieved to see cooler heads prevail at last before the nation's economy was irrevocably harmed. The result could have been catastrophic. Indeed, there still could be repercussions. I learned in high school economics class that our money is backed by the "faith and credit" of the United States government. When that faith is shaken, and the world starts to question how reliable we can govern ourselves and handle our finances, as a nation we can find ourselves in some precarious situations. It was only the leverage of breaking that faith with the nation's creditors, and the economic meltdown that would follow, that led to the end of the standoff. Faith, our theme for this month, lies at the very heart of the whole situation.

It reminded me of one of my favorite movies of all time, “Do the Right Thing.” Perhaps you remember Spike Lee’s breakout film of the early nineties. It takes place in one day, the hottest day of the summer, in a neighborhood in Brooklyn New York. There is a huge cast full of actors who would go on to do great things. The movie is about the racial tensions that divide and fragment this neighborhood, and the possible ways those tensions could and should be resolved. I won’t give you a rundown of the whole film – it is very complex and full of symbolism. It is a movie well worth a repeat viewing. The name of the film comes from advice that the old man, the sage of the film, gives the main character, “Remember, always do the right thing.” As if it were so obvious! Spike Lee commented about his signature movie that all of the characters believe they are doing the right thing; at least from their point of view with the experiences they have had. Yet even when everyone is trying to do the right thing, conflict, and in the case of Lee’s movie violent conflict, is the result. This is what reminded me of our government. It’s easy to say, “Always do the right thing.” What happens even when trying to do the right thing is that we break off into factions, sometimes called “living in a bubble.” To quote another favorite movie of mine, the right thing is true from a certain point of view. When this happens, we see the world only through fragments and not the whole.

Now granted this is a generous, if not borderline naïve, interpretation of our recent experience of economic brinkmanship and self-imposed crisis. Yes there are those who wanted simply for their side, either Republican or Democrat, to win. In a way politics can become like sports – I root for my team to beat your team. What is quickly overlooked is that both parties, and the American people themselves, need to be on the same team. There is a shared reality we inhabit beyond our party affiliation. At this church, we name that in our welcome to worship every Sunday. At some point both parties need to look beyond factionalism and consider the common good. Only when it became immanent obvious that the common good of our nation’s economy was threatened did true negotiations begin.

How do we get beyond our fragmented lives and live in wholeness? The answer is perhaps one you could guess given that I told you what the theme for the month was just a few minutes ago: faith. A couple of weeks ago I defined faith as belief plus action. Belief in something isn’t enough. Taking action, but not reflecting on it in light of your values or theology is not enough. Only when we bring our beliefs and our actions together do we have a sense of what we have faith in.

The Quaker writer, theologian and teacher, Parker Palmer speaks to a faith that finds wholeness among the fragments of our lives in his book, "A Hidden Wholeness." He tells this story about one of the retreats he used to lead on this subject:

"One participant [in my workshop] had worked for a decade in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, after farming for twenty-five years in northeastern Iowa. On his desk at that moment was a proposal related to the preservation of Midwestern topsoil, which is being depleted at a rapid rate by agribusiness practices that value short-term profits over the well-being of the earth. His "farmer's heart," he kept saying, knew how the proposal should be handled. But his political instincts warned him that following his heart would result in serious trouble, not least with his immediate superior.

On the last morning of our gathering, the man from Agriculture, looking bleary-eyed, told us that it had become clear to him during a sleepless night that he needed to return to his office and follow his farmer's heart.

After a thoughtful silence, someone asked him, "How will you deal with your boss, given his opposition to what you intend to do?" "It won't be easy," replied this farmer-turned-bureaucrat. "But during this

retreat, I've remembered something important: I don't report to my boss. I report to the land."

Because this story is true, I cannot give it a fairy-tale ending. I cannot claim that his pilgrimage solved his or the topsoil's problems, any more than my pilgrimage to the [Minnesota] Boundary Waters solves my problems or the world's. But this I can claim: every time we get in touch with the truth source we carry within, there is net moral gain for all concerned. Even if we fail to follow its guidance fully, we are nudged a bit further in that direction. And the next time we are conflicted between inner truth and outer reality, it becomes harder to forget or deny that we have an inner teacher who wants to lay a claim on our lives."

It is easy to lament, "Oh if only all our politicians had the strength of character to make such choices!" I would certainly join in such a lament. However, I hasten to add that it isn't just our politicians who struggle, and fail, to reconcile their outer reality with their inner convictions. As Spike Lee would remind us, we are all in that boat trying to "Do the right thing" as best we can. Politicians wrestle with this just as much as the rest of us; at a grander scale with more on the line and usually with cameras rolling. The man at Parker Palmer's retreat choose his "farmer's heart," but at what cost? We don't know.

But Parker Palmer is pointing us in the right direction. Faith in this context means listening to that still small voice within us. The search for wholeness is a spiritual journey. This is not surprising since the word “wholeness” shares a common root word with the word “Holy.” Whatever else we might say about what the word “Holy” means, part of it implies wholeness; transcending the fragmented pieces of how we live or how we view our lives. There is something deep within us that calls us to wholeness. While we are hovering around the subject of etymology, the root of the word “religion” means “to bind together” – to bring the fragments of our lives together in wholeness.

Maybe the most eloquent writer and thinker on the nature of faith was Paul in the New Testament. I am sure this may surprise some of you, since I am usually pretty critical of Paul most of the time. But there is one part of the Book of Romans that I have come to appreciate more and more the older I get. In making a case for the doctrine of Original Sin, Paul is reflecting on sin and human limitations versus God and God’s infinite possibilities. In the midst of that discussion, which gets a bit convoluted at times, he stumbles into this nugget that would make Freud proud. Romans chapter 7, verse 19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

Paul calls this “sin,” I call it the universal fact of human limitations. Maybe that is the same thing. Whatever we choose to call it, I am sure you have experienced it before. It is the situation that the Agriculture worker felt when he attended Parker Palmer’s retreat. I know what the right thing to do is. I can see it, envision it, and even want to do it. But doing the right thing, doing the good that I want as Paul says, can be really hard and at times could mean great personal sacrifice. Yet what Paul is describing is the experience of fragmentation: our beliefs and our actions don’t sync up. We know the good we want, but somehow do the evil we wished to avoid.

Faith is belief and action brought together. To be honest, Paul would claim that only faith in Jesus as the Lord and Savior was the only way to reconcile belief and action. But with all due respect to him, I think the experience of fragmentedness he is describing is true regardless of whether your faith is in Jesus or Buddha or any other great religious teacher. Religion means to bind together these fragments; no one religion has cornered that market despite what they may claim.

We live in a culture that encourages the experience of fragmentedness and discourages wholeness. Mass marketing and the appeal to target demographics look only at certain sections of society

and not the whole thing. And what is the unspoken, and occasionally explicitly spoken, message behind most ads? First they make you aware of what you don't have. Then they show you their product which they claim will solve your newly aware problem or deficiency. And finally they tell you either the price or where to go buy it. The solution is always the same – fix your problem by buying stuff.

Now any one commercial is not inherently evil. But taken as a whole they send a message. When I watch TV with my youngest son Matthew, we are usually watching a cartoon aimed at his age and demographic. When the ads for toys come on, immediately he asks to have whatever the kids on TV are having fun playing. Then another ad comes on and he asks for that. And then the next. He wants all of them! Now eventually I just say no to everything – I can't and won't buy the whole toy store. But clearly there is a message sent to us, and not just children, that the good we want, the product on TV, is the answer to the evil we have, and so the proposed solution out of this is to buy more stuff.

In contrast to this endless cycle of fragmentation, is the journey of the soul. When we seek out wholeness we are living not at the behest of some advertiser, but rather living out of our own values and beliefs. This morning you have witnessed at least three ways to live according

to your values: supporting UUSC through Guest at Your Table, supporting new and growing churches through the work of Chalice Lighters, and even supporting each other through the tremendous work of the volunteers on our Pastoral Care Team. But whatever we do to live out those values, we need to be intentional and make time to listen to our souls. The best way to do this is through spiritual practices done on a regular basis. Our culture will not make time for us to listen to our soul. Oh it makes time for fragmentation, factionalism, conflict, and chasing satisfaction through consumerism. But time for wholeness, listening for our life's calling, getting in touch with our passion and love for life, that time we must carve out for ourselves.

The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead had an interesting definition of God. Whitehead said that God is that creative force in the world that brings together different and disparate elements into a new and harmonious whole. It could be as simple as the colors yellow and blue coming together to make green, or as complex as the members of Congress and the President working together on a budget. But whenever unlike things get combined in a new and creative way, then we are seeing evidence of God in the world, Whitehead claimed. I am no expert in math or quantum mechanics, but I like that definition of God. It is a God that makes sense in the 21st century. It is a vision of the Holy not as a sentient

being staring down at us from the lofty heights of heaven, but right here as close to us as the atoms in our own body, trying to bring together the fragments into the whole in some exciting, perhaps even bold, new way.

It is tempting to echo Spike Lee's injunction to "Always do the right thing." But as he points out in his movie, that does not get us beyond our fragmented and limited views of the world. At best we get to where Paul got; knowing the good but lamenting the evil we do instead because of our common human limitations. Instead I wish to encourage you to listen to your farmer's heart, or your chemist's heart, or your banker's heart, or your parent's heart, whichever heart seems to tug on your consciousness, but you have been avoiding. The spiritual life is simply paying attention to those things calling you, but you have not listened to yet. Your soul is calling you back to wholeness. May you, may all of us, have the courage to heed its call and the faith to live accordingly. Amen Blessed Be.