

Working for the Kingdom

by Rev. Michelle Collins, delivered February 9, 2014

Lord, I keep so busy working for the Kingdom

Ain't got time to die.

Cause when I'm feeding the poor

I'm working for the Kingdom

Ain't got time to die.¹

The Kingdom of God that is among us and within us. This is the Kingdom that the words of this spiritual are referring to.

The term “Kingdom of God” was part of Jesus’s central message, calling for the presence and immanence of the kingdom of God. As some of you may know, I grew up as a Southern Baptist, at least until my questions and logic got the better of me at about age 19. The Kingdom of God was a term that we used a lot. It represented the world that we were trying to create with our evangelism and our living of our religious values. Well, for me it was about living my values. I can’t actually recall a single time that I “witnessed” to anyone, trying to convince them of my beliefs and how they should change theirs. Even then I thought that beliefs someone else had found themselves were A-Okay and I was just curious about them. But I think Jesus wasn’t necessarily about evangelism either. That wasn’t the Kingdom work he was doing. He spent his time teaching about ideals of love and also about breaking down barriers between people, crossing economic lines, challenging untouchability, and of course healing many.

This is the Kingdom work echoed in the spiritual *Ain't Got Time to Die*:

...when I'm feeding the poor, I'm working for the Kingdom...

...when I'm healing the sick, I'm working for the Kingdom...¹

Martin Luther King deepened this concept as he developed and popularized the work towards the Beloved Community. Now, beloved community is a term that we use a good bit around here. I want to take a minute to apply it in a larger sense for us. I remember being so excited the first time that Dr. King’s concept of the Beloved Community proper was explained to me. It was a not monarchy related, not masculine gendered inclusive idea of a community that we can actually bring into being. Dr. King

¹ *Ain't Got Time to Die*, a spiritual by Hall Johnson

understood the Beloved Community as the larger community and movement that he was trying to build – based on principles of nonviolence and on equity and dignity for everyone. So when we say we are building Beloved Community, this is the vision that we are tapping into!

We each have Kingdom work that we are doing – here in our congregation and that we are doing individually. What I want to explore today is how we find sustenance for our Kingdom work... what is the foundation that helps us to keep going and that nourishes and energizes us along the way? How do we find energy for our work?

I want to propose three things that can nourish us with energy, and they are: a shared identity, trust, and praise.

There is energy that we get from a shared identity and from wrapping that identity around a common vision. This is especially true when we are physically around others with whom we share an identity. I remember the first General Assembly that I attended. To say that it was invigorating would be an understatement. It was over two thousand religious liberals, two thousand Unitarian Universalists gathering in my hometown of Nashville, Tennessee. That's not exactly a place I think of as being progressive religiously. UU congregations in the south often feel like havens – the first UU congregation that I attended was in Nashville, less than two blocks from a Baptist church with one of the larger steeples in town. Billboards along the highway and at the bus stops will sport negative messages about immigrants and anti-gay sentiments are the norm, although fortunately countering visions are becoming more present, too. My congregation felt like a safe haven where I wouldn't have to spend my energy lowering the voices and assumptions facing me, and I could spend my energy figuring out what my path and questions were instead.

General Assembly was different from that though. I had been attending the congregation in Nashville for less than a year, and while we had good numbers – maybe 200 were present on Christmas Eve – it was still a tiny pocket. I hadn't yet ever seen or experienced more UU's than that. I mean, it's one thing to read a number, but it's another to experience it. Attending a gathering of this many UU's connected me with a larger identity that I began to adopt as my own. I say "began to" because it still took a long while – 10 years in fact – before I really realized it was me and that I'd never leave being a UU behind.

General Assembly isn't the only larger gathering that we have. And in fact, it can be inaccessible for many, as it's often far away and can cost a good bit to get too. We have many tangible reminders of our shared identity that are much closer as well. One thing that I've been looking forward to for a while is today's collaboration between First U and the congregations in Newark and Mill Creek. We're not only sharing our identity as Unitarian Universalists but also sharing the joy of worshipping together too! The energy and enthusiasm that y'all have brought to this collaboration and shared music has been infectious. And there is also the work and gatherings at the district level and at the Delmarva cluster level with our collaborative work and our shared worship experiences.

Our work is easier to bear together. Challenges are struggles are easier to bear when you can connect with someone else who is also facing that struggle, whether you are struggling together or simply knowing that you are not alone in your struggle. There are specific pastoral techniques for helping folks to feel the comfort and sustenance of connecting their experiences with others. And not only are we connecting with other people, but we are connecting around shared visions and missions – being Kingdom workers, building the Beloved Community.

Our shared identity provides sustenance for our Kingdom work. The next thing that I want to lift up is TRUST – or perhaps one might call it faith – trust that the support and strength will be there when we need it.

The choirs sang of this during the Offertory with *He Never Failed Me Yet*.

They sang: *He is my God and I'll serve Him
No matter what the test
Trust and never doubt
Jesus will surely bring you out
He never failed me yet.²
He never failed me, he never failed me yet.*

In this refrain, I hear trust that the support will be there, from Jesus or however one might define that support as coming from somewhere or something. Now, for y'all humanists, don't shut me out yet! I'm not done! I have to admit that connecting with these ideas of trust and faith is probably what I'll have the most difficulty with myself. If

² *He Never Failed Me Yet*, a spiritual by R. Ray

we were to take the phrase literally, we'd run into problems right away. *I'll never doubt because he's never failed me yet.* We'd have a field day coming up with examples of times when faith and beliefs have been challenged because of an experience of feeling like one's god wasn't there for you. From my time as a hospital chaplain, I can think of many faith challenging and even faith shattering moments when someone was losing a loved one or was dying themselves and saw it as a failure for support.

But I want to take a step further back and ask something a little different: What is the strength that you can trust in? What is the strength that you can trust in?

I don't know if we often take the time to consider this question, at least not until we're faced with a situation when we need more strength than it seems like we've got. And then we're usually not at our best and in a state for serious reflection in the issue. But also that's when we find our best answers, I think.

In our reading today, Dr. Howard Thurman³ explores struggles – the struggles of the seagull chick and the struggles of humans. He makes a bold claim. He says: "There is always strength for the struggle." Now this is a faith that there's something, somewhere, something that matches what we're open to and capable of.

What is the strength that you can trust in? What keeps you going when you feel like giving up? I think it's something that's different for everyone. Maybe it's remembering a time when you didn't think you had the strength but found out that you did. Maybe it's knowing the support of friends or loved ones is there for you. Maybe it's believing in the support of a higher power. Or maybe it's just sheer persistence and stubbornness – that's definitely part of what it is for me. The strength and support that we can trust in.

Finally, as sustenance for our Kingdom work, I want to propose a word that we don't hear too often in our Unitarian Universalist context. But today especially, I think it's definitely here. Praise. Kingdom work is praise, and praise is Kingdom work. At their foundation, the spirituals are praise music. That claim should seem obvious given the music that's been shared with us today, the refrains that are repeated and emphasized, and it's in the words here, too:

*I will sing of God's mercy, every day, every hour, He gives me power.
I've got a crown in the Kingdom, ain't that good news,*

³ Howard Thurman, "Struggle is an aspect of life" in *Meditations of the Heart*, pages 61-62.

*I've got a savior in the Kingdom, ain't that good news.
I keep so busy praisin' my Jesus,
If I don't praise my Lord the rocks gonna cry out
Ain't got time to die.*

Praise, invigorating, uplifting praising. Praise is something that African American churches certainly do well. It's something that the Southern Baptist churches of my youth certainly do well also. In fact, we'd have a specific time each summer devoted to it. Every summer, the church ran a revival – not a tent revival – we were in our own sanctuary – just a week full of high energy services. Being in the orchestra myself, I was at every service, daily for a week. We practiced the music for months, even though there was certainly repetition from year to year. As the week progressed, we'd be on a praise high, energized and revived. I think there was probably some inspirational preaching, from time to time, but that's not what sticks out in my memory. It was the music that energized me.

Thinking in terms of praise is not so far a concept as one might think for Unitarian Universalists. There is often a tone of celebration present, celebrations of life, celebrations of accomplishments, celebrations of places where our struggles succeed. And our board of trustees has even called out praise and celebration in our church's ends, calling for everyone here to find ways to experience inspiration and wonder, fulfillment and joy. It's praise. What are some of the celebrations that you can hang onto? Where can you throw yourself into a moment of praise? It's more than just a nice thing to do, it is sustenance for continuing our work.

Embracing our shared identity, finding strength that you can trust in, and lifting up moments of praise. It's not only about our work building the Beloved Community, it's about making sure that we can keep going. Working for social change is not free of risks or challenges, and it's full of burn-out. It can be slow and arduous work. But it need not be downtrodden. This month in worship we've been talking about generosity, and embracing the sustenance that you need is about generosity for yourself. Find what you need, listen to what others need, find the strength that you can count on. That's how we'll keep going, both when the going is easy, and when it's tough. May it be so.