

WHAT WILL

WE BE?

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I heard someone say once, "I love that hymn [Amazing Grace,] but I only feel comfortable singing it here." And we chose that hymn today because it's important to talk about what it means to be somewhere for a long, long time, maybe not 10,000 years like that last verse says, but for a long, long time. Here at this church, we tell everyone who joins that they ought to have a daily practice, weekly worship, monthly service, yearly retreat, and a once in a lifetime trip to Boston, someone said. Stop preaching my sermon. Come on. We're serious about it. We really are because enlarging and strengthening our spiritual life, it's not a suggestion. It's a way of life and it's this strength that will help us to do what must be done for sustained times ahead. So I got back from a pilgrimage to Boston, thank you very much, this week. And I got to tell you, it did not disappoint.

I learned a whole lot, but the thing that struck me most powerfully I think is how long we have really been around as a faith friends. It's not 10,000 years, but it has been a bit. One of the people we heard a lot about in Boston was John Winthrop. If this name does not ring a bell for you, his sermon purported to have been preached aboard the Arbella in 1629 to Christian separatists known later as the Puritans sailing to the unceded lands that they would call Massachusetts called upon his flock to make a city on the hill. His words. "For we must consider that we shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." Well, maybe not all people, definitely his bosses and whether we like it or not, part of the long arc of Unitarian Universalism into this place, into where you are anywhere in the world and into the hearts that we all carry here was traced by those Puritans crowding the decks of the Arbella. To hear the leader of the Massachusetts Bay Company preach that sermon. Company, not colony. You heard me right.

And Winthrop later served the company as its governor, not minister after it was a colony. See, Winthrop wasn't a clergy person. He was a middling estate's lawyer who took a chance on a new world and a new role, even though his peers and his friends thought it might be to his peril. He was a lay leader of his congregation taking that leadership path. It's good and enduring through the four centuries since then that they boarded that vessel remains this hope of being a city on a hill. Now, political speeches of all kinds from people of every stripe have held up this image, always to shine some way it seems to a new freedom to all who follow it. Yes, we've been around a long time, friends bright, shining as the sun.

See, there are roughly 55 congregations still active in the United States that have been meeting continuously since before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and six of them are Unitarian Universalist congregations. Yeah, that's more than 10%. One of those congregations is First Church Boston, where Winthrop was a member and where his name remains on the rolls today. We are part of a faith and a community of sibling churches that have been around a lot longer than this country has as a city on a hill.

Now we're in Dallas, so it's more like a city on a mound here. For the last few months we have explored this sermon that helped to found this congregation, and today we talk about the future and ask what will we be? On my pilgrimage, I learned that Daniel Limbaugh, our first minister, was not ordained yet when he preached that founding sermon. He was ordained later in a ceremony on January 21st, 1900 down on Commerce Street. Now me and two dozen of your best friends got to see, touch, and feel a lengthy article written about that event. It made the news and a copy of that order of service. We know you love your order of service everyone. It was there in the archives at Harvard. In ordaining, Mr. Limbaugh, the Reverend W.C. Pierce of New Orleans impelled him and all Unitarians to I quote, "Study the Old Testament of the earth around them and the New Testament of humanity today and to interpret the divine purpose running through the works of the creator to interpret God, the God of power and of beauty."

And Limbaugh who wrote our first reading today was up to the task. He was trained and schooled actually in Greek literature. It was his favorite. And one of the most common concerns of Greek literature are the traits that make of a person's character and their resulting fate because of those. Our Unitarian and Transcendentalist, sage, Ralph Waldo Emerson like to say this, "Sow a thought and you reap an action, sow an act, and you reap a habit, sow a habit, and you reap a character, sow a character and you reap a destiny." Thought, act, habit, character, destiny.

Acts shape our destiny. That's why character building, soul development is what Limbaugh hoped for the future of the people of this church because he believed like many other wise teachers that character is destiny. So developing our souls was essential to find what we will be. And he named two, that for some their destiny is to do wrong in this world, to participate in evil. We believe like Limbaugh preached, like we talked about in our story, that humans are inherently good but can choose evil ways. And we are in a time together when the word evil is being used a lot, not just on social media,

but plenty there. The honest belief that something is evil encourages us to do what? Really I'm asking. What do we do? Yeah, we do good. We fight it. That's right. It's this feeling, but how do we do it?

There's this legend about our friend John Winthrop that sort of came through the ages, probably out of those hellishly cold winters up in Boston. He noticed, so it goes that there were logs disappearing from his woodpile. So he found the thief. He said, "Oh, you must be in need, so please take the wood with my blessing so that your sinning doesn't damn you to hell." It's the irony of burning in hell for stealing firewood that's a bit too rich for me. Tells me it might not be a true story, but changing the thief's and the owner's thought or impression about the taking of the wood, they felt in evil was taken out of the world by changing their thought around it. Because evil friends, it's in the eye of the beholder on the individual level. Rarely does a person see themselves as bad or evil.

Most people are going around getting what they think they need or achieving what ends they think are of a higher good, what they think is right. It's in the eye of the beholder as the individual, those acts. But what about systems? When Dr. King talked about evil toward the end of his ministry, he was almost always talking about systems. He talked about man-made systems that harm people and usually the poorest among us. While relieving those, these systems do this, relieving individuals in the system of any personal responsibility, that's the corporate evil he saw. King talked a lot about in this sense the military-industrial complex and some did not like that very much. Some today still don't like that, but he wasn't alone. This week the world lost one of its great teachers, Father Gustavo Gutierrez, the parent of liberation theology. One of the primary evils, and he used the word often in his work, work that changed the face of theology for everyone everywhere.

The evil he named was poverty. He said, "Poverty is never good. It's an evil to be opposed." And it convicts any system of government or organization that perpetuates poverty as an evil to fight against all in a line, Gutierrez to King, to Limbaugh, back to Emerson, back to Winthrop, back to Jesus and Jesus's teachers would say, "If you love your neighbor, then you will not let their lives and more quickly and unjustly just because they are weaker, just because they are poorer." That is evil. And to let a lack of resources affect another's destiny, where there is significantly more than enough to share is what the great teachers always, always will name as an evil in our world. So Limbaugh 125 years ago wondered what will we be, what will do about evil in the world? He and others through our line call ours, "The religion of the future," in quotes. And what is one of the best predictors of future actions? Past actions. Correct. On that pilgrimage, I was endlessly struck friends by how intertwined our faith, this faith is with the founding of this nation.

When we visited Concord, we stood at the window of the house where the minister of first Parish Concord would stand, where he lived, which is one of another of the six Unitarian Universalist congregations that reaches back before this nation was formed. And our guide pointed out from the window where the first great revolution of this nation started. Right in the backyard of the minister's house is where the first shots of the American Revolution were fired, like right there at the minister's house. And then the guide pointed to where what he called the second great American Revolution started, right in that room and he picked up a copy of the essay Nature by Ralph Waldo Emerson. To paraphrase our God, our guide, oh heavens. The second revolution of transcendental thought was in

that essay. It uncoupled the requirement to believe in the Bible and the divinity of Jesus from the ability to be a person of deep and powerful faith in this country, which meant uncoupling the power of the church from the power of the republic.

This revolution was a thunderbolt that fired the connection of the innermost being of each of us, of the particular self to every other soul around us and the divinity of us all, the divinity of us all. He was a little scared to preach what he was afraid was a heresy. He didn't know he had the right audience. A faith as close to political power as virtually any other because of a thought that led to action, that led to character changed our destiny really of humankind for countless many. Yeah, something broke away when the transcendental movement took hold, but it broke free. Religion means, the word means to rebind, to remake like a bundle of something, to rewrap us up again and again when we are hurt and religions out there are still teaching that their followers and believers aren't enough, that they're not worthy of love. Some call their own followers evil because of who they love and how they grow to accept themselves and their authentic lives or how they care for their families or seek the medical attention that they need to live their lives.

Religion still teaches some that inwardly there's some moral failing and name that inward failing, they see as some form of evil and that perversion of purity, that idea that someone is wrong or sick of heart, that they are not part of the world's family, not at the welcome table as a beloved companion. It's just wrong. People will choose to do wrong with a good thing and that's what makes it so hard. The wrong use of a good thing. And I believe the sickness that that breeds is part of what divides us as a nation and as a people who sense in our deepest selves, whether we're conscious of it or not, the divinity and the goodness in our neighbors. What will we be then? What is our destiny? What have we done?

As we said in the prayers, member and beloved friend Muriel Hamilton died this week. She was a founding member of our Racial Equity Task Force. In recent years she moved to be closer to family, but both in her obituary and in the messages I received from her friends this week, it was clear that Muriel was a force for good and also for good trouble. You see, I did a little digging this week. Turns out Muriel was on the Washington Mall in 1963 and heard Dr. King say that he had a dream for this nation that he still believed in. I only learned this because a faculty member at the London School of Economics, Professor Power wrote an article about meeting Muriel and of hearing about her experience when Muriel was a college student in Wisconsin in 1964. Professor Power was so moved by Muriel's story that she heard that Professor Power went herself to Selma in 1965 to register voters and march with Dr. King.

She devoted her entire life to that work here and then moved back to England to teach the people in England all about it. I pray there is a heaven because I want to tell John Winthrop that story. I just want to explain that the passion of Muriel inspired for justice and equity and against empire and its evils that sprung from what Muriel shared about the action she took on that Washington Mall led her back to the seat of the power that started this entire enterprise. The work Muriel did had real and dangerous risks then and it remained part of her work here in Texas throughout her life and her good trouble had good company. Every year around this time I think, I feel, and especially with as much as

is on the line right now for people in the next few weeks, I'm always blessed to remember the life and the legacy of those who fought well for all to exercise their right to be heard, their right to vote. And for me, it's always Fannie Lou Hamer that comes back.

One of the greatest voices for justice in one of those lives. She was arrested, brutalized, terrorized for her dogged actions in registering all to vote. Her words, "Singing is one of the main things that can keep us going. When you're in a brick cell locked up and haven't done anything to anybody, but still you're locked up there and sometimes words just begin to come to you and you begin to sing like one of my favorite songs, This Little Light of Mine, I'm going to let it shine." The same song goes back to the fifth chapter of Matthew, which is the Beatitudes of the Bible when he says, "A city that sets on a hill cannot be hid. Let your light shine, that men would see your good works." I think singing is very important. It brings out the soul. I notice she provides the biblical citation for where she's pulling that quote from, unlike John Winthrop did in his speech. I'm just saying.

But I'll tell you what, we friends are going to need to bring out our soul in the coming weeks ahead. If we are not the religion of the future, we are the religion that the future is going to need. We are building this city on a hill, well on a mound, but still we are building it. And we go on this little band that has been here whose destiny was set before the cornerstone of this nation and taken the hard road to this inexorable, unbreakable, unquenchable free search for justice. We have been called every name in the book, separatists, puritans, Unitarians Universalists, transcendentalists, communists, capitalists, heathens, heretics and more. And I just have one question for all of them. Is that all you got?

Because a city that sets itself on a hill can't be hid and we are not hiding. We are right here. We let our light shine on the many fronts of this new war that is happening on the poor. We build systems to counter the evil ones against the poor. We let our light shine on the hatred and the bigotry of our beautiful children who are only trying to grow into their full selves and love those they are called to love with integrity. And we do this with the spark of divinity that is in each of us, that connects all of us, that guides all of us onward in this religion of the future. Where will we be? You ask. Well, we're going to be where we always have been, right freaking here. May it ever be so. Blessed be and amen.