



WEEKLY

WORSHIP

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"I leaned my back up against an oak.
I thought it was a trusty tree.
But first it swayed and then it broke.
And so my false love did unto me."

Those were the first words I ever learned in my life. No, I'm kidding. Those are the first words I learned for the tune of our opening hymn, we called it then The Water is Wide. Who knows the tune? Good. Okay. All right. I learned that actually in high school. Oh, the drama. Oh, the feelings. Oh, the angst. "And so my false love did unto me." Those were just the words I was looking for then, and I sang them as part of a all-male singing ensemble. If you ever want to understand angst, teach that song to 40 pubescent teenage boys, who share their most passionate love with whoever they see walking by at the moment, and then turn them loose on the school.

Thank you for indulging that image, and by imagining this, you might get a sense of how it feels for someone 30 years later with a lot of living done in the meantime to sing that song this morning, but with these new words about worship. "Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control, our spirits long to be made whole. Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed." That final verse is an answer of a kind to the heartbreak caused by another in high school, my false love, healed by my loving self now turned inward love. For that, I am grateful, grateful to these new words to an old tune.

We're in our Lenten season now, as I said in our time together, and a time when we encourage everyone of all ages to examine, to notice how we are spending our precious energy, where we are placing our spiritual attention. This series leading to Easter will explore this church's suggestion to all

of us to have a daily practice, weekly worship, monthly service, a yearly retreat, and a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage. Today we talk about weekly worship as a spiritual practice.

So we talked about what practice is, but what's worship to you? Ah, they were a lot more confident in the 9:30. Y'all got to get up earlier. That's fine. I got it. You're not messing with my sermon at all by not having any answers. It's a lot of things to people as we just heard. Oh, wait, no, that's ... But one of the essential elements of worship is communing, is being together, being together with one another, that kind of communing. Being in the presence of the divine, perhaps, communing, whether that divinity resides somewhere external, internal, or both, or neither, communing. Here and in many churches, worship has a liturgy, which is a combination of elements that flow together and are spoken, sung, or shared in other ways like silence, a reflection, which is a form of deep listening. The form of our liturgy here is recognizable in faiths today that stretch back millennia formed out of shared, collective memory. A kind of history we hold today like Cole Arthur Riley speaks of so eloquently with her words in the reading.

It reminds me also of a story that the writer and mystic Anthony DeMello tells sometimes. It's about religious tourists. There was a couple who traveled to some of the oldest religious sites in the world and enjoyed those sites most that had something unique or beautiful about the traditions that they practice there. The distinctive element of their worship was the key. So they arrived once at one of the oldest churches in Spain where the worship service is led by an order of monks that garnered such reverence from a practice of pausing to bow numerous times whenever they approached the altar or left the altar. So sure enough, our tourists arrived at the church. They arrived there for worship and like clockwork, as the celebrants approached down the center and then continued walking, they paused every few steps, bowed their head, and then continued walking. The service was nothing too different than they had experienced. The liturgy was much the same that they'd come to expect, but as the celebrants departed from the altar again, every few steps, they paused, they bowed their heads, and then continued walking until the recessional was done.

Our tourists were so moved by this dedication that even though they didn't understand it, the tradition, this worshipful action might've meant humility before the divine or a pause there before the flow of life, and they were still talking about it when they sat down for dinner. And that's when they overheard a conversation from locals about the church. "When will they get over it? Just because they worshiped in that basement all those years ago when they couldn't worship in their church because they were in hiding and they had to stoop under those low beams that they had there even though the beams aren't there anymore. What idiots. Get a grip."

The locals laughed like all you laughing, but the tourists just looked at each other and cried.

The story, like many of the DeMello's, it's meant to be ambiguous. Is it beautiful perhaps that the monks kept these motions in their liturgy? Is it maybe silly and outdated and no longer needed? Are you a local in the story, some of you laughers? Are you a tourist in the story? Are you maybe one of the monks in the story? Or are you in that congregation that's just kind of gotten used to it for

centuries? Or are you alone at the bar getting drunk, midday? No judgment. I'm just saying. It's been a week, you know.

If you're like me, it's probably a mix of these different characters, these different places in the story. There are things we all find so glorious and beautiful in worship services. Maybe there's others we could leave out if we had our way, but sadly, for you today, there is only my way, the mad queen, and even that's not true. I only joke. The norms and the practices and the traditions that we have and that we hold to here are part of what we notice, what we hold when we plan and offer a service like this one. I don't get to pick and choose everything in worship just because I'm leading it even.

Cole Arthur Riley talks about this power of this practice, about the power of being with her words so beautiful, "Staying in," she says, "Words we might not choose." Or words or elements that mean a lot to others, may be a tiny few but that we just don't understand or get yet. She say, "I think it's a beautiful symbol or practice of solidarity and also very restful for me to not always have to manufacture the words on the spot, but to just come and accept and receive words without having to try so hard."

I don't know about you, but that grace in the phrase, "Without having to try so hard lands somewhere deep in me." We, as your ministers, we hear from many of you, and we know what many of you are feeling and how hard going it is right now. I wish I could open the news on my phone without trying so hard. I wish I could unwrap the newspaper that arrives in the morning without trying so hard. I wish I could get the people the help that they need and that they want without trying so hard. I wish I could get out of bed some days without trying so hard. I wish I could build my bunker underground with four years of the West Wing, Battlestar Galactica, and doughnuts, and all of my best friends without trying so hard or facing kidnapping charges for doing so. But that's just me. There's only my way. "Get in the bunker."

No. Worship is a time of the week where we put down our tasks to receive and to rest and to be loved. It's a practice that helps us in hard going, I know, because we hold our collective memory too and find the strength to face the days to come.

This past week marked the 60th anniversary of the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge when the police in Selma, Alabama brutalized the marchers who advocated for every person's right to have a voice in their civil government with the vote. It was after Bloody Sunday that ministers from across the country were summoned by Dr. King to Selma to join the cause of advocating for voting rights. One of those clergy who answered the call was the Unitarian Minister, the Reverend James Reeb, and his wife. We've talked about him before up here. We will talk about him again here because sometimes things are worth mentioning more than once. That is how history, that is how collective memory works. When other clergy left, he stayed. He met with advocates, activists, and those planning the march and he learned more about their plans.

One of the evenings he was doing this was an integrated restaurant where he ate with people of color organizing the next march. When he left the restaurant, was attacked by three white men, clubbed on

the head, and then died in hospital from his injuries two days later. The death of this Unitarian minister caused an outrage in the country, tens of thousands gathered for vigils around the country. It was 60 years ago yesterday, Saturday, that the Voting Rights Act was delivered by President Johnson to Congress right after the president had called Reeb's widow and his father to express his condolences.

Now we know the sad history of the gutting of that act by the Supreme Court more than a decade ago. But Dr. King eulogized James Reeb upon his death and said this. "James Reeb symbolizes the forces of goodwill in our nation. He demonstrated the conscience of the nation. He was an attorney for the defense of the innocent in the court of world opinion. He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers." Quite a week in history. The words are different, but the tune is eerily the same.

It was also this week in 1938 when the Third Reich walked unopposed into Austria and annexed their neighbor, making it a province of Germany. Around the streets and in the cities, Austrians and Germans flaunted their hate for Jews, forcing them to try to flee. Others took their own lives and still others were forced to work menial tasks and to be terrorized before being sent to camps to be killed. This week in history, friends. The words different, the tune the same.

The chilling echo this week is in the arrests and more that are starting and the detainment of people who have the right to be in the United States of those, yes, espousing beliefs and protests, yes, perhaps things you find distasteful or disagree with some of those here. But ever since I have seen some of these, especially the arrests this week at Columbia University, I am asking myself whether the state action against lawful residents and secreting them off to a detention facility is the future we will accept for those who displease a petty dictator. Seeing before me this project of defining, of paring down ever and ever more narrowly who is and who isn't protected by this nation's laws and the civil rights it promises without due process almost leaves me speechless like I don't have the words. Like I don't have the words for a lawmaker who would pen and file a bill that makes it a felony to be transgender in this state where more than 100,000 trans people live and work and are just trying to live their ever-living lives. And an attorney general in this state who ordered all courts to stop allowing Texans to receive documents that align with their gender. Quite a week in history, the words are different, but the tune is not new, friends.

When Dr. King eulogized James Reeb in the interfaith service, he also said this. "James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister who has remained silent. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand against social evil and serve as a taillight rather than as a headlight. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who was moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism." At a eulogy, friends. People like to sanitize Dr. King, but you got to hear the truth he spoke sometimes.

In my first job, there was actually a portrait of James Reeb right outside all the ministers' office. You could not leave your office without remembering. It was a reminder of what the hell we are doing here,

friends. That's why you and I and the supporters of this church are financially supporting our own cherished members who are choosing to live free of this latest threat against trans people in this state and to care for their families in ways they must in states that are safer for now. You don't know the life and the fear of this member who's moving their family away. Yet being together in this community, being here in worship, in this holy time when we decenter ourselves for a moment and hold the words, the experiences of others for a time and feel how utterly true, how finely-tuned our hearts and our souls are to the suffering of everyone who joins in this community. If you just open your heart to it, that is the heart of worship. That is touching the holy within you around us all. It is part of the gratitude for being part of a church and with people who believe so much in this support that they put their money where their values are. Amen. At least there's that this week.

I have no words some days, friends, so I rely on the words of others, that's what worship is. Who in times of great strife put to paper and into mind the hope that they have in a world to come. These are the people whose souls are part of the collective memory, whose united souls call out to us with words and with music, and in the hours of our greatest need to keep going in their name and in the name of those to come. From the nameless, terrorized, and disappeared to the ministers and members of this faith who stay to fight and give the last full measure of their devotion that others may live in freedom.

Come, Spirit, come. Fill us with the heart of those heroes who would take their families to a freer place with the faith of each one of you, the living cloud of witness, who share in the words of this faith and in the faith of all who struggle in hours like these. To find the word to name what is happening, make channels for the streams of love, Spirit, that flow from these souls to all of us present. Urging us ever onward to build where there are breaches, to repair where there are ruptures. To free where others would have them bound. To love when hate would have its way with us. Bless, bless our building of this church in this land where justice rolls down like water. May that ever be that we may do this as we do all things, together. Finding new words for this old tune of a love that surpasses understanding and that maketh all things new forever and ever, friends, may it ever be so. Blessed be and amen.