



FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST PREACHER

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WRITER, ARTIST, HISTORIAN, AND ACTIVIST

SUNDAYS, MAY 4 & 11, 2025

In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am

Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

I have come to you today to talk about how I practice hope. We live in fearful times, when the assaults on our humanity are escalating every day, and every day the champions of greed snatch away the necessary, privatize the commons and stuff it all in their pockets, as they endlessly try to satisfy an appetite for ownership that cannot be met. These times are not new for people in many parts of the world. Last week I rode with a Wolof cab driver from Senegal who lamented the discovery of oil that marks his country as a target of corporate bandits. My own country, Puerto Rico, has been undergoing armed robbery for 532 years. These times are not new for many people in the United States. The bandit kings have always begrudged even the crumbs from their banquets to women, to workers, to the first people of this continent and its latest migrants, to Black people and Brown, to the queer and gender queer, to children and elders, the sick and disabled, to anyone from whom they cannot efficiently extract wealth. They have defined whatever is spent on our living as wasteful. If they could privatize the air we breathe, they would. But as Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes, we were made for these times.

Capitalism has created more riches than any other system in human history and at the same time persuaded us to believe in a universal scarcity that keeps us pitted against each other, believing there is not enough. But the world, the earth itself, the creativity, resourcefulness and generosity of its 8.2 billion people, and the dazzling aliveness of all its species, the world, overflows with abundance. There is food enough for all of us to eat our fill. There is sunlight, wind and tide enough to power our best inventions. We could all of us be clothed and sheltered. The world is full of medicine and skill to heal us. Only greed, and the confusion it has sown, stand in the way, and now the economies of greed are in trouble, toppling toward collapse because extraction by its nature is

finite, so they are lashing out, and the storm is all around us, but this is no reason for despair. We live in a time of transformation, and this is its weather.

We have ample scientific evidence that greed, domination and violence are not inherent to humans, that in fact they are relatively recent and not at all necessary. But here we are, in an existential tug of war between an insatiable desire to own absolutely everything, with all of the divisive lies and brute force it takes to serve that goal, even to the peril of our collective survival, and the enduring beauty and joy of the common good, which is a much better offer to put on humanity's table.

There are three songs I sing in everything I do. Three threads I am always weaving.

I sing solidarity, which means holding fast to the common good of everyone even when society shouts at us to fight for our narrowest self-interest, holding fast even when it's inconvenient, uncomfortable, dangerous, even when it brings short term loss. To keep our eyes on the abundance only our unity can free up to flow into our lives, knowing our truest wealth is each other. To keep acting on that belief, even when we're scared, even when our jobs vanish and our universities crumple, to keep building our shared immunity to the lies of separation.

These words have been passed from hand to hand, tune to tune, since they were first written as part of the founding document of the American Mineworkers' Association in 1863:

Step by step the longest march
Can be won, can be won.
Many stones can form an arch,
Singly none, singly none.
And by union what we will
Can be accomplished still
Drops of water turn a mill,
Singly none, singly none.

Solidarity means remembering that one and one is two. In Marge Piercy's poem *The Low Road*, she asks, "What can they do you? Anything they want." Alone, she reminds us, they can roll right over us, one at a time. But, she says:

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,

eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

I sing imagination. To prop up a society built on plunder, our ability to imagine anything else must be contained, repressed, punished. When Harriet Tubman was praised for how many captive Africans she freed, she said, "I could have freed many more, if I could have convinced them they were slaves." Imagination, the ability to know our condition and know that it is not inevitable, is highly combustible stuff,

As often as I can, I find ways to tell the story of what it was like to get post-stroke rehab in Cuba, because as captives of the medical industrial complex in all its normalized cruelty, to hear about a humane and generous system of healthcare freely available, not only to its citizens but gifted to the world, stretches expectation until it starts to itch and tingle with alternatives.

Imagination is rooted in the untamed memory of who we have been, who we are and who we deserve to be. It flowers in shining cascades of what if. Solidarity is a fungal net full of nutrient exchanges that enrich soil. Imagination seeds it with potentials that threaten every kind of domination. In 1500s Germany, the rallying cry of peasant uprisings was *die gedanken sind frei*—my thoughts are free.

This is why artists and prophets are among the first targets of dictatorships, why the Spanish burned the Mayan codices, and the English built bonfires of Irish harps, why the Pinochet regime of Chile outlawed the teaching of evolution and the charango, an indigenous instrument that carries the memory of sovereignty, why millions of West African people, kidnapped into forced labor, were forbidden to speak their own languages, play drums, read books, why Archbishop Romero was gunned down for preaching a liberation theology that stood with the poor. You don't repress what

you already know how to control.

But the silenced always find ways to express their belief in a better future even if they have to do it in code. Imagination is a stubborn weed. It breaks concrete and flowers in its ruins. Captive African women made quilts full of color that hid detailed maps of escape and with their communities, gave abolitionist meanings to seemingly innocuous hymns. Polish Jews walled into the Warsaw Ghetto documented every aspect of their lives and buried archives in milk cans under the floor of a secret school so they could tell posterity who they really were. The streets of Chile filled with students whose signs read, "We are the grandchildren of the people you disappeared." These were dreams of the impossible, made manifest. It is our nature to dream the biggest, brightest most joyful lives we can, even in the shadows. Even when we're afraid. The alternative is to be numbed, to sleepwalk, to settle. It's not survivable. This is why choosing each other is called "woke." This is why Che Guevara said, "Be realistic, demand the impossible."

I sing that we can only build what we can envision, so to expand our imaginations outside this box is one of the most life-affirming things we can do. I sing that imagining winning is a sacred responsibility. These are excerpts from my poem V'ahavta, based on a central prayer of Judaism.

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of empire:
Another world is possible.

imagine winning. This is your sacred task.
This is your power. Imagine
every detail of winning, the exact smell of the summer streets
in which no one has been shot, the muscles you have never
unclenched from worry, gone soft as newborn skin,
the sparkling taste of food when we know
that no one on earth is hungry, that the beggars are fed,
that the old man under the bridge and the woman
wrapping herself in thin sheets in the back seat of a car,
and the children who suck on stones,
nest under a flock of roofs that keep multiplying their shelter.
Lean with all your being towards that day
when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune
out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters.

Defend the world in which we win as if it were your child.
It is your child.
Defend it as if it were your lover.
It is your lover.

When you inhale and when you exhale
breathe the possibility of another world
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
until it shines with hope.
Then imagine more.

Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth
Into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.

Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live.

This is where hope comes in. The third song. Hope is not a feeling we lure with scented flowers so it settles as delicately as a butterfly in our emotions. It isn't cheerfulness. It isn't naive denial of harm. Hope is not optimism. It isn't based on evidence and does not need a case made for it. Hope is not an argument. Hope is a decision.

Hope is born of solidarity and imagination. Con los pobres de la tierra, quiero yo mi suerte hechar... Like José Martí, who wrote these verses of Guantanamera, I decide to throw in my lot with the poor of the earth. Like 19th century miners building their first union, I know one drop, one stone, one step won't build the world we need. I am the proud daughter of a feminist mother and great-grandmother, and her grandmother, the wife of a rabbi in 1880s Ukraine who stood up in temple, said, your God is a man, and walked out, inspiring generations. I watched a million Puerto Ricans bring down a grotesquely inhumane governor in eleven days. I have witnessed what individual courage can ignite and what purposeful multitudes can do. I believe we are capable. I spend my days imagining thousands of paths into the future where we thrive, and mapping them in words and images. What, then are my options in times like these?

In "Letter to a Young Activist in Troubled Times," Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes: "I, too, have felt despair many times in my life, but I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate." I refuse to be fascinated by horrors. I don't pore over the details of how our

world is ransacked. I refuse to let discouragement become the captain of my ship. Trauma is not the boss of me.

I seek out everything that is heartening. I fuel myself on small victories and sing the songs of long dead poets. I smile at strangers, noticing the tiny threads of connection that bind us into the great mycelial web of life. I practice a solidarity that is universal, unconditional, unilateral. This is how I pray. I do my best to stay awake and signal to the rest of the forest that we could bloom right now.

In the same essay Pinkola Estes writes: In any dark time, there is a tendency to veer toward fainting over how much is wrong or unmended in the world. Do not focus on that. Do not make yourself ill with overwhelm. We are needed, that is all we can know. Didn't you say you were a believer? Didn't you say you pledged to listen to a voice greater? Didn't you ask for grace? Don't you remember that to be in grace means to submit to the voice greater? You have all the resource you need to ride any wave, to surface from any trough."

And I wrote: "To live a lifetime of audacity, dwelling in the place where joy meets justice, year after year, can only be sustained by being so in love with a vision of what's possible that we no longer flirt with despair."

If, as I believe, our morale belongs to the commons, then we have to find balance between facing the hard truths, choosing to know them, to be clear, and protecting our spirits from the onslaught of bad news and mean spiritedness, so we can keep acting on belief. We can't flirt with despair. It's an unaffordable luxury. We need each other close in order to resist its toxic appeal, knowing the alternatives are both dismal and dangerous. We need to tell each other stories that remind us of what we already know in our bones. That we are made for these times, and demanding the impossible is the only realistic choice.

Hope is the decision to act every day on what our bones know. To imagine the world we want in such detail that if we get lost, we can always point ourselves back toward it. To choose each other, and keep reminding ourselves that if we leave no-one behind, we can build it.

Hope is the decision to act for the greater good with every cell and synapse. To bring our most joyous, connected, big-dreaming selves to each hour of our singular precious lives, for the sake of all beings, so that we and the children of our children's children may live.