

“What Would You Give?”

A Sermon by Molly Housh Gordon

First Parish in Needham

Sunday, October 17, 2010

Not very long at all before his assassination, Mohandas Gandhi gave his grandson Arun a piece of paper on which he had written what he perceived to be the “Seven Blunders of the World.”

These have since become known as Gandhi’s Seven Deadly Sins.

They are:

Wealth without work; Pleasure without conscience; Knowledge without character; Commerce without morality; Science without humanity; Politics without principle; Worship without sacrifice

“Aha!” I thought, when I read these for the first time. “Finally, some deadly sins that I think my UU community and I might agree with.” We definitely see the deep value of work and conscience, character, morality, humanity, and principle. We see the way things can turn awry when these are absent.

As a matter of fact, we really like talking about these things. Principles! We have those... seven, in fact! Conscience and character! We have those too! And morality! We’ve got *tons* of that!

But the last one... this worship without sacrifice thing... That is a little more challenging.

You see we don’t really talk much about sacrifice. At its worst, sacrifice sounds superstitious and supernatural, and even at its best, it’s not a characteristic that we can claim and be proud of. Rather, it’s an active call to give something up.

We live in a culture that often tells us we can have it all, and should want it all! And don’t think that our church culture is entirely an exception.

Why are you here? Maybe your first answer is that you’re here for your kids’ religious education. You like singing in the choir. You like coming to worship to get a little dose of inspiration for the week. You have friends here. You like the community.

Is that all? I think maybe not.

Are you really here just because you’re getting something out of it? Or are you here because a deep part of you senses that you have something to give the world, and you need this community to call it out of you, to demand that you make the space, to help you find the courage to give it?

Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams saw a church, at its best, to be what he called a prophet-hood of believers. He looked to the Hebrew Bible to explain prophecy. In these stories, prophets are people who are called by God, who give themselves over to God and who proclaim the message of God as they hear it. Prophets often are reviled in their communities. They give up everything to proclaim their vision of the world, even if it is an unpopular one.

In 1920, a few days after voting for the first time since gaining the right, our foremother and Universalist prophet Olympia Brown commanded us down the ages, “Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it,” and “rejoice that you are worthy to be entrusted with its great message.” In other words, she says, be a prophet for our faith. Know that it *requires something of you*.

What does it require of us? Perhaps it is just as the prophet Micah tells us. We are not to give food, or wealth, or our children. Rather, what is required of us is something far greater—**us**. What is required of us is to give our whole selves over to doing justice, and to loving kindness, and to walking humbly with our God.

What is required of us is the attitude of the prophet Isaiah, who, when God asked “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” finally said, “Here I am. Send me!”

When we think of something the church ‘should’ be doing, we need to remember Isaiah saying “send me!” When we have a vision of how the world can be changed, we need to remember Isaiah saying “send me!”

This is what I think Paul means when he tells the Romans to offer their own bodies as living sacrifice. We have to be ready to step up and give the offering of our own commitment. We have to turn our *lives* over to our faith.

But we don’t have to give lives to whatever someone else says is right. Rather, going back to Paul, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may discern what is good and acceptable and right.

This is where our individual searching and seeking can come in, if we are willing to give ourselves over to it entirely. The heart knows what is good and acceptable and right. Are we willing to follow it?

It is also important to be clear that the sacrifice I am advocating is not self-denial or self-annihilation. Rather it is the willingness to give the *fullness* of our selves over to the passion of the spirit as we encounter it.

Sometimes I wish that God would chase me down, like in the Jonah story, and tell me what it is that I most have to give. What I must do is much harder.... Making the space in my busy life to hear the still small voice, to discern where I am called and what is required of me.

Right now I am feeling called to talk to you as a congregation about the particular sacrifice that I think we can make together in our worship.

It's tied up with the notion of giving our whole selves over to this faith, this community, and our larger vision. I think we need to sacrifice our need to keep up appearances. We need to give up on decorum, which always calls us to hold back, to be polite, to hide the fullness of ourselves because of the inevitable flaws.

Our holding back is a symptom of the sin of worship without sacrifice. Every now and then, I think we shut out the calling of the spirit or the calling of our hearts because it is too loud or improper.

We inherit this tendency from our theological history in at least two ways. The first is the influence of our Puritan forebears, who believed themselves to be God's elect. If you are a part of the elect, then you show that you are by maintaining appearances of perfection.

The second is a part of our somewhat later religious heritage, the 'ever onward and upward' attitude of optimism in religious liberalism beginning in the 1800s. If we are always onward and upward, then we better not let anyone see the two steps back that we take with every step forward.

In our unison confession we prayed, "forgive us for repelling people by the way we set a good example." Forgive us indeed! How can we, in the words of the same prayer, "encourage the secret struggle of every person," if the example we set is to paper over every struggle?

That's why I like the Jonah story. Of all the prophets, he's kind of a jerk. He runs away from his calling. We all do. But he's real. And in his realness, he eventually comes around.

The truth is, we are not always good; we are not always ok. To worship pretending otherwise is a sin because it holds us apart from each other and from the prophetic act of giving our whole selves over to our faith.

Recently, a colleague was telling me about a Haitian Christian worship service that he attended. During the service, there was a time of prayer. But it was not the polite sitting-in-quiet kind of prayer that we are used to. To my friend's astonishment, everyone in the room got down on the floor, turned around and knelt at their chairs. Then they began to pray aloud in a rush of noise. Whatever was on each of their minds, they just said it to their God. Some in Haitian Creole, some in English. Some loud, some soft. Some pleading, some praising. There were all kinds of tears, he told me, tears of despair and of ecstasy and of joy.

"That sounds incredibly moving," I said.... "And very scary."

"I want to try it at my UU church," he told me. "Good luck," I told him.

I don't know that out-loud, kneeling, individual prayer is the sacrifice called forth from us. Probably for some of us it would be a revelatory and for some of us painful. But the *spirit* that I see in that story, the unembarrassed passion, speaks to me.

What calls to me is the idea of worship with no half-heartedness-- worship that lets the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise. It is only that kind of worship that allows us to bring our whole selves as living sacrifice to our community and to the power of our collective vision.

Another of my minister friends recently preached a sermon about the religious and prophetic value of hysteria. She told us that there are so many things going on in the world that make her wonder why we aren't wailing and crying together in worship.

For her in that moment it was the femicide in Honduras that called for tears. For me right now, it is this epidemic of GLBTQ teen suicide, which I learned extended this past week into my home state of Oklahoma. I was already feeling sad and angry, but this hit me very literally close to home. **These are our kids!** Are we willing to give them our tears? We *have* to give them something more than a perfunctory wave: "Hi, we're here. You're welcome if you want."

UU blogger Amy Snoeyenbos wrote about these teenagers and the UU response to them recently. She said: "When our message to the GLBTQ community is "you are welcome to come here" we are missing an opportunity to say "God loves you and so do we. Please come and share your beautiful light with us." Which message would save you in an hour of need?"

I know which message would save me.

When all we say is welcome, where is the passion and compassion? Could that passion be our sacrifice? Could that be what we are called to give?

In our Christian heritage the words sacrifice and passion are closely linked. The word Passion in the latin means 'suffering.' However, in its entry into English the word originally only referred to that most ultimate sacrifice, the suffering and death of Christ on the Cross. It was not until the early 13th century that the word passion came to refer to other kinds of suffering, and the late 14th century that it took on it's currently more common meaning of strong emotion or desire.

Gandhi says that worship without *sacrifice* is sinful. Drawing upon the connection of the two words, I say that worship without *passion* is sinful. If passion is about desire and deep need, then the sacrifice we must make in our worship is the sacrifice of every single artifice or wall that keeps us from saying 'We need each other.' 'I need you.'

Our proclamations of welcome are shallow and empty when they are not based in what theologian Catherine Keller has called the divine eros, the transcendent desire for more love, more beauty, more flourishing. When we allow ourselves to be influenced by the divine eros, in her estimation, we give ourselves over to be moved by desire—desire for each other in the sense of our interconnectedness, and desire for the just world that we can envision.

Going beyond the walls of appearances, we can connect with our passion. We can tap into those streams of compassionate love that move us toward worship that is truly transformative. It is then that each of our offerings to the world will be called forth from

those deep hidden places within. It is then that we become the prophetic community that we strive to be.

The only question now is: are we willing? Are we willing to give our entire selves to being channels for the streams of love, even if that includes streaming tears, or is it our fate to end up parched and dry?

Let us choose love.

Let us choose need.

Let us choose sacrifice.