

*The Collected Sermons  
of  
Celie Katovitch,  
Ministerial Intern*

*Delivered at  
The First Parish Church  
in Weston*

*2011 – 2012  
and  
2012 – 2013*



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*Sacred Recycling*  
A Sermon for The First Parish Church in Weston,  
delivered by Celie Katovitch  
October 9, 2011

“Whoever tries to keep her life will lose it, and whoever  
loses her life will save it.”

You can find quite a gallery of paintings of Jesus-- images of Christ as a white man, a black man, a brown man, and as a woman; Christ with a dove and Christ with a sword; Christ as emperor and Christ as liberator of the oppressed. The one that comes to mind from my childhood, though, is a pretty traditional rendering; perhaps it will sound familiar to some of you. In the picture I call to mind, Jesus' face is bathed in a radiant glow; he is robed in angelic white, looking serenely down at me out of peaceful eyes. It's a picture of Jesus as someone calm and nurturing, someone who would sing a child a lullaby.

It's a little hard for me to match that Jesus with the words in Luke's gospel. “Whoever tries to save their life will lose it”-- a statement distinctly unsuited for a lullaby, if you ask me. I can think of few things less calming, in fact. Life may be like a box of chocolates, a hard row to hoe, and any number of other melancholy metaphors-- but I confess, I would like to keep mine a little longer. This, to me, seems like a statement sprung from that mysterious core of Jesus' personhood-- that mystery that is what all the many renderings of his image, with their vastly different Christologies, have in common (for that matter, maybe it's what explains their vast differences). It points to the Jesus who speaks in paradox, at once mystifying and hitting that part of us that resonates when we hear something we know to be deeply true. In one breath we say, “How is that possible?” And in the next we ask, “Ah yes. It is true. I don't understand how--but I know it's true.”

Thank God for those moments. Thank God for such paradoxes, and their power to startle us. If we are lucky, they may startle us out of an old way of thinking.

One thing that I had been thinking a lot these past few weeks was about what it means to be your

“ministerial intern.” The question has traveled around and around in my thoughts, like a song lyric stuck in my head. What’s the precise relationship between those two words? What’s the “minister” and what’s the “intern”? Maybe you all, having welcomed a long line of ministerial interns, find the answer more obvious than I do. I suspect that I will arrive at it only through talking with and walking with and serving together with you.

Nonetheless, I was mulling this question last Wednesday as I was walking through the halls of Harvard Divinity School, where I am in seminary. I am sure, actually, that I was thinking of that and also a whole lot of less important questions: what I was going to cook for dinner when I got home? When would I find the time to write this or that paper? *Would* the new Lady Gaga postage stamp outsell the new Justin Bieber postage stamp?

I must have heard some sort of commotion outside, because I paused to peer out of one of the mullioned windows at the courtyard. Looking thoughtfully out of the one next to me was a member of the school’s facilities staff. Ron was a fairly short man, in his late sixties I would guess, whose brown face well creased with age and frequent smiling. I often saw him around campus, watering the grass or sweeping the steps or rotating the trash and recycle bins, though we had before now never exchanged more than hellos. As we were both paused at the window, however, Ron-- maybe noticing my preoccupied expression--offered some words of kindness words wished me luck in my studies. “I always try to encourage people,” he said. “That’s a big part of why I’m here-- to encourage the students and make sure you all are getting through okay.” I asked if the job was treating him all right. He shrugged noncommittally. “I like it well enough.” Then his voice lifted with commitment again: “But I really enjoy the people, I enjoy the students. I’m here to be supportive of you all and give encouragement.”

I asked who encouraged *him*.

Without a word, he pointed upward. The well-worn smile was out again.

“God encourages me so I can encourage the people here,” he said. Then his face became a little bit serious again. “God’s encouragement isn’t something you can hold on to,” Ron said. “You want to give it

away. You give it to somebody else, for them to have and then to make something new of and then pass on.”

I knew that we were standing on the edge of a holy moment. “Yes,” I said, “I know that feeling. It’s like...” I searched for the right image.

“It’s like recycling,” said Ron.

How hard it is to describe the beauty of that moment. It really was almost like something out of a parable. God’s encouragement is like recycling: so strange, so true. And it had that mystifying, soul-piercing kind of truth to it because it was an image that had grown from Ron’s own day-to-day work, and so was exactly right. Ron said this, and it startled me out of all of my distractions. I felt the dawning of a sudden clarity. I looked at Ron’s face--which, by the way, bore absolutely no resemblance to my picture of the lullaby-singing Jesus-- and saw the face of Christ.

Ron’s *job* was to take care of the school grounds. Ron’s *vocation*--what I would call his ministry--was to support the people who attended the school, as he heard God calling him to do. I do not know how Ron felt about his “job”. It could be that it brought him joy and abundance; it could be it brought him very little joy and very little pay. But whichever of these was the case; it was a job that Ron had made the vehicle for his ministry. His job was the setting he had chosen to bring that ministry to life.

There is the job: intern. There is the nature of the vocation: ministerial. If we are lucky, the two can interweave. Ron was a ministerial groundskeeper. In and through his grounds keeping there was a ministry: a holy work of service to others, encouraged by God. An increasing reality for many among us is that jobs are lost, and new ones are hard to find. But one cannot lose a vocation. Our tradition has long taught that everyone has a ministry. And this is what a vocation is: it is a lived response to the kingdom of God that is within you. It’s the bringing of that kingdom--that core of yourself through which the spirit speaks and God’s encouragement resounds--out into the world, to offer to others. **What is your ministry?** Perhaps you are a ministerial teacher, a ministerial lawyer, a ministerial manager; or perhaps your ministry comes through knitting, through visiting your neighbors when they are sick, or through singing in a choir.

Ultimately, a ministry is a giving from your deepest self, in order to help others nurture that part of themselves. In other words, it's a kind of stewardship. When Jesus said that to save one's life is to lose it, he was not just thinking of the opposite of life being literal death. I think he meant that to horde one's life to oneself--to live without ultimate concern for others, without being a steward, without "recycling" care so that it remains part of the world and sustains our companions--is to lead something other than a full human life. We will each walk through our shadowed valleys; some of us are walking there now. But I pray we may know that in the life of one who has heard God's encouragement and passed it on to others, goodness and mercy are sown that outlast even death. "Through the death of others we have been born," writes Ernesto Cardenal. "Death is *sacred recycling*: another phase of life. There is something that doesn't die in us: a DNA of risen bodies... All those we call dead are alive, because the past exists like the present, although unseen." Life, and even death, in their most mysterious and essential dimension, is an act of stewardship. In our lives and in our dying we have it in us to tend the souls of others, out of God's tending to ours.... And I believe it is in that tending that we find the eternal.

For Ron, literal steward of the seminary grounds, God's encouragement was like recycling. For each of us, there is a different thing, sprung from the everydayness of our own lives, which speaks to the heart of our ministry. What is God's encouragement like for you? To what and to whom are you a steward, nurturing and passing on that encouragement?

In the journey of answering those questions, may you find blessings in the paradoxes. May you meet companions and strangers whose faces show you the face of God. And may goodness and mercy follow you all the days of your life. Amen.

## *Inner Voices*

a sermon by Celie Katovitch  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
January 15, 2012

One of our best living Unitarian theologians, Rebecca Parker, tells the story of an eye-opening trip she once took. She's driving from her home, on one of the coasts, to attend seminary at a school on the other, so she and a friend decide they will take the blue highways across the southern states, so that they will have a more scenic route. The days of driving have been passing by smoothly, until one day, the friends find themselves driving through a corner of rural Arkansas that they see has been flooded in the recent past. The car is pattering along, with Parker and her friend peering out the windows, nonchalantly remarking on all the signs of the flood that passed--puddles of water muddying in the fields, roofs sodden, trees dripping-- and muttering sympathy for those people who had found themselves caught in it. Then suddenly they round a bend in the road and find themselves--abruptly--wheel-deep in churning water. The car stalls; they have to abandon it and dash for high ground. All this time, Parker says, they had been living in what amounted to a false reality, misreading the landscape around them. They'd been thinking the flood had passed, that it was gone, and that, most importantly, it was never going to cross paths with *their* journey. Until suddenly, here it was: an "is," not a "was," and a very real part of their lives.

We all can identify some moments in our own lives that are like this. Something happens, and our whole perspective, the whole way we interpret the world, suddenly changes. Sort of like the moment when you're looking at one of those famous pictures that's two images at the same time-- an old woman and a young woman, or a duck and a rabbit--and all you can see is one image, no matter how hard you squint, no matter how many times someone tells you the other is also there... until somehow your gaze alters, and now all you can see is the other image--the one you were missing before.

There are instances for each of us when, after driving through what we think is a dry landscape, we find ourselves facing the flood.



Parker likens this to the moment she felt her consciousness shift about the impact of race: when she went from feeling that, as a white person, it was a problem affecting others, but not so much her, to feeling that racism was her problem, too.

For me, there was the moment when it suddenly sank in that the high school I attended was 99% white. There was the moment when, befriending an exchange student from Japan at that high school, it sunk in how hard it was to find academic support if your first language was not English. There was the moment in college when I accompanied a friend to the registrar's office, and heard the person behind the desk ask him--with one look at his dreadlocks, and despite hearing his clear American accent--whether he was an international student.

The reality this points to is one that some of us never forget, because we must face it every day of our lives. But I am willing to bet that even those of us who do not personally face racism on a daily basis have, as bystanders, witnessed similar moments.

Tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day: a day when we who aren't forced to think about them more constantly are likelier to have instances like this on our minds. Although, we may have been trained, through the years, to see it first as a day off from work, or a day that's somehow not "for" us. It's a day that some of us may even be a little nervous about; we may feel it is a day of guilt--or that it's a day when we *should* feel guilty.

But if you listen to King's words with which we opened the service, listen to how many times he says "We." I think his message would've lost something if he'd said, "*some of us* will be able to throw out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." The famous hymn would fizzle if it became, "*Some of us* shall overcome." This is not a day about "good people" and "bad people"; it is a day about becoming whole people. It is not a day about personal blame, or a day when some are accused of harboring deliberate hatred for others. This day is *irrelevant* to those who do harbor such hatred. It is not for them. It is for ALL the rest of us, and it speaks to the imperative given to us by King, which is still with us: the imperative to be aware, to seek to understand, and above all, to *connect!* It's about trying to get from "me" and "you" to "we."

Racism's impact today is a new wineskin. It looks different--oftentimes--from what it looked like thirty, or twenty, or ten years ago. We want so badly, most of us, to do the right thing. We want to be just. We want, above all, to be real-- to take in reality and not mirage-- and so, with Parker, we can say that this is profoundly *our* issue, not the issue of a distant "someone else" from whom we are different. As Jesus' parable tells us, we cannot attempt to mend a new wineskin as we would the old one. A new reality requires a new response. In today's world, where the impact of race is more apt to sneak up on us, where racism is sometimes less blatant but is still present and is trickier... what can we do?

While I was home on holiday this Christmas I rediscovered a book of poetry I'd been given a few Christmases ago. The title was *Inner Voices*, a reference to the unique form of poems it contained. In many of the poems, the poet--whose real name is Richard Howard--manages to "imagine" himself into the voices of two people, who he then puts in conversation in the poem. One poem, for instance, is an imagined exchange between Walt Whitman--who wrote "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"... and Bram Stoker, who wrote *Dracula*. Not exactly two birds of a feather. They were from different sides of the Atlantic. One wrote about lilacs and Lincoln, one wrote about a vampire. Yet some of you may be surprised to learn, as I certainly was, that these two were actual correspondents, and good friends-- that Stoker actually called Whitman the brother of his soul! I suspect their experiences were very different; I suspect there were some misspeaks, and some misunderstandings. And at the same time, they obviously heard one another deeply.

Patrick Lawler, another poet and a friend of mine, has a book of poems that do something similar... Although in this case, the conversations tie together people who in some cases did not even share the same years on earth. They link people across vast distances of place, push together individuals sprung from radically different times, pair voices that you'd think could only possibly clash: Virginia Woolf and Albert Einstein; Jim Morrison and Friedrich Nietzsche... even Donald Trump and Greek mythology's Narcissus... well, okay, maybe some connections are more obvious than others. But that's the wonderful thing: the poems seem

to say that despite all this, these individuals could in some way have *connected*. That each might have heard, in the voice of the other, some small but resonant echo of his or her own voice.

Most of the time, the similarities are not obvious. Most of the time, you must look and listen deeply to find what is shared, hearing beneath the words to the level of the spirit, to the inner voice singing within them. Nor are the poems interested in making all voices sound the same. There are many ways in which the experience of Humphrey Bogart is emphatically NOT like that of Sylvia Plath. Not all voices *are* similar, just as, though we all suffer, not all suffering *is* equal. I am white, and I have suffered. I do not know what it is to suffer *because* I am white.

Our lives with one another are always like these poems-- or so I believe. We are always, simultaneously, strangers and siblings. The ways in which we are strangers are countless. The ways in which we are siblings are countless. Navigating this strange reality can be difficult. We can oversimplify our similarities on the one hand, and risk drowning out the realness of another voice. We can also start to worry that we don't know the politically correct terms, the right lingo, to avoid making a mistake, and err too much toward the "strangers" side of things.

If we're to have a prayer of finding the balance, where should we start?

I think we start with poetry.

I'm not urging inaction to anyone here; I am not saying that you should kick back by the fire with an anthology of Dr. Seuss limericks and consider your work here done. I am saying I think we start by rooting our actions in a poetic mindset: alert for the ways in which the stories of others resonate with our story and the world's story. I am saying we must listen deeply like the poet to the authentic voices of others, in all their distinctness. We must be willing to be changed by what we hear: to imagine ourselves closer to an experience different from our own. (In one poem, my friend puts his own voice into the conversation. The poem tells of the Cherokee being driven westward on the trail of tears in 1838. My friend's own voice begins by insisting, "I wasn't there." Which of course, in the literal realm, is true enough. "I wasn't with the soldiers who slaughtered 200 children, women, and elders. It was the 1950s, and I was watching white and black TV.

I couldn't have been there." The refrain echoes throughout the poem. "How could I have been there?" Then the insistence becomes, "And if I was, I wouldn't have participated..." Until gradually, he can begin to ask the question at a deeper level, across the 100-year distance: "Was I there?")

Above all, like the poet we must NOTICE-- notice the differences, notice the voices being left out. Notice which schools have adequate school supplies and which do not. Notice whose American-ness is questioned. Notice whose neighborhood is where.

And notice, importantly, the points of connection--where "you" and "I" are really "We." Notice, as Martin Luther King did better than anyone of his generation, the intersections between race and war and class and economics. Notice the struggles--and the hope--that we all have a stake in, because we all want to be real, and to be whole.

And when you notice them, do not throw a life preserver from the safe distance of the faraway high ground. Have courage, and wade in. I know **WE** can do it. Amen.

*How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Leviticus*

A sermon by Celie L. Katovitch for  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
February 19, 2012

We can take pride in our uniqueness today: I am fairly sure this marks the first appearance of Leviticus as a reading on a Christian liturgical calendar in some time! Our second reading, from Mark, is one you will hear frequently in churches across denominations. Some passages, like that one on the Greatest Commandment, are passages that would make even the most skittish bibliophobe take a second look at scripture. Other passages--or whole books, as the case may be--liturgical calendars learn to...prayerfully skip over. When you are trying to preach a gospel of love, they are not your best bets.

A Bible professor at Andover Newton Theological School was telling me recently that every January he meets a handful of diligent souls whose New Year's resolution it is to read the entirety of the Old and New Testaments over the course of the coming year. That means, he has calculated, about 2 chapters of the New Testament per day, and 8 of the Old Testament. It seems fairly doable.

They start out strong, he said. Genesis is a good hook, with the creation story. Then by early spring or so they reach the third book of the Old Testament, Leviticus. "That's usually when they decide to give up," he told me.

Leviticus is not a soothing book. Nor does it tell a gripping story. Nor is it poetically written-- it doesn't find its way into a lot of wall hangings or greeting cards. We find different genres in the Bible: a mixture of poems, stories, and sacred histories. Leviticus is generally thought to be a legal code in form. It reads, in many places, like a list-- specifically, a list of practices deemed to be "abominations." This is a frequently occurring word in Leviticus. Many of these practices are things we do not think twice about doing in current life. Here we find it's forbidden to eat shellfish or pork (though as we heard, one can eat grasshoppers to one's heart's content), to trim a beard, and to wear clothes made of more than one fabric. Most of these judgments we have relinquished to the ages, but a few still cling to some of them to suit their own particular purposes.

Not having been raised in a Bible-reading household, I first encountered Leviticus not within the pages of the scriptures, but quoted on a protest sign. The sign was being waved by a self-described “preacher”--I suspect one with no theological school degree in hand-- who was standing outside a community celebration of diversity and bellowing hate into a megaphone. I do not remember who specifically was deemed by this man to be an “abomination” that particular day; I do remember that the writing on the sign began with the words, “God hates \_\_\_\_\_”, and that it cited Leviticus, as if quoting it directly.

If any you have seen the Westboro Baptist “church” or similar hate groups on the news, you may notice that it’s often Leviticus that is turned to for a Biblical justification of intolerance. Thus, my own longtime approach to this book has been simply to keep my distance. I’ve tended to tune out as nonsense anything resulting in a phrase beginning with “God hates...” I cannot conceive of a God who hates anyone, and there are comparatively few things in this world that to me qualify as “abominations”... even if each year some component of the Super Bowl half-time show tempts me to re-think that assessment.

But I’ve never been entirely sure this avoidance is sufficient. As liberal religious people, people who likewise find our lives spoken to and in some way connected to these scriptures, are we not called to some kind of response? Might we who would preach a gospel of love have to challenge preachers of hate on their own ground?

Tradition has furnished us at least two easier options. One, thank goodness, is humor. Last year the Westboro Baptist Church appeared in Cambridge outside Harvard’s Jewish student center, waving their signs decrying various abominations, declaring their confidence in God’s hatred for their fellow human beings. One sign bizarrely displayed a Christmas tree that had been labeled as a “pagan idol.” So they gave those who took the humor approach plenty to work with. A group of students, many of them my colleagues from the divinity school, stood on the corner directly across from them, waving signs of counter-protest. I saw one that proclaimed, “God hates signs,” and another that asked doubtfully, “God hates... Christmas trees?!” Others displayed the Great Commandment, or the words “God is Love.”

Our ancestors also had to respond to harmful Biblical literalism. In 1819, when that position was a dominant one, our early theologian William Ellery Channing said this about the Unitarian approach to scripture that he espoused instead:

*“We do not... attach equal importance to all books in [scripture]... Our leading principle in interpreting scripture is that the Bible is a book written for [humans], in the language of [humans]... We find, too, that the different portions of this book, instead of being confined to general truths, refer perpetually to the times when they were written, to states of society, to modes of thinking, to controversies in the church, to feelings and usages which have passed away, and without the knowledge of which we are constantly in danger of extending to all times and places what was of temporary and local application.”*

We who practice non-fundamentalist religion have learned that we can find certain parts of scripture to be more timeless than others, more able to speak to us across different historical eras and different life circumstances; we have found that the major themes endure while certain inclusions are more transient, specific to the time and place they were written.

This allows us to edge our way past Leviticus. We can weight other parts of the scripture--like the Great Commandment--heavier than we weight its many prohibitions and abominations. We can view these as addressing particular concerns of a time that is past, which do not really speak to us any longer. There is a lot of wisdom in this, I think.

Yet I still wonder whether simply dismissing Leviticus in favor of other scripture is adequate to today's world. In an interfaith society, loving our neighbors as ourselves may actually mean that to say the New Testament simply supersedes Old Testament texts like Leviticus is no longer the best response. If we are going to at once hold fast to our place as a compassionate, scripture-inspired people, *and* be strong allies to our brothers and sisters in other faith traditions, we may be called not to ignore texts like this, but to grapple with them. We may be called to a still further nuanced understanding. We may be called to venture back onto turf we have relinquished, and to ask, “how *should* Leviticus speak to us today?”

We might first want to demand whether Leviticus even *can* speak to us today. Can we take

anything spiritually useful from this nearly unreadable list of restrictions? What are we to make of the harsh tone, the insistence on dividing not only groups of food and clothing but also groups of people from one another? For that matter, who is this author anyway?

Probably this book was written over time by several people who belonged to the priestly caste-- those who oversaw the rituals, covenants, and laws that served to mark the people of Israel as a holy people. Scholars think it took on its final form, what we see in our Bibles today, during a time in history when the Israelites had witnessed exile from Jerusalem and the destruction of its temple, which had been the center of their religious life. One way to understand Leviticus and its many strange restrictions, then, is as a litany of survival. It was born out of a feeling that, dispersed across vast distances, the religious community was living precariously with the threat of extinction. To save it, the Israelites would have to redefine what it meant to be a religious people in these changed circumstances. The smallest decisions seemed to carry implications for the life or death of the community.

William Ellery Channing was right in saying Leviticus speaks mostly to its own time-- but in some small way it also speaks to ours. There is an urgency I hear in Leviticus. There is a worry that religious commitment is thinning, and that strong religious community--perhaps itself the best hope for combatting hateful faux-religion-- is being lost in a changing society. There is a worry that it's becoming difficult to keep God at the center. These are concerns that many of us know well.

That urgency has something to teach us, I think.

Leviticus asks us tough questions. In its concerns over seemingly mundane details of our lives-- down to what we eat, what we drink, what we wear, and so on--it is demanding that we ask where God is in all these small, everyday moments. Worship, Leviticus seems to say, is not something that occurs on one specific day, in one specific place, only. Being a person of faith is a full-time job. We are called to live worshipfully in the small moments, alert for the presence of the holy in all that we do. In a less poetic way, perhaps Leviticus urges us, like Jacob Trapp, to be attentive to God's presence in what is around us: in



our work, in music, in conscience, in acts of love, in what and how we eat, in a grain of sand. It is easy to look at this book as creating divisions; but beneath these, maybe what it urges more deeply is *attentiveness*: not separating the sacred and the secular, but finding the sacred *in* the secular--in every hour of our lives.

\*

What if we were skeptical about Leviticus' concrete dogmas and rules, but took seriously its call to religious commitment? What if we respected its insistence that we must ask hard questions about what it means to be religious people? What if we took to heart its suggestion that each of us must look at what we give primary authority in our lives?

Maybe the ultimate question in Leviticus is this: are you making enough time to lead a spiritual life?

May we have the courage to ponder it. And may we know its answer by where we place our commitment, where our eyes perceive the sacred, and how our faith in a love that overcomes hate goes with us out into the world.

Amen.

*Pastoral Prayer*

God of boundary-breaking love,  
We ask your blessing on this community of faith,  
Upon this house of worship,  
upon all people gathered here  
And present in our thoughts.  
Help us to lead lives of love  
And commitment lives lit by the spirit.  
May we never fail to find the mark of your presence  
In the most everyday of tasks.  
May we find you in the wafting scent of fresh coffee;  
In the feel of our feet on the firmness of the ground;  
In the sight of our young people's art on the walls;  
In the sound of voices lifted in song.  
May we find you in the questions  
As much as the answers.  
We ask your blessing today on all who are sick  
And all who are suffering;  
may they find moments of peace.

We pray for those who face injustice and  
discrimination,  
Especially in the name of religion;  
May their hearts know your eternal love.  
We pray also for those who struggle in faith;  
May their souls know you hold that struggle  
In gentle hands.  
Call us, O God, to walk in compassion,  
Honoring all beings as our neighbors.  
And in this world ever at risk of being divided  
Remind us always of our oneness.  
Hear now O God, the private prayers of our hearts  
Which we speak inwardly now.

*The Three Secret Virtues*

a sermon by Celie L. Katovitch  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
April 15, 2012

I've heard some wonderful sermon titles in my time. But last week, I heard what might be the best of all. It was concocted by a friend of mine, and it was: "Easter Happened. Now What?"

Easter happened. Now what?

Easter is the day that invites us to remember the mystery of our existence-- the day that tells us we are in some way, beyond our knowing, free from sin and free from death. The day that makes us a promise about the endurance of the human spirit: a promise that when all seems hopeless, when the worst has happened, something in us renews, is reborn, and lives again. But it's also the day that reminds us of the many instances of resurrection that interlace our lives, and which assures us that we have an ongoing work of resurrection to practice-- an imperative, in the words of David S. Blanchard, to "rise to life."

Underneath a variety of clever titles, maybe the subject of every sermon after Easter should rightly be "Easter happened. Now What?" Because I think a question we are always asking ourselves is: "How do I rise to life?" How do I keep doing it throughout the 51 weeks of the year that are not labeled as "holy weeks"-- though of course, they are. How do I keep at it, when the holiday is over, and it is hard to see sacredness in the everyday? How do I rise to life, when life includes that which frightens me, or saddens me, or puzzles me? In the midst of the many, small, everyday moments of my existence-- how do I lead the life that is good?

It's a question that no number of sermons could exhaust. It's also a question that's inspired quite a lot of thinking and writing of other kinds down through the ages. As part of their attempt to wrestle with this question, the ancient Greeks gave us the four cardinal virtues of temperance, justice, prudence and fortitude. From those four classical virtues of Plato and Aristotle, early Christian theologians built the seven heavenly virtues of traditional church teaching (built them, I should note, in opposition to the seven deadly sins):

the virtues of chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, patience, kindness, and humility.

One word of caution about these virtues and their roots, however: neither Plato nor Aristotle was part of a congregation. As far as I know neither was known as a great “family man,” and while both wrote about friendship, whether either knew the less poetic side of friendship--knew the friendship that can be hard--is an open question. Their writings, about virtue and all other subjects, came out of a context of striving toward what in Greek is termed “arete”: a kind of immaculate excellence, without blemishes or cracks or imperfections of any kind. And so I wonder whether those of us who dwell a little more habitually and comfortably with life’s imperfections--as any longtime relationship, whether with a partner, a friend, a family member or a religious community, will require us to do-- could use a some supplementary guiding virtues.

Over the last few weeks, I’ve caught snatches of the same song playing in several different stores and restaurants I happened to walk into (perhaps it was a spiritual nudge from the universe). It’s a song that was popular 10 or 15 years ago, called “Breakfast at Tiffany’s.” It is narrated by a man who feels his relationship is on the verge of ending. Differences between him and his partner loom large, to the point that they seem irreconcilable; a rift between them has opened up, and the time seems to be nearing for the two to part ways. Then the narrator suddenly remembers their shared love for the classic film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*-- and miraculously, the recollection of this one small, to us insignificant fact is enough to change his mind, and to convince him to try again to work things through.

In the imperfect breaking and mending of our lives with one another, we all find ourselves facing such moments-- moments when a seemingly insignificant detail, or phrase, or shared memory seems to be loaded with a much greater significance. When these come we have to decide how we will weather them. We have to decide when that small, shared connection is enough for us to stake everything, and when to hold on to it is simply to try to grasp at something which has moved on, or from which we have moved on. In relationships, discerning when something is an inconsequential detail and when it may actually be the heart of the matter is an unexpectedly difficult task.

To take on that task with integrity requires us to seek something other than arete. Because being in relationship, in the end, is not really about excellence. It is about wholeness: wholeness which can hold the imperfections, the cracks and the blemishes, the disagreements and the rifts and the differences that arise--inevitably--between people that have journeyed a long way together. Let me speak a little about three virtues, largely unsung in American culture, which may help point the way toward wholeness; and I pray that we may all learn more such virtues by the day through our life together.

First, a few words about *quietude*. Here is an unappreciated American virtue if ever there was one. Maybe that's because we're quick to label it as a deficiency of one of the classical virtues: fortitude. Many of us have been taught, both overtly and subtly throughout our lives, that quietness is a sign of weakness, a failing of courage. In classrooms, our engagement is often measured by the number of times we speak; in meetings, our strength may be assessed by how much we're able to have our voices emerge as the dominant ones; at social gatherings to have the gift of gab is really a *gift*, something we tend to think signals both likability and boldness. And yet, it is very hard truly to listen when this is your mindset; it is very hard to lend another person your full attention, when in reality you are composing *your* next sentence, biding time until it is again *your* turn to speak.

Sometimes quietude can be a sign that we are not speaking up for ourselves assertively enough; but other times, it is the sign that we are listening-- not out of passive habit, as most of us do far too often, but out of *actively* offering our full presence to the other person. Practicing quietude courageously is to open up a holy space of non-judgment, and when our loved one speaks, to follow the advice of poet Anne Sexton by: "put[ting] an ear down to their soul, and listen[ing] hard."

Another neglected virtue is what I would call *heart*. We might think of this as a companion virtue to the classical "prudence," and "temperance." Living with heart means being able to hear when another person is speaking the truth of his or her soul-- not necessarily the reasoned intellectual argument that prudence and temperance would produce, but the expression of a deeply *felt* reality. We in the West have a long history of

declaring things that are thought to be more valid than things that are felt. Yet, the work of relationship means we must be able to listen for, and to speak, feelings more than rational arguments. In matters of love, nothing but the language of the heart will do.

When I was working as a hospital chaplain this past summer, many of the people whom I visited began by asking what seemed to be very theological questions. "Why did this happen to me?" "What is the reason for my suffering?" "Is there a God, and is he punishing me?" But they were not very often looking for my own, intellectually-formulated answer. They were not looking for a win-lose debate. They were seeking to connect with their own deepest feelings: feelings of fear, of loss, of sadness, of uncertainty. They wanted to know that another human being could recognize those feelings, and could hold them without trying to make them go away.

I truly don't think it's coincidence that "Breakfast at Tiffany's" was a song. Perhaps songs are one of the few mediums where we still find it more or less acceptable to express heart-truths without disguising them. Maybe truth deeply felt is more easily singable than speakable in the first place. David Blanchard writes elsewhere, "Our songs sing back to us something of our essence, something of our truth, something of our uniqueness. When our songs are sung back to us, it is not about approval, but about recognizing our being and our belonging in the human family."

We all have a song, even if we aren't literally musical people. Our song is our deepest, experienced reality. Being able to recognize when another person is singing his or her song, and to honor it without trying to turn it into our own, is to reflect back to that person an affirmation of his or her humanity. Being able to know and sing *our* song is to be in touch with what is most vulnerable within ourselves--and to risk sharing it, in the hope of real connection with another.

The final secret virtue I want to mention may be the hardest one to practice. I know it is the hardest one *for me*. This is the virtue displayed by Jacob in our third reading, in the struggle with the angel. It is tough to name what exactly this is-- the working name I have is *holy quarrelsomeness*.

I would guess that early in our lives, just about all of us imbibed some version of the message that

“conflict is bad.” We associate it with anger, something that for many of us has an ominous--even sinful!--connotation. Some of us learn that it is a sign we’ve done something wrong; others that conflict, if allowed to exist, will be followed by a significant loss, and thus is something to be feared and avoided. Some of us receive the message that to take part in conflict of any kind is to fail in our practice of virtuousness, and especially of the prized virtue of *kindness*. We come to think that if we engage an issue over which there might be disagreement, we will be seen as being unkind.

I think of Jacob wrestling with the angel, and of the words he cries out in the midst of their struggle. “I will not let go unless you bless me,” he declares. Not “I will not let go until I win,” not “I will not let go until one of us is left feeling badly,” but “I will not let go unless you bless me.” Some conflicts are worth having, because something sacred is at stake. Rather than signaling poisonous dislike, they signal passionate caring about something that matters. To *stay in* such a conflict, not to let it go but to keep struggling and to persist until a solution with real integrity emerges, is to say that something matters enough not to be swept under the rug. To seek not peace in uniformity, but blessing in disagreement, is to practice a holy quarrelsomeness that real relationship very much requires.

Friends, I believe that the “now what?” that follows Easter is the imperative to practice resurrection: to rise to life, in all that we do. And does not Easter teach us that as we rise to life, we must do so *together*, or not at all? It is the reminder that we are free-- freed from hopeless and death, to do the ever-renewing work of living the good life in relationship with others. May we do that work with just the right balance of the quietude that lets us listen, the heart that lets us sing our song, the stubbornness that lets us seek blessing through struggle, and the love that lets us hold them all together.

*No Matter What*  
First Parish Church in Weston  
Celie L. Katovitch  
May 13 [Mother's Day], 2012

The minister of the church I attended as a child remarked one Mother's Day that in some ways the word "mother" is a lot like the word "God." The images each word conjures for each of us can vary tremendously. In all likelihood, just as the God of my understanding may not look like the God of your understanding, what "mother" signifies--how it resonates, beyond the power of our own efforts and intellects to shape or control--may be something a little different for each and every one of us. And for both words, early experiences matter a lot; they may decide whether each calls to mind presence or absence, support or struggle, or some complex combination of both. Our reading likened different mothers to different types of flowers, but I suspect that most of our mothers were--like the great majority of human beings in this world--more like bouquets: with some lilies over here and some sunflowers over there, maybe a thistle or two if we're honest with ourselves.

Looking back on my childhood, memories of my interactions with my mother tend to come to me piece by piece like flowers to be gathered into a bouquet. I recall happy walks in the woods; a thousand chorus concerts and rather terrible school plays at which I beamed to see her face dutifully smiling out in the audience; Christmas presents that found their way to under our tree even on some Christmases in my early years when I now realize money had to have been tight (though it escaped my notice at the time). I also seem to recall scuffles about what was the most just bedtime hour, about college applications, about relationship issues. One drawn-out battle sticks in my mind, when I thought U.N. peacekeepers would have to be called in to mediate our argument over the feasibility of my walking the six miles home from school to our house in the country on my last day of eighth grade: a rite of passage I devised for myself and which seemed, at the time, to be something on which hung my entire identity as a growing person... I have no idea why I thought this was so at the time. Needless to say, my mother was not a fan of the plan. But seeing that this was an



existential quest, she let me do it, eventually. And when, at various points on that six-mile walk through the city into the countryside, I glanced behind me and could've sworn I saw a car that looked suspiciously like ours shadowing me and then zipping out of sight down a side street so as not to be seen, I elected to attribute it to coincidence.

Getting back to the matter of God, though, I can say one thing definitively about my mother. She gave me my theological education. Harvard Divinity School may be dismayed to know it, but all of my seminary study has been a footnote to her--and to what I learned in my first few months of life. Before she had a chance to think about how to "raise me right," before she had a chance to take advantage of a single "teaching moment," she taught me everything I need to know about God.

I am a Universalist because of my mother.

Because of her I am a believer in that faith variously expressed over its hundreds of years of life in this country as the faith of salvation for all, of the non-existence of hell, and of a God whose grace leaves absolutely no one behind--no matter what.

I learned Universalism without being *told* any of this. I learned it at age one day--at age two days, at age one month. I learned it from an incubator in the natal intensive care unit at Saint Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse, New York.

This was the place to which I was whisked after arriving in this world, in a failing of punctuality, two months before my appointed time. I arrived with lungs only partially formed, unable to breathe on my own.

In those days, to be born so early a preemie was a possible death sentence. Each day seemed precarious, with the question of whether I would live hanging in the air. Beyond that, there was the possibility of a long list of serious afflictions that can come upon premature babies: everything ranging from heart defects to blindness. To be pessimistic about my odds was the only realistic course of action.

But my mother--in literature and in life--has always preferred magical realism.

She showed up at that hospital throughout the many days I was there. Showed up, determinedly, when the fear that I would be lost despite all of the natal intensive care unit's efforts, kept others in my family away because it was simply too much to bear.

With her own fear--which had to have been deeper than anybody's--she showed up. She could not hold me; I was confined to the incubator. Still, with only the blessing of a CD of classical guitar to soothe her, she showed up to be with me. She kept me company throughout all the weeks in the intensive care unit.

My grandfather, recalling the determined look she wore in those days, once said that he knew my mother "wasn't going to let that child die." A testament to the courage my mom showed--but surely she knew (knew painfully) that it wasn't in her power to decide that. That perhaps it wasn't even in God's power. What she could do was be there with me... and it made all the difference.

There were many babies in the natal intensive care unit--the NICU, as they called it. I was one of those who, thanks to wonderful doctors and nurses, and mostly to chance, made it through. In other incubators, other babies did not make it. God did not choose that to be so. It was a room in which nobody had a lot of ability to dictate how things would happen--God included, or so I believe. But what was within people's power was to be present. My mom showed up for me, and in her presence was God's presence. In some way, I trust God showed up for all in the NICU.

The reality of suffering may be the hardest reality any of us has to grapple with. It has been a particular sticking point for theologians. If, as a long tradition of thinking tells us, God is both all-loving and all-powerful, why does suffering exist? If God was all-powerful, God could stop it. In response to this problem, one school of theology has decided that thinking of God as all-powerful is a mistake: that we should simply give this idea up.

I will tell you why that isn't the option I choose.

I'm not ready to say that God is not all-powerful, because somewhere beneath my own consciousness, carried deep in my bones, is the memory of my mother's showing up for me in the NICU. No, she was not in control. No, she did not have the power to decide the outcome of this terrible thing that had happened. In many ways, it would have looked as if she was absolutely powerless. And yet-- independent of what that outcome was-- *everything* had changed. In Hebrew, the word for breath--*ru-ach*--is the same as the word for "spirit." In those days, a machine inflated

my lungs and did my breathing for me; and my mother's presence kept my spirit alive.

As many of you know, to become a parent is to become ultimately vulnerable. It is to open yourself up to worry and the fear of loss in ways beyond anything known before. In fact, any of us who have loved someone unconditionally will know that in doing so we lay our hearts bare.

We also become ultimately powerful. Think of all the times you have witnessed someone do something--or you yourself have done something--that simply would not have been possible if it had not been done out of unconditional love for another person. Whether it's diving in front of a bullet to protect a friend, or risking your own financial welfare to help a relative whose house has burned, or going to a concert that under any other circumstances you would have regarded as three hours better spent having teeth pulled--because it means something to your child. Love makes us totally vulnerable--and it seems also to grant us power we never had before. Not usually the power to control how things turn out; but nonetheless a power that changes things, utterly and entirely.

My mother said that the moment she realized I was going to be okay came on one particular day in the NICU. The nuns who were the nurses at Saint Joseph's hospital had several weeks before knitted tiny colorful caps for all the well babies on the regular natal unit. My mom came into the intensive care unit one day, after I had been moved out of my incubator to a little bed, and saw that a cap had appeared on my own tiny, tubes- and wire-encircled head. She saw this simple expression of blessing and she knew.

God is with us always. God is like the cap that appears on the head of every baby born--sick and well; black, brown and white; straight and gay; those with lungs full of air and those barely breathing.

I've never been totally compelled by the heaven vs. hell aspect of Universalism. Life in this world tends to give me enough to contend with without my thoughts turning too often to other settings. What compels me about Universalism is what it says about God: that many things about God are utterly beyond our understanding, yet still we may know that God loves and accepts us unconditionally, just as we are--that who we are, and THAT we are at all, is a blessing; and that God shows up, in some way, for all of us. My

mother revealed this God to me without knowing she was doing so. Maybe some other person, or place, or event, has revealed this God to you. Maybe there have been times when you have been blessed, not because of your "merit," not because of your relative saintliness or sinfulness--but because love came like a gift, irrespective of these things.

I'm reminded of a true story from the Unitarian side of our heritage. (Perhaps some of the folks from our partner church know this story!) In Transylvania in 1594, there was an attempt by the orthodox who controlled the province to stamp out Unitarianism. Scores of civilians were killed for their faith, and no one was hunted more by the rampaging armies than the Unitarian superintendent, a man named Matthew Torozckai. Torozckai saved himself by waiting out the persecutions hiding in the dark throat of an iron mine. To keep up his spirits, enclosed in the darkness, he composed dozens of hymns--gathering them to be sung once the oppression was over. I imagine his hymns rising out of the depths of the mine, singing of the spirit still alive. Hunted, oppressed, choked by shadows--but still alive.

Did his song change his situation?

The answer, of course, is no.

And the answer, of course, is yes.

The cap on the head; the song in the iron mine;  
my mom bringing her presence to the NICU.

When we bring hope, acceptance, and unconditional love to one another, we reveal the presence of God. Whether we're literal mothers ourselves, or whether we're fathers, or siblings, or friends: when we show up for one another with these blessings, we reveal the "mothering" nature of the divine.

On this Mother's Day, and on all days, let us strive to remind one another of God's love. Let us be the songs. Let us be the caps. Let us be the breath that revives the struggling spirit. And let us give thanks for the times we have saved, and been saved, by doing so.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

Living, loving God:  
You have blessed us with the gift of life  
For which we are grateful.  
May we accept that grace with our whole hearts,  
Knowing that already  
*You have accepted us.*  
May we take comfort, knowing that yours is  
The sacred embrace from which we are born  
And to which we will all return.  
You are always with us – alleluia.  
We ask your blessing upon our mothers:  
And on all those who give us life  
and help us find rebirth;  
All those who nurse our hurting spirits;  
All those whose gentle presence  
Has brought hope into our lives.  
May our lives mirror back the unconditional love  
We have been given.  
On this Mother's Day, grant us gratitude for the times  
Our literal and spiritual mothers have blessed us.  
Grant us patience for the times they have wronged us  
And, when we are ready for it, the release of  
forgiveness.  
Call us to clarity of sight  
That we might see your blessing resting like a cap upon  
the head  
Of each and every person.  
Call us to clarity of heart  
That we may love generously  
Even when we are afraid--especially when we are  
afraid.  
Through mothers and fathers, siblings and friends,  
You reveal yourself to us,  
reminding us we are never alone.  
In that spirit,  
We pray today for all those members and friends of this  
congregation  
Who are ill, or who carry burdens quietly on their  
hearts;  
May they know we, and you, are with them.  
Hear now, O God, the private prayers of our hearts,  
which we speak inwardly now.

*Who Do You Think You Are?*  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
Celie L. Katovitch  
June 3, 2012

Peter is an interesting figure in the New Testament. He is--numerous anecdotes tell us--not always on top of his game. He is the archetype of the fallible human being, requiring Jesus' reprimand multiple times (once, scolding him for doubting that the crucifixion will occur, Jesus even calls him "Satan"!)

He is sometimes prideful-- arguing with the other disciples about which of them shall have a more exalted place in heaven-- and sometimes stubborn-- refusing to let Jesus wash his feet as an act of devotion. He isn't always quick on the uptake-- he's at a loss after witnessing the transfiguration and mumbles a fairly awkward and inadequate response. And his capacity for hurt and betrayal is on full display: it is he who famously "denies Jesus three times" on the night before he dies.

Yet the exchange narrated in the Gospel passage we heard today is a shining moment for Peter. It is a brief dialogue, but so much rests upon it. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. And Peter, without a pause, responds: "You are the messiah."

What's the big deal? we might say. Didn't Jesus already *know* this about himself? Wasn't it a rhetorical question in the first place? It's not really as if Peter's answer changes anything, right?

I'm not so sure.

A paradox known by many of us is the difficulty of understanding what it seems we should know more naturally and easily than anything else: our identity. I think that perhaps to be a full human being is to ask recurrently -- as the Marcan Jesus does--who one deeply and truly is. It is to put the question "who do you say that I am?" to oneself, and to one's companions and community. And the intriguing thing is, we cannot come to a full answer without the input of both: our own voice, the voices of others.

One of the great myths some of us grew up with is the one that says we have the only say in who we are: that we are self-made and self-making. If there is something we want to be, we go become it by sheer independent initiative, and if there is something about

ourselves we want to change, then we charge forthrightly off to change it. We are the sole authors of our own autobiographies, churning out the books of our lives James Patterson-like, with an emphasis on speed and nobody else's name but ours credited in three-inch-high letters on the front cover.

But it seldom works this way.

When we look at the stories that are our lives-- the themes and patterns that point to who we are--we are never seeing ourselves through our own eyes alone. We are encountering a layered narrative woven of many storylines: some written by us, some written with us, some written for us. Not just how we presently see ourselves, but how we have seen *and* how we have been seen across many years, determines our identity. We never see with our own gaze only: we have to see ourselves reflected in the eyes of another.

This reality of our interdependence is expressed as "ubuntu" by the Xhosa of South Africa. Ubuntu means "I am, only because *we* are."

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber expressed it this way. "All life is relationship. Man wishes to be confirmed in his being by man, and wishes to have his presence in the being of another. Secretly and bashfully he watches for a YES which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another."

And the name Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh puts to this truth is "interbeing." "To be is to inter-be," he says. "You cannot be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing."

Now, this does NOT mean that we should simply let the opinions of others decide who we are. Many, many people, it seems, have been vocal in their opinions about who Jesus is at the time of the conversation with Peter. The passage stands out precisely because it marks a stark separation of hearsay, rumor, and opinion from what is *\*true.\** When Peter answers Jesus' question with the response "you are the messiah," Jesus responds by hastening to hush him. I imagine a holy silence steeling over everyone present-- as happens when something profoundly true has been said. One way that we're given to know that Peter has reflected back something true about the identity of Jesus is by this response. The real is always, at its heart, a mystery, before which we can only hush.

I think about the passage we heard as an instance of Peter's inviting Jesus to be Jesus-- without which, the latter might indeed have remained, for all intents and purposes, like another prophet or disciple of Elijah or John the Baptist. I think Peter's response gave Jesus a chance to be seen in the mysterious fullness of who he was, after which he could put aside those other, faultier narratives about himself. Perhaps Peter extended an invitation for Jesus to rise to what was true about himself by hearing that truth named by another.

It's interesting that Peter is named elsewhere in scripture as "the rock" upon which the church was built. Peter, in all his conflictedness and pride, occasional obtuseness, and in his tragic capacity to make mistakes and to wound those dear to him, is the foundation of the church. And I don't just mean the Church with a capital C, the nonspecific Christian Church as a global institution. I think our connection to Peter--yours, and mine--is more personal than this, because each individual religious community is conflicted and sometimes prideful, occasionally obtuse, possessing a tragic capacity to make mistakes and to wound those who are dear to it. In this way too, Peter is the foundation: the foundation of First Parish Church in Weston; of my member church of the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg (a fact the devout pagans and humanists among them would be surprised to know, I'm sure!); the foundation of every congregation I have ever encountered.

As with Peter, there is even an inevitability to churches' relationship with pain. When things of greatest ultimacy and intimacy are at stake--when questions come up that speak to our most dearly held beliefs about God and our fellow human beings--the potential arises for hurt, even when none is intended. Yet, in as much as we must accept this fact, we can also take hope. For we likewise have it in us to affect hundreds of those transforming moments like the one between Peter and Jesus. Part of the grace of church, it seems to me, lies in its being an entity that exists with the spiritual purpose of transforming us into our better selves. Or perhaps more aptly, for the purpose of asking us to help our fellows so transform--and accept their transforming of us.

We, we who have all come here with past narratives and old stories of some kind working against



us, with histories we can't rewrite, with all kinds of potential to do ill and all kinds of potential to do good waiting within us, with our quiddities and our mysteries, and sometimes a thick layer of uncertainty overlaying it all-- we come here knowing there is the chance that we can be seen differently, and read differently, whatever lies behind us on our journey. By coming here, we come ready to risk the possibility of transformation: of being seen into our selves, of being read into our selves, in new and soul-deepening ways. By coming here, we've made a promise--whether we realize it or not--to hear the question from our fellows "who do you say that I am?", and have accepted the chance to give back to them the gift of a new, more life-giving answer than the one they have been working with.

This is the sacred work to which we're called.

It doesn't usually happen in a moment. It can be slow; it can happen a little at a time; and you cannot force it. But if we are doing our job--that is, if we are really being church--happen it will. Slowly but surely will both transform and be transformed.

There's an old Rabbinic story that goes like this. Once there was a kingdom full of wealth and abundance, whose king and queen had one child, a son about whom they could not stop talking to anyone who would listen. "He is perfect in every way!" they cried, "and he shall be the perfect king." To ensure that this happened, they structured the boy's life so that nearly all of his time was spent learning from instructors how to be this perfect king. One day, when the prince was on the cusp of adulthood, he seemed to vanish abruptly and neither of his parents could find him anywhere. At last someone thought to look beneath the large banquet table in the castle, and there, to everyone's shock, sat the prince.

The queen, especially alarmed, demanded to know what the prince was doing under there, to which he nonchalantly replied, "I am a chicken."

The king demanded he come out at once, as it was time for the next in the string of his endless lessons. But the prince replied, "I am a chicken. I don't attend lessons."

The king and the queen were shocked and dismayed, but they left him for the time being, figuring whatever stunt this was would soon pass. They returned at dinnertime and told the prince it was time

to come out and to sit at the table because dinner was ready. But the prince said, "I am a chicken. I do not sit at tables." He refused to eat any food, but would only peck at grains of corn scattered under the table for him.

Very soon, the kingdom was in chaos, hearing that the only heir to the throne had gone mad. The king and queen, after they had tried everything else, began searching for a wise man, who they could charge to reason with the prince and convince him that he was not a chicken. But wise men seemed to be in short supply; they could find no one who was willing to go near this conundrum. Then one day a farmwoman came to the king and queen, offering to cure their son. "Are you wise?" they asked. She replied no. "Are you a scholar?" they asked. Again she replied no. "Then how do you expect to cure our son?" they demanded.

"I will cure your son because I understand chickens," said the woman.

At their wits ends, the king and queen gave permission. The next day, the woman went to the banquet hall, and without a word she crept under the table where the prince was, and sat there. The prince sent her a look of puzzlement, but otherwise ignored her. After awhile one of the servants came by and scattered a handful of corn and the prince, as he had been doing for days, pecked at it. The woman also pecked at the corn. The prince watched this in silence. After awhile he said, "Who are you?" "Who are *you*?" retorted the woman. The prince said, "I am a chicken." "Ah," said the woman, nodding and pecking at some more corn. "I am a chicken, too."

The prince pondered this, a little suspicious. But several days went by, and not once did the woman try to quiz him on the precepts of kingliness, as everyone else in his life had always done. She didn't mention kings once. The days went by, and she simply kept the prince company, now and then sharing conversation with him about things important to chicken. They became friends. Then, after quite a few days had passed, the woman called out to one of the servants to bring her some food on a plate. "You lied to me!" cried the prince in dismay. "You told me you were a chicken!" "I *am* a chicken," said the woman. "I can be a chicken and still eat from a plate."

The prince thought about this. He watched the woman eat her food from her plate for several minutes.

Then, eventually, he called out for a plate to be brought to him as well. They ate, and continued being friends as they had before. Then after another good while had passed, the woman called out to the servants and asked if they would pull the chairs back so that she could come out from under the table and take her dinner seated in a chair. Again, the prince protested. "You lied!" he said. "You told me you were a chicken!" "I *am* a chicken," said the woman again. "I can sit at the table and eat plated food and still be a chicken." The prince pondered this, too. Then he slowly also crawled out from under the table and joined the woman in drawing a chair up to it. They sat in their chairs, eating the food from their plates, for some time. Slowly, an understanding smile dawned on the prince's face, and he started to laugh. He went on to take up his kingship with joy, and became one of the most beloved rulers the land had ever known.

Sometimes we can't know we are a king until someone accepts us as a chicken. Sometimes we can't become the person we would like to be until someone meets us as the person we are in the present. Sometimes, when everyone has pegged us as one character in the story of our lives, we need others to give us the freedom to try out a new role; and when we are stuck in a role that does not match who we truly are, we need someone else's perspective to prompt us to grow into greater integrity with ourselves.

Church both asks and helps us answer the question of who we think we are.

You have done both for me over the past year. I have also heard you asking yourselves – as a church – that question. I hope you keep asking it. Because those strange, and awkward transition times when we still aren't quite decided whether we need to be a king or a chicken are the sacred times, the transformative times. They're the times when we need one another, and need church, the most.

To Turn the Heart Around  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
Celie Katovitch  
January 20, 2013

Twenty days into January, I would imagine we can still get away with talking about ourselves as living in "the New Year." With any luck, resolutions made are still in place-- at least, more or less; perhaps you are starting to catch yourself a little more quickly before your pen manages to write "2012" after the date on checks and sign in sheets of various sorts; maybe setting a new goal, or setting down an old burden, has enlivened your spirit with that liberating feeling of a fresh start. My hope for us all is that we might have a chance to savor that feeling of newness, to entrust ourselves to it: not because civilization rises or falls based on the mathematics of new year's resolutions-- precise numbers of pounds lost, of good deeds done, of days we kept the den tidy, or whatever else-- but because the trust is good for us.

I suspect that we humans are hardwired to fear change, or at the very least, to think of it as a last resort, "if we have to" option. By this I mean change of a significant sort, having to do with who we ourselves are: I need to distinguish here between the kind of change that allows us to purchase a new and improved iPhone every few months or so, and the kind that occurs at the level of our own souls. It's not often that we're societally encouraged to trust in that second kind as a possibly good, and probably important, thing. Holidays, however, are the one striking exception. Oftentimes their purpose is precisely to call or attention to the changes of our lives: the passing of seasons, natural or sacred, or to the ever-present possibility that we ourselves might change-- change by the act of forgiving (to which is devoted the Jewish new year Rosh Hashanah), change by the act of remembrance (to which is devoted the Islamic new year Muharram), change by taking stock of the blessings we have harvested (to which is devoted the Celtic new year Samhain).

Right now we find ourselves three weeks into our calendar New Year's invitation to new intentions, and standing on the eve of Martin Luther King Day-- a day set aside in celebration of one whose life was

dedicated to peaceful and profound soul-change. Both seem to call us to pay a special kind of attention.

I confess that I have found myself approaching the holiday this year with a heavier heart than usual. Though I want to celebrate and to commemorate, I am also thinking of last month's events in Newtown. I am asking what it means to commemorate a life ended too soon by a shooting, now, in the wake of so many young lives ending far, far too soon. I am asking what steps, what mindset, what actions, are required to embody the nonviolence Dr. King stood for-- to make that nonviolence a reality, now, at this unique moment, in all its difficulty and in all its tragedy.

Answers don't come easily or quickly. Yet I believe that for all of us, there is something important even in the asking. Change begins with asking--simply asking--what we might do to love and live more fully. MLK famously predicted that future generations would have to repent as much for the silence of caring and good-intentioned people as for the deeds of overtly hateful people. The only mistake is not to think about it, not to talk about it, not to ask ourselves the hard questions.

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The commonality between today's two readings, the first from the prophet Ezekiel, the second from the gospel of Mark, is that interesting word "repent." If you are anything like me, you may be put a little on edge by this word. These days, probably we most often hear it from the lips of televangelists, or perhaps from fundamentalist-oriented folks on some downtown corner handing us leaflets about hellfire. Usually what we're urged to "repent" from is something labeled by those urging repentance to be a "sin"-- almost always something arbitrary, very often something downright silly (I will never forget a sign I once saw being brandished by a member of the Westboro Baptist so-called "church"--really, of course, a hate group having no similarities at all to a church-- which displayed a large drawing of a Christmas tree and declared that anybody whose house had ever contained one was a sinner and should repent... I don't remember the reasoning behind this, which is probably fortunate... something to do with trees being associated with pantheism, an apparent no-no for that crowd). In any case, that word "repent" seems to be linked almost inextricably with the concept of "sin"-- one that is at

best unhelpful and overused, at worst destructive, to many of us.

This is a loss, I think: first of all, because repentance was never a word intended to cause feelings of pain or guilt; and secondly, because I think it is actually a word that could be helpful, if we could sift out those newer associations and reclaim it its original state.

I remember when I first encountered a poem by Mary Oliver called "Wild Geese"; I'm sure many of you know it. It begins with these wonderful lines:

*You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
Through the desert, repenting.*

I remember I read those words and felt a huge sense of release. How many things in our lives seem to tell us that that is *exactly* what we must do? How often are we all given the message that we must make up for something about who we are that isn't good enough-- that we must walk on our knees through the desert? Our own UU tradition has usually held that *unlearning* that message, not internalizing it, is what helps grow our spirits. It's one of the things I most appreciate about our faith.

The interesting thing, totally forgotten by so many sin-centric folks, is that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures to a large extent agree with this. There is no sense of guilt or shame, no sense of bended knees and self-depriving treks through the desert, associated with the word "repent", in either the Hebrew of Ezekiel and the prophets or the Greek of the early Christians. What both suggest, instead, is a call to the soul-change that powered MLK's life and vision: a call that is encouraging, rather than scolding or despairing.

"Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!" is Ezekiel's command. "Turn, turn and live." This is what the word handed down to us in translation as "repent" means in Ezekiel's Hebrew. It means a turning-- a radical re-orienting of ourselves and our values. The prophet's fervent hope is for a turn away from unfairness and toward a more just way of living that reflects the spiritual principles a person professes. There are no separate categories of supposed "saints" and supposed "sinners"; rather, each of us has it in us at every moment to turn toward the good--toward what brings the world to life--or to turn toward that which

stunts goodness and life's flourishing. The significance of our choice is immense-- so immense that it makes a difference as stark as the difference between life and death, as Ezekiel says in his literarily clumsy but passionate way. It is never beyond us to change things completely by that turning: no matter what our past, no matter where we have been or what we have done or left undone, we can turn our hearts and souls around, change our living and our thinking, and in doing so, perhaps also turn the world around.

In the Greek of the New Testament, the word given to us as repentance is "metanoia": in the same spirit as Ezekiel, it *literally* means a change of mind (from the Greek "meta"-- over or beyond-- and "noia"-- mind or soul). So when John the Baptizer appears in the Jordan River, baptizing all-- Jesus of Nazareth included-- for repentance, he is offering not a harsh judgment, but an urging to transformation, a freeing of the heart.

This, of course, is also the message of Jesus, who begins his ministry of healing with the words: "repent, and believe in the gospel"-- meaning "gospel" not as a particular book or scripture, as we of course think of it, but again in its literal sense: in Greek the word he uses is *evangelion*, which means a "good message" (we often hear it expressed as simply "the good news").

No wonder people thought, as a later verse in Mark tells us, that he had "gone out of his mind." In a time when his native land of Judea was occupied by the Romans and his people suffering under tremendous violence and oppression, when people had begun to find sadness and fear the norm, when in a very real sense *no* news was good news, a message of such hope had to have sounded not just counterintuitive, but downright bizarre. When things seemed to have become locked in one unforgiving pattern, here was a proclamation of change through the reorienting of people's own hearts and souls.

"Repent, and believe in the gospel!"

"Open your minds, and believe in the good news."

We might even understand Jesus as saying: "Believe that *good news is possible*, in a time of violence; even when your hearts are heavy; even when the way forward is not yet perfectly clear."

May we believe so as well.

What better time than now, when our believing that hope is possible could be, indeed, what *makes* hope possible.

What better time than now, when both the promise of a new year and the legacy of Martin Luther King seem to summon us to place our faith in the potential of a heart that has been changed.

Rosh Hashanah. Muharram. Samhain.

Whatever season or calendar month it may be, a new year is beginning somewhere for a people on earth: a fact which should give us some courage, it seems to me. Perhaps we can take it as a reminder that we can *always* be open to moments that give us a new heart, and a new spirit, in Ezekiel's words; moments when our minds are suddenly changed, our hearts are suddenly turned, and we know we're being asked to turn toward life more fully in some important way. We don't have to wait until January first-- and we cannot miss the window of opportunity, for it never passes. Maybe the Buddhists have the fullest understanding of this. There is a celebration of the Buddhist New Year as well, but it does not usually have quite the cosmic significance of a Samhain, a Muharram, a Rosh Hashanah. Rather, each moment of each day contains within it all that sacred promise of newness. In each moment-- *each moment*-- we decide whether we turn our hearts toward that which brings us into a fuller life, or toward that which holds us back from a full life. Each moment we can awaken our minds anew, open our hearts to compassion anew... or not.

No judgment. No separating out of good from bad. No tallying of past failures or anxiety about future accomplishments. Just a chance-- at any moment, in *every* moment-- to ask ourselves if there is some part of our being that needs to come a little more to life.

I think that that chance is what MLK--and for that matter, the Hebrew prophets and Jesus of Nazareth, who so inspired him-- hoped for us take.

In that spirit, may we cease walking on our knees through the desert. May we let go of fear and of guilt, and stand as if with a new heart and a new soul within us.

May we find the courage to ask what changes are required of us.



And may we turn, turn, and turn again toward  
goodness-- toward a fuller and more compassionate  
Life.

"Bartender, please fill my glass deep for me  
With the wine you gave Jesus  
That set him free after three days down." ~Dave  
Matthews Band

Take This Cup from Us?  
First Parish Church in Weston  
Celie Katovitch  
March 17, 2013

As you know, Holy Week is the name we use to reference the week leading up to Easter. It begins with Palm Sunday in the Western Christian tradition (in the Eastern Orthodox tradition it begins the day before, with the interestingly named Lazarus Saturday-- no doubt worthy of a whole sermon in itself). It begins for us, then, next week, when we will mark the event of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, where he would be condemned to death and crucified, and where his followers, three days later, rolling away the stone door of his tomb and finding his body gone, would declare the great song of the Christian faith: "he is risen."

Long and enduring strands of theology written across the centuries have taken as their starting point the fact that Jesus knew this progression of events when he set out for Jerusalem, that he indeed knew with absolute certainty that all of these things-- condemnation, death, and resurrection-- would happen precisely as they did... And further, that he was so utterly convinced that all of it was part of a pre-ordained plan, all he had to do (indeed, all he could do, for looking at it this way choice would seem to have very little to do with the matter) was walk nonchalantly along the path pre-destined for him, more or less letting things take their natural course.

But this strikes me as hard to imagine. That Jesus had inklings that great powers were at work beyond and through himself to which he could only courageously surrender is fairly clear. That he was a realist about the potential dangers of his message, which from the start had incurred the wrath of the spiritual and economic elite, is certain. But when I read the passage telling of his solitary prayer in Gethsemane on the night before he died, when I hear Jesus confess that his soul is "overwhelmed with sorrow and troubled," when I hear him pray, face almost pressed to

the ground, "my father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me," I do not hear the voice of one who is calmly just doing his duty, or who is confident about the security of the future. I hear the kind of fear that comes from uncertainty; the kind of dread that comes from not knowing, or at least not knowing with enough sureness for comfort, what is happening. I hear the voice of someone suffering from the hallmark human difficulty: the fact of a vision gone cloudy, and a future not entirely secure or predictable.

For us, looking across a distance of two thousand years, Holy Week spans Palm Sunday to Easter: a time of honoring what we can see, from that distance, as an event that changed the course of history and the story of the human spirit. For Jesus of Nazareth, I imagine that *this* week was holy week. What word other than "holy" is there to describe that time of deciding to go to Jerusalem; deciding to go not knowing what would happen, though knowing that it was certainly *possible* that the worst would happen; deciding to go forward, with the way ahead profoundly shadowed in mystery?

The theologian John Macquarrie doesn't assume, with the more typical interpretation of the events in Jerusalem, that the whole point of the story collapses if we allow Jesus the freedom not to have known for certain what would happen to him. He writes, "[We must] recognize that Jesus went to Jerusalem and, it was to turn out, to his death, with a human understanding and with human emotions... [W]e are looking on someone who, as truly human, advances with integrity and obedience to his vocation into the events the shape of which is still in large measure hidden from him... He had dedicated himself wholly to the vocation laid upon him, and there could be no turning back... The human emotions of hope and uncertainty and the conflict between them must have been present in his mind" (John Macquarrie, *The Humility of God*, 59).

Paraphrasing noted New Testament scholar Raymond Brown, Macquarrie continues:

*"A Jesus who walked through the world knowing exactly what the morrow would bring, knowing with certainty that three days after his death his Father would raise him up, is a Jesus who can arouse our admiration, but still a Jesus far from us. He is a Jesus*

*far from a mankind that can only hope in the future and believe in God's goodness, far from a mankind that must face the supreme uncertainty of death with faith but without knowledge of what is beyond. On the other hand, a Jesus for whom the future was as much a mystery, a dread and a hope as it is for us and yet, at the same time, a Jesus who could effectively teach us how to live, for this is a Jesus who could have gone through life's real trials.' ... So... we are made to confront Jesus in his full humanity, and surely this does not diminish his stature but rather enhances it (Ibid.)."*

Given that full humanity, those "human emotions of hope and uncertainty, and the conflict between them" must indeed have been strong in the mind and heart of Jesus of Nazareth during this week, when, we presume, he made the decision that he would indeed go to Jerusalem, and await whatever life would bring him there, whether suffering or triumph, sorrow of joy-- in short, whatever "cup" it would be his to drink.

Just as we all make such decisions-- on a large or small scale-- throughout our lives. On days when those human emotions of hope and uncertainty overwhelm us, on days and through hours that creep by slowly with that difficult waiting full of the knowledge that what will happen is not within our control or even our ability to predict, and when we fall with our faces to the ground, overwhelmed with fear. Each of us asks that "this cup be taken from us."

Some while later, after he has taken time by himself to sit with the reality of where and who he is, Jesus returns and prays again. "Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

This is still far from a tone of confident anticipation.

It strikes me, rather, as Jesus' wise voicing of one of the most universal and most difficult of spiritual truths: that, hard as it may be for us to accept, human beings are not very good escape artists. We are seldom able to flee from our suffering. For us, the way through suffering is not through running away from it-- it can only be through entering *into* it.

The last thing any of us wants to do, really... but nonetheless it is what we must do. And not simply because we have no other choice (most of us can -- and do-- at least try to get a running head start and escape

for awhile-- a little or a long while). Yet, to accept the cup that has been given to us, not passively but from a place of strength and trust in what is holy, is to embrace who we are and the fragile gift of our aliveness. To flee from the cup of our fears and our sorrows and our pain is not actually to evade death, but to flee from life.

"Your pure sadness that wants help is a secret cup," Jelaluddin Rumi says. Sometimes "the crying is [itself] the connection [to God]." The image of a cup is a recurring image in the poetry of Rumi and other 13th century Sufis. And intriguingly, for them the cup of pure sadness and the cup of wisdom, of enlightenment, of a similarly pure and unadulterated JOY-- are the same thing. "Don't take the cup away from me," begins another poem of Rumi's, "before I've had enough to drink. [I have been] offered [so much] love, I'll be drunk with joy" (Rumi, 'Don't Take the Cup Away'). To refuse the cup is to refuse both sadness \*and\* joy-- and their mysterious intermingling in that difficult reality that is Love; it is to refuse life, and the fullness of it that is given to us.

I thought of those seemingly not very significant opening chapters of the Book of Nehemiah, the incidental detail the prophet drops into his narrative, saying, "in those days [before receiving his prophetic inspiration to rebuild Jerusalem], [he] was cupbearer to the king."

Cupbearer: a title that in those times meant not simply that Nehemiah brought the king his daily goblet of mead (or whatever the ancient Persian equivalent was), but that, in a time of frequent unrest and attempts on the king's life, it was he who *tasted* it, BEFORE the king, each time risking the possibility that today would be the day some poison had indeed infiltrated it. So it was quite a job the humble Nehemiah had being, as he says (maybe not so off-handedly after all), "cupbearer to the king."

And yet, in a spiritual sense, maybe he mirrors best the daily situation of each of us. With any luck, most of us face the full feelings of Gethsemane-- "sorrow to the point of death"-- at a few, very dark times, but they are not something that we walk with moment to moment in their full immediacy. But we are, most often, a bit like Nehemiah: daily having to face small moments of risk, small but powerful recurring uncertainties, small but significant chances that bring

the fragility of our lives into full view for us to see. And we must make the decision to reach out to them, to live through them-- or to refuse the cup, and flee, attempting to become the escape artists we perhaps secretly all wish we were.

But more often, there is simply no way for the cup to be taken from us "unless we drink it." There is no way around fear or sorrow except through them.

Beyond this, the risk of refusing the cup-- refusing what life brings us-- may indeed be a greater one to take. Run from sorrow and we may find ourselves also outrunning joy; refuse to risk fear, and we refuse to risk love; today we turn from suffering, tomorrow we may turn and miss resurrection. Like Nehemiah, we must day after day find the courage to taste from the cup of all that our life is... and like Nehemiah, and like Jesus, we may find that the matter of how we take that daily chance and muster that daily trust, is in the end what will tell us who we are.

John Macquarrie says this of the power that lives within us, letting us find the courage to meet what comes to us, whatever it may be: "*For this is a humanity that transcends any other that we know, a humanity so open towards the Father that... [turning fully toward whatever life has brought us] we can believe with the early Christians that God [is] indeed at work here.*"

May we believe that God is at work in all that our life is. In the moments when we have to decide whether we will go forward and risk uncertainty, may we remember that it is only when we do so that we really live.

Dear Eaarth  
The First Parish Church in Weston  
Celie Katovitch  
April 14, 2013

I begin this sermon with a public service announcement. Let it be known that this week has proven what many of us already knew: namely, that First Parish in Weston has the most dedicated and forbearing administrative staff around. This particular week we could add the adjective “long-suffering.” I understand there were a number of calls, including one from the Town Crier, that came in to Betsy and Millie in the office pointing out their spelling error in today’s sermon title. Well, I am here to vindicate them in both their impeccable spelling and their kindness in fielding these worries all week. Your order of service is NOT a misprint! Let the record show that their skill at copyediting is unsurpassed, and you should feel free to compliment them on it profusely – they deserve it!

Yes, the spelling of “earth” with two a’s in your order of service today is intentional. Just as it was intentional as the title of a recent book by environmentalist Bill McKibben. In that book McKibben argues that the planet we think of ourselves as inhabiting is being--and in some ways has already been--changed utterly. It has become, for all intents and purposes, a \*different\* planet-- an eaarth. It has been changed by entirely new patterns of melting, of acidification, of flooding, and of desertification-- patterns never seen before; patterns which our many years of fossil fuel burning and pollution have been instrumental in creating. Our own handprint is visible upon this less stable, changed earth-- this new ea(a)rth (with two a’s).

As one who has attended or served Unitarian Universalist congregations since youth, I would guess that I have probably heard or read, over the years, at least a dozen Earth Day sermons. Luckily, our tradition is easy to mine for words that sing to and of the beauty of the earth. One of my favorites is this poem by the Universalist minister, Max Kapp, who came from my neck of the woods in upstate New York:

“For what my eyes have seen these many years  
and what my heart has loved,  
often I have tried to start my lines: ‘dear earth.’

'Dear Earth,' I say,  
and then I pause  
to look once more.  
Soon I am bemused  
and far away in wonder.  
So I never get beyond 'Dear Earth.' "

On the Unitarian side, there are of course the Transcendentalists-- Thoreau with his Walden, Emerson with his Nature. On both sides of the family tree, we have praised the glory of earth's more scenic, more pastoral landscapes (...it's more seldom that the Transcendentalists sung about the side of nature that includes tornadoes and earthquakes and floods... but no matter...).

Or at least, no matter-- before now.

I have heard and read a great many earth day sermons, but this is the first one I've preached. And sadly for me, and for young preachers everywhere, I believe the days when sermons could begin with the simple "dear earth" spoken by Kapp are over. Earth Day has to mean something different to us now, because the earth has become something different than it was to the Transcendentalists; different even than it was to our parents and grandparents. It is altered; it is in trouble; and no simple verses picking out only flowers and calm breezes and quiet woodland ponds will do. New questions and needs face us, that we must address them with a new kind of urgency. "Dear Eaarth," our address must begin.

I was talking with a classmate the other day about the early passage in Genesis that was our first reading this morning. She said to me, "Well, I believe God tells me to bend nature to my will because I am higher than the animals and plants. The Bible says man should have dominion." She is not alone in reasoning this way. Indeed, our society has for hundreds of years seemed to heed that injunction far too well. It has taken the sense of that passage in its most literal and unexamined form and run with it, to the point that most of recent history could be read as the story of humankind seeking to bend nature to our will-- curtailing or tinkering with or ignoring or surmounting natural processes in order to gain something we thought would benefit us. Sometimes this was well-intentioned and necessary, as when what we needed was more adequate safety or shelter. Many



times it was driven only by greed. And sometimes we began with good intentions-- the wish to alleviate some human pain or difficulty-- and then seemed to get caught in the grip of this dominion idea, as if it possessed us and in us magnified itself, becoming something prideful and destructive.

For this reason, the passage is one that has long troubled those of us in this Judeo-Christian tradition who are concerned about care for the earth. Sometimes we try to counter it with the famous passage from Luke, "consider the lilies...", yet this is usually felt to be one of the Bible's more Hallmark Card-like moments, almost Transcendentalist in its romanticism. A suggestion that we go admire the flowers... It hardly seems to be much of a counter to the forceful "dominion" idea. That idea is summed up most bone-chillingly, for me, by the historian Carl Becker. He wrote:

"In America the moving of mountains is not a symbol of the impossible, but a familiar experience. Major Hutton, the assistant engineer of the Grand Coulee Dam, is reported to have said: "If a hard mountain gets in the way, move it. If it is just a soft mountain, freeze the darn thing, forget it, and keep on going."

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This encapsulates the sin in which we're caught. This is the dangerous perspective that has crept sneakily into our thinking, and which exists, at some level, in the minds of all of us. We have taken that word 'dominion' far too much to heart. This is what prompted the poet W.S. Merwin to cry out that the root of all problems was the simple fact that, "men think they are better than the grass."

Humankind seems prone to this tragic flaw, this wish to bend the rest of creation to our will, to put ourselves above everything to which we are, in reality, intimately connected.

IS that what the Biblical tradition teaches us to do?

I'm not so sure. I've always been struck by the progression of things in Genesis, especially the fact that in the passage we heard today at least, humans are not God's first thought. Actually, we come toward the end of the progression, following the water, the light, the sky, the land, the trees and plants, the stars,

and the animals. We were meant as one contribution to the making of the world. We are shown, in later chapters of Genesis, as caretakers of the land: as gardeners, and farmers. Our “dominion,” then, as God seems to have envisioned it, is one of care and tending. And yet, there is one sense in which we are perhaps “better than the grass”; a particular way in which we are at least set apart from, if not “better than” other creatures. Something is indeed different about us-- and that difference seems to be sourced in responsibility. It cannot fall to the flowers to ensure the flourishing of the fish, or to the ‘flocks’ to tend the trees. Yet we are capable that tending... And so a higher, special task of taking care of the earth does fall to us.

And yet, perhaps right now some of you are thinking of the number of burdens you already carry: of hundreds of other things that you need to “take care of,” things relating to families, and jobs, and real, day-to-day worries that weigh upon you. Perhaps some of you are thinking that you are not activists by temperament, that you just can’t see yourself joining a human chain and illegally demonstrating against climate change until hauled off the capital rotunda (side-note: this is one of Bill McKibben’s impressive feats; I first encountered his work through an acquaintance in college who was one of those tied to McKibben’s arm for such a demonstration-- and this at the age of 75!). Perhaps some of you are thinking that this simply isn’t your issue.

All of which are valid worries-- except the last one.

I believe that as religious people, this is very much the issue of every single one of us. And NOT because we are all romantics and nature-lovers like Thoreau and Emerson. It is not a matter of whether we are outdoorsmen and -women, or avid INDOORSmen and -women; whether we write poems about budding trees or fear nor’easters, or both; whether we are activists or contemplatives, whether our world is ecology or politics or accounting or software or basket-weaving-- and the reason for this is simple.

To label the care of the earth as “not our issue” is to condemn ourselves to slow but certain spiritual starvation.

The great insight that Thoreau, Emerson, and Kapp were onto – and which has not gone away, even now on this new, changed, and suffering earth – was

not a purely scientific or political or social truth. It was a religious one: a truth having to do with us as we most deeply are, and the world we exist in as it most deeply is. That truth is that our own souls only know themselves through our interaction with the natural world. We look at creation and find, not exactly our reflection, but yes, some reminiscence: a deep resonance of our emotions, our intellect, and our very being, with what we take in through our senses from the web of life that surrounds us. In some way, we can only know ourselves with nature's help. The earth shapes, reflects, and grows our souls.

"I know that I am one with beauty," said the photographer Ansel Adams, "and that my comrades are one. Let our souls be mountains. Let our spirits be stars. Let our hearts be worlds."

Mysteriously, our souls and spirits and hearts are molded in the image of creation. How different this is from an easy interpretation of the Genesis passage, wherein human beings only are made in God's image, and in turn make the rest of the world in ours. How much more does Adams' statement honor the fact that by the time we arrived on the scene in the Biblical story, the waters, the mountains, the trees were already present-- already reflecting in their own way the image of God, and in their own determining of what we--humankind-- might become, through the responsibility that was given to us.

Creation helps us recognize ourselves, for it is where we find a deep and mysterious similarity to the workings of our hearts. Yet it is also where we find something that is strikingly Other than us: something that, as earthquakes and floods tell us in no uncertain terms, is greater than us and beyond our full grasp-- certainly beyond our ultimate ability to control. It is this aspect of nature we have most forgotten. The more we try to go against the grain of this truth, the more trouble we set ourselves up for environmentally, even as spiritually we fall again into that trap of trying to make the world with our own hands. Then, when we look to this earth so made -- this human-altered, Bill McKibben-esque Eaarth -- we see not that strange familiarity of connectedness between nature and ourselves, but simply our own mirror image staring blankly back at us. We see the darker side of our own faces, and not the face of God.

It may be that when Jesus asks us to “consider the lilies” he is urging us not to an easy reverie but to genuine contemplation of something other than ourselves. Maybe he is asking us to arise out of our self-absorption and to consider ourselves a part of a larger creation, all of which is full of divinity, if only we can manage NOT to overlook it while searching only for our own reflection.

So those of us on the staff thought what we would ask of you is to take this week-- you have a whole week between now and the “real” Earth Day-- and think of some way to take care of the earth. You might attend a protest or lobby, certainly; but you might also find dozens of other ways to do that. You might take an extra moment to turn off the faucet on the sink while you’re brushing your teeth rather than let the water run; you might contribute to a local sustainability organization; you might take the train to work one day of the week instead of driving; you might sit outside and take notice of nature, paying a little extra attention, and letting it simply be what it is. All of us can do something.

May you be blessed in what you do. May it refresh your soul. Don’t be afraid to get creative! And may the God whose own sacred creativity breathed this changed and changing, saving and savable world into being go with you through your week.