

Love First

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker

Parker, president and Professor of Theology at Starr King, preached this sermon Sept. 6, 2005 at the school's Opening Convocation.

Thomas Starr King – the namesake of our school – was a mere five feet tall. “I may be small,” he said, “But when I am mad I weigh a ton.” I invoke Starr King’s name on this opening day of our 101st academic year because we commence this year in a nation that is at war and has lost its way, a nation in which our presence as progressive people of faith is needed and even our anger is required. Starr King insisted that the pulpit be used to address national issues – for our religious and ethical values are not simply personal – they are about how we relate to one another and to the earth. King said, “We are not intended to be separate, private persons, but rather fibers, fingers and limbs. . . . There can be no such thing as justice until [people] in large masses are rightly related to each other.”

Starr King’s anger held the weight of burning love. His ministry was fired by passionate caring that could not tolerate seeing life be needlessly harmed because of stupidity, lack of attention, inadequate organization or narrow self-interest by people in power more devoted to the advantage of a few than the well being of us all.

Many of us spent part of this past weekend viewing news coverage from the Gulf Coast. The tragedy is heartbreaking. Scenes of people swept away by flood waters, crowding into inadequate shelters, waving homemade signs from roof tops that say “Help Us!” to helicopters flying overhead, desperately hoping they would not fly away. Many waited for days in sweltering heat for food and water. The death toll remains unknown. In the aftermath, outrage has become a flood of its own. The events of this past week have unveiled how deeply our nation is off course. We are not just witnessing a “natural disaster.” What has unfolded before our eyes is the cumulative effect of our nation’s decisions about how we relate to the environment, how we manage the production and distribution of wealth, how white privilege plays itself out, how we approach security, and how we relate to knowledge and information. All of these topics are religious issues on which the leadership of progressive people of faith is needed.

Even conservatives are now raising the alarm. Paul Craig Roberts, a former editor and columnist for The Wall Street Journal and now a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, wrote this week:

“The U.S. has lost its largest and most strategic port, thousands of lives, and 80 percent of one of America’s most historic cities is under water. If terrorists had achieved this result, it would rank as the greatest terrorist success in history. Every expert and newspapers as distant as Texas saw the New Orleans catastrophe coming. But President Bush and his insane government preferred war in Iraq to protecting Americans at home. Bush’s war left the Corps of Engineers only 20 percent of the funding to protect New Orleans from flooding. . . Not content with leaving New Orleans unprotected, it took the Bush administration five days to get the remnants of the National Guard not serving in Iraq, along with desperately needed food and water, to devastated New Orleans. . . . Bush has squandered the lives and health of thousands of people. He has run through hundreds of billions of borrowed dollars. He has lost America’s reputation and its allies. With barbaric torture and destruction of our civil liberty, he has stripped America of its inherent goodness and morality. And now Bush has lost America’s largest port and 25 percent of its oil supply. . . What will it take for Americans to reestablish accountability in their government? Bush has got away with lies and an illegal war of aggression, with outing CIA agents, with war crimes against Iraqi civilians, with the horrors of the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo torture centers, and now with the destruction of New Orleans. What disaster will next spring from Bush’s incompetence?”

Roberts calls this incompetence and he makes Bush the target of his rage. But our analysis must be broader. It is not one heedless human being with too much power who put us where we are, and the course of our nation will not be altered in the direction of justice and compassion by removing one president from office.

What we need is a revolution in our values – a revolution that turns our attention more reverently and responsibly to the interdependent, relational character of life. What we need is a spiritual and a practical revolution that embodies love for neighbor and for the world through sustaining structures of care and responsibility.

Five days after the hurricane did its worst, President Bush toured some of the devastation in Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi, and said this was a time for people to love their neighbors as themselves. His comment suggests a view of love as a gesture of kindly help when the situation has become horrendously dire.

Such a view of love is not sufficient.

Loving our neighbor implicates us in loving the whole network of life. Science – the very science that the religious and political right insists on denying – has given us photographs of earth from space. We can see we are one blue globe, wreathed with seas and clouds. We know the crust of the earth floats on a core of fire. Even the rocks are part of a complex flow of elements that fold down into that molten core and rise again. We dwell in our cities and towns on a living, breathing planet molded by transforming fire, flowing waters, the exhaling of trees and inbreathing of animals.

This interconnectedness of all things requires wisdom and reverence. We cannot tramp over this landscape of life as ignorant fools and expect to be safe. We cannot turn from our bonds and obligations for and with one another and expect everyone to be okay. We cannot love AFTER the fact and expect love to be able to save life. Maybe, in the end, love WILL save us all, but it has a lot better chance at the beginning.

We need to love from the start – not as an emergency strategy when everything has gone wrong. We need to love our neighbors as ourselves through economic systems that pay a living wage for labor, instead of indulging in policies that allow the rich to get richer and the poor to be left behind when the storm comes. We need to love the world through reverence that fosters observant attention to the intricate, relationality of life. Love will only save us if we put love FIRST, instead of making it the last resort.

It is not sufficient to relegate love to a few “Hallmark moments” or to celebrate love in sentimental accolades about the compassion of the American people. It is not sufficient to expect love to be the domestic help that will wipe the tears from the eyes of the children living in the house of a cruel master. It is not enough to address injustice in the moment. The whole pathway – the whole road from Jerusalem to Jericho as Martin King said – the structural foundation on which we journey together, must be just. If we can learn to love FIRST, not last, then love may save us.

The Rev. Joseph Lowrey, one of our nation’s great civil rights leaders, was interviewed on CNN this weekend. The young announcer asked the old activist, “Do you think the tragedy we are seeing in New Orleans is the result of racism? We at CNN don’t want to avoid facing this question.” (The announcer must have heard Alma Crawford’s sermon during Starr King orientation last week, asking us to pay attention to what we cannot see or do not want to look at.) Lowrey paused for a moment. “You cannot reduce an event of this complexity to one thing. Part of the problem is just plain incompetence. But yes, of course, what we are seeing is racism. It is also classism and environmental irresponsibility. We cannot go on treating each other and the earth this way. We must learn again to live with reverence.”

We must learn again to live with reverence. Reverence is a form of love. It is response to life that falls on its knees before the rising sun and bows down before the mountains. It puts its palms together in the presence of the night sky and the myriad galaxies and recognizes as Langston Hughes told us, “beautiful are the stars, beautiful too are the faces of my people.” Reverence greets all humanity as sacred. It genuflects before the splendor of the grass and the magnificence of the trees. It respects the complexity, the beauty and the magnitude of creation and does not presume to undo its intricate miracles. Instead, it gives life reverent attention – seeking to know, understand and cooperate with life’s ways.

Reverence for life has to be learned. It is not just a feeling – it is a way of life that is manifested in more than an isolated moment of appreciation for nature or awe before its destructive as well as creative power. Reverence involves full-fledged devotion enacted in deeds of care and responsibility. It involves knowledge, study and attention.

Our society at present is led by a world view that is insufficiently grounded in reverence. Religiously, it is a world view that regards the earth itself as trash – a throw-away planet that God is soon going to discard in a plan to wipe this world away and create a new one. Economically, the dominant world view regards human beings as self-interested individuals, motivated only by their personal desire to consume. And, scientifically, the dominant world view sees existence as the Old Science does: devoid of value, as atomistic, disconnected and mechanistic. Such inadequate views are tearing our world to tatters through a lack of regard for the communal character of life.

We need a renewal of reverence for the intricate interconnectedness of life that is born from paying attention to the world, investigating what IS REAL. We need the view of life that spiritual traditions in many times and places have affirmed and that *new* science in the West is revealing: the view of life as an interdependent web. We need to shape a future informed by this new science, not the old, no longer relevant, mechanistic science.

Holy regard for heeding advances in knowledge is at the heart of our religious faith. A few years ago I visited my congregation's partner church in Okland, Transylvania. The Rev. Levente Kellerman took me into the sanctuary to see the ceiling of the 400-year-old Unitarian Church in his village. In typical Transylvanian style, the church has a wooden ceiling, crisscrossed with beams creating a lattice work of deep squares painted with folk art depicting flowers and plants. Near the center of the sanctuary, the Okland church ceiling harbors a surprising image – a golden sun surrounded by circling planets in a star-spangled indigo sky. It is a diagram of the Copernican solar system. At a time when religion was opposing science, our ancestors built sanctuaries in the remote mountains and valleys of Transylvania that sheltered the discoveries of new science – even when the dominate religious culture advocated ideologies and rigidities that allowed no new revelation, and insisted that the old theories of how the world came to be had to be taught in the public schools. Oops. Forgot which century we were in.

Because, of course, it matters now more than ever. In 1514, when Copernicus re-imagined the nature of the solar system, it was the result of lifetime of careful study. One of his students described his method. In his *First Report*, Rheticus wrote about Copernicus's way of working: ... *my teacher always had before his eyes the observations of all ages together with his own, assembled in order as in catalogues; then when some conclusion must be drawn or contribution made to the science and its principles, he proceeds from the earliest observations to his own, seeking the mutual relationship which harmonizes them all; the results thus obtained by correct inference under the guidance of Urania he then compares with the hypothesis of Ptolemy and the ancients; and having made a most careful examination of these hypotheses, he finds that astronomical proof requires their rejection; he assumes new hypotheses, not indeed without divine inspiration and the favour of the gods; by applying mathematics, he geometrically establishes the conclusions which can be drawn from them by correct inference; he then harmonizes the ancient observations and his own with the*

hypotheses which he has adopted; and after performing all these operations he finally writes down the laws of astronomy ...

This is the kind of intelligent, persistent care that enables revolutionary new understanding. It is the LACK of this kind of love that is harming our nation now. But the presence of such studious and grounded care can transform the world.

This brings us back to here and now and the start of this 101st academic year at Starr King School for the Ministry. In the history of our own small school we have been through – and in some ways are still in – a flood of change. In the midst of so much change, what abides is the mission of the school: to educate progressive religious leaders for Unitarian Universalist ministries and for society. The task given to us here and now is to do what we can to advance reverence for life and deepen the promise of love. We come together as new and returning students, staff and faculty. Together, let us dedicate ourselves to the thinking, researching, practice and learning that will bring more Love into the world.

It is an audacious task for a little school. But to paraphrase Thomas Starr King, “We may be small, but when we are mad we weigh a ton.” The weight of love can help turn the world around. May it be so.