

Sermon: A Letter to the President Elect
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November 13, 2016

Back in the time of Jesus' life and early after his death, there were twelve men – friends of Jesus – who were called his disciples. They were his students and in turn, after his death, became the teachers in Jesus' absence. Each having their own understanding of their beloved and his life and death, they took this practice of student now teacher very seriously. Traveling from community to community, and at times, when travel was too difficult or not quick enough, they preached by letter. Paul, one of these disciples, is most known for this practice, and today has inspired me to preach by way of letter writing. An epistle, if I be so bold.

Now, before I begin, let me also say, I offer this letter today to the President Elect. But it is truly a letter to each of you. And perhaps harder still, it's actually a letter to our children.

Dear Mr. President Elect,

We do not know each other and likely may never meet, though you have visited the neighboring town in which I live, and, based on the outcome of the election, I know many of my neighbors were there to greet you. By way of introduction, I want to tell you about one of the most beautiful parts of my life: The congregation I serve; the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing.

That's right, Washington Crossing. An historic and bucolic space where each Christmas morning a reenactment of George Washington crossing the Delaware is held right down the street. Years ago, I am told, a congregant's son and his friends dressed as Native Americans and surprised the reenactors with an unplanned attack on their voyage.

We take history seriously in our parts, but we do also wonder about it. How else it might have been told. Whose voices are missing. We wonder about the winners, the story-tellers, the ones who get to shape the historical arch. And we also watch when it seems to repeat itself. Just the other day, at a school where so many of our youth attend, there were swastikas found in the bathroom and anti-gay slurs, and a note slipped into a Latina girl's backpack telling her to go back to Mexico.

It is a spiritual practice to take seriously our history and our history making.

I share this with you, on the eve season of your inauguration – before the title Elect fades away and you do become a more solidified part of the history we will one day examine - because, the task before you is weightier than I could ever dream: to not only wonder about history and your place – our place – in it, in the making of it – but to also hear and listen and act knowing so much of the division of our union now, is because there are voices that have looked on and have felt missing from the narrative. Their lives, and grief, their hardships and hopes have felt unjustly ignored. This is a not a new sentiment for us Americans; but it has been for this particular group. I'm sure you agree, ours is such a young American history; it feels, on so many days, quite fragile.

But back to the church I serve --- Each Sunday we call our children to the front of the sanctuary near the pulpit. It's a symbolic act of shared participation as much as it is a ritual of appreciation. These little bodies that grow with curiosity and then audacity; affection but then also protection as they age. They keep us grounded in what we all once were – and then, just in their presence, just in their bravery to travel the long aisle from their caregivers to the pulpit, encourage us to live by more than thought or word for their future.

I've been thinking about these little ones lately. Mr. President Elect, there is one child who, in my three years, hasn't missed a Sunday to run full force toward me and into my arms. No matter how much heavier she is these days, or taller, or too old – no matter if it is before church starts or five minutes in – her dive into her minister's arms takes my breath away some days.

You see, you will appreciate as a leader and as someone who will represent much more than only your particular personhood, the mountain climb of progress in this moment of affection: a child uninhibitedly climbing the stairs to where the pulpit is. Sacred ground and an intentional elevation from the people in so many other places. And there I sit, a lesbian robed in clerics and with a stole that speaks to a recognized calling to lead the spirit and witness the lives of those I serve ... Well, as I said, from the visual, I imagine you can appreciate how far we've come – for women and folks who aren't straight; for the children who embrace them and in turn learn they will – without condition – be embraced.

There are other children here too, of course. One child is a fierce growing girl who promised to make me a dress – with what on it, I asked? She looked at me, considered, lots of red sequins. After learning of when women could vote in Religious Education last week, it was her mom, not our curriculum, that had to reteach this lesson - for it was only white women who could vote; women like her mom, like her one day, couldn't vote for another 40 years.

You see, even in this intentional faith, there are still uncritical assumptions we make into declarations. I know you can appreciate the power in this. There is such power when we teach with confidence and forget our context.

And I have to tell you, because I think we will share this moment -- when I saw that the correction had to be made – I was so embarrassed! But also so grateful. It's taken me many years to find appreciation in humility and the vulnerability of learning in public. My heart knows I don't do it well the majority of the time, if I'm being honest. It's good for all of us in leadership to have models in this work, you know.

Next week I'll dedicate and bless two children whose names represent the Buddhist teachings their parents cherish. And the week before last I was reminded to include Diwali in the prayer so as to speak to another family's traditions. And it's not just the children, mind you, though it does always come back to them. We've got these teachers who, when a child can't sit still in class, they teach the lesson by walking laps with them and asking questions about our Principles, about community, about relationships and the holy. We try, so hard, not just to honor but to create an environment, in which any of us can feel whole. I realize now I haven't said this yet, Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism is a direct response to the founding

principles of our country. I suppose, in many ways, I shall look to you in the coming years, to build with you this more perfect union.

I worry about the children, though. Not any one of them for any one reason but mostly because of baseball. And pancakes. And tired parents and nap schedules and also how all the statistics say the culture of places like this – one of the most beautiful parts of my life – is in decline.

This is the place in which we learn to be brave and kind. It's the place where imprinting happens and we know there is somewhere in the world that will take us back again and again when we're feeling lost. You should have seen this place the other night. Singing together from the heart; lighting candles and writing notes of gratitude on the walls.

People wonder what Unitarian Universalists worship but I didn't that night. It's as the Apostle Paul wrote, "you may have nothing, but you possess everything." All we had was colored pencils and used candles. We sang a cappella and had only a few lights on. Our most powerful tool that night was our breath.

We didn't possess much but this place held everything – just as it always does: like my colleague, the Rev. Robin Bartlett has said of her congregation, "Imperfect people and untrained volunteers, and some pretty old classrooms, and state of the art nothing. It holds you... and it holds these other beloved people who are your people, and it welcomes all. It brings a random assortment of interesting and different and tough and ragtag folks together so that we might learn to love one another better. ... It defines success with words like "forgiveness" and "love" and "welcome," instead of with words like A+ or "home run" or perfect."

"Church takes patience and hard work, and it's boring sometimes. Just like life. But it contains a group of people inside of it who seek to make themselves and the world better with kindness and stillness and strength – the kind of strength that requires softness and open-heartedness, not the hard body you get from lifting weights at the gym strength. And this kind of open-hearted, soft strength isn't always valued in very many places anymore, but it's the most important kind of strength there is. And it matters. It matters so much. We have nothing, and possess everything."

Mr. President Elect, I share with you in the safety of this letter that I am afraid. I am afraid that on some days my strength feels weak or of the wrong kind. That anger has taken the place of softness and that the success I value – in forgiveness and love – feels like more work than ever before. I want to be better than the version of who I am today for our children. For my child who may one day walk into the bathroom and see his parents spoken of in those derogatory terms; or be reminded of his cousin's ancestry in the threat of the swastika; or who simply may wonder if kindness is the right kind of strength.

I don't really know what to do about this right now. Other than maybe be with my people in the ways that we worship. Be reminded of who and how I want to be and put all of my open heart into opening hearts (including my own). I hope that you will help me. And help us. I pray that your own stories of history and hope, of children and of wondering what to worship, will guide

us all into a shared future that is safe and open-hearted; forgiving and loving; and measuring in new and creatively compassionate ways the ways of success.

We will likely never meet. But this letter has been good for me – and I hope for you as well. A friend of mine has started something called Neighborhood Love Notes, where you take a piece of sidewalk chalk and meditate about who you love rather than who you fear. It won't change the world, she tells me; there is so much work to do. But it can save a heart. So I put some sidewalk chalk at the back of the sanctuary and I thought, maybe after we worship, my people – the ones I serve – the ones who lift me by way of our shared intentions, grief, and collective hope – maybe we could worship some more outside of our sanctuary walls.

I hope you will find such simple things to call yourself back to a practice of love and connection, these days. The responsibility of leading is an enormous one. May your people call you to the work of opening hearts, like mine do.

Mr. President Elect, I wish you could meet these people. For a century they have worked, and will continue, to build the beloved community no matter the task at hand.

In faith, Rev. Kim Wildszewski

May all that is blessed, be.