

“Fences and Freedom”

**3 April 2005
Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Bill Neely
Worship Associate: Drew Danielson**

Minister’s Prayer:

Warm us like the melting winter snow, Eternal One.
From habits of coldness and approaches of frigidity;
warm our tired hearts and weary hands with
sunbursts of spring, with sunbursts of spirit.

Show us our neighbors again and
call forth the birds to sing in our ears.
Melt us,
and the hard, cold ground
so that common, dormant Beauty
may again bless this world.

Melt
the frozen crystals of isolation in our beings
into common streams of humanity,
so that we may flow along with life
toward the common sea of holiness.

Bless the parks with dogs chasing balls, and
bless the Earth with kids seeking mud, and
bless the walking trails with lovers seeking each other, and
bless us, Eternal One,
in your constant, wise way,
by centering our lives in the seasons of transformation
that cool hot tempers and
melt frozen dreams.

Enable us, Eternal One, to see the bursting Beauty of these days.
Embolden us, Eternal One, to magnify that Beauty
so that others may see it, too.

Amen.

Reading: *from Ethical Ambition* – Derrick Bell

Rising to the challenge is what makes possible the revelation that humanity, at its essence, is both an ongoing readiness to recognize wrongs and try to make things better, and the desire to help those in need of assistance without expecting reward or public recognition. It is a difficult task, but no other endeavor better conveys the certainty that this is what life is about; this is why we are here ...

I truly believe that in making honorable choices about our lives, we can acknowledge sacrifices we make and the risks we take and recognize that what others view as losses and foolhardiness are the nourishment upon which our spirits thrive. I certainly know what I am giving up when I make these choices, but the sacrifice evolves into the courage to move forward even when my convictions conflict with my career goals. As others have done before me, as many are quietly doing now, I believe we can remain true to our convictions: We can choose ethics over advancement and never regret the choice.

Reading: Freedom – Denise Levertov (adapted)

Perhaps we human
have wanted God most as witness
to acts of choice
made in solitude. Acts of mercy,
of sacrifice. Wanted
that great single eye to see us,
steadfast as we flowed by.
Yet there are other acts
not even vanity
or anxious hope to please, knows of--
bone doings, leaps of nerve, heart-
cries of communion: if there is bliss
it has
been already
and will be: utterly.
Blind
to itself, flooded
with otherness.

Reading: *from Man's Search for Meaning* – Viktor Frankl

In spite of the enforced physical and mental primitiveness of life in a concentration camp, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. Sensitive people were able to retreat from their terrible surroundings to a life of inner riches and spiritual freedom ...

A thought crossed my mind: I didn't even know if my wife were still alive. I knew only one thing: Love goes very far beyond the physical person of the beloved. It finds its deepest meaning in our spiritual being, our inner self. Whether or not [the beloved] is actually present ceases to be of importance. "Set me as a seal upon thy heart, for love is as strong as death" (Song of Songs 8:6).

One evening, when we were resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds to see the sunset! Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate gray mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner declared, "How beautiful the world could be."

Sermon: Fences and Freedom

The chain link fence at the correctional facility is tall, taller than most of the chain link fences that we see surrounding schoolyards or marking the end of the field in a neighborhood baseball park. The top of the tall

fence curls over to cover part of the area of the correctional facility, making climbing the fence from inside the enclosure much more difficult than if the fence were standing straight up. As you climbed it, you would have to gradually hold more and more of your body's weight as you climbed toward an almost horizontal position, meaning that your fingers enmeshed in the fence would need to hold your entire body's weight. When I was younger, that may have been a possibility, but now, the fence may as well reach to the heavens. There's no way I could scale it.

You can see the fence very clearly at the front of the facility, where it joins with an administrative building through which one must enter to gain access to the grounds. But near the back of the facility, the fence is harder to see. Not because the distance is so great — it's actually not very far at all. It's harder to see because there's a mountain against the back of the facility, a mountain that seems at times to envelope the fence. But once you gain access to the grounds and move toward the mountain, you can see that the fence is still there and still formidable, although not quite as much when set against the mountain.

The mountain towers over the grounds, but like a big gentle father almost seems to cradle the collection of red brick buildings of varying sizes enclosed by the fence, that fence that is so unlike those schoolyard fences I am accustomed to. Those small fences that seemed somewhat large when I was a kid that I would hurriedly climb over in gym class to retrieve a homerun baseball. We had to hurry because we weren't actually allowed to climb over the fence. The gym teachers actually expected us to waste precious moments of gym class running all the way around the fence to get the homerun balls. Like that was going to happen. We could take minutes to walk from our desks to the chalkboard to do a math problem but those baseball field fences: up, over, and back — 15 seconds, tops.

Those small fences of my youth that I was never sure were quite tall enough to contain Abby, one of the family dogs who helped raise me. Abby, a boxer, meaning she had a thick chest, was very smart, loved kids, and slobbered a lot. My siblings and I used to take her over to a nearby baseball park surrounded by one of those small fences so that she could run free off of her leash. She was the fastest dog I had even seen, even to this day, and I always thought that if she really wanted to, she could have jumped over the fence at her will. But that would have led her away from us, which was never what she wanted. Instead she would line up at the other end of the field, run full blast toward us until we were sure she was going to crash into us and necessitate a trip to the emergency room, then veer off like a fighter jet in the sky kicking up grass and dirt in her wake, eyes mischievous, tongue hanging out of her mouth, slobber flying.

I had been inside those small, schoolyard-type fences many times, but this fence is different — this tall one that curls over covering part of what's enclosed. There are kids inside, kids the same age as I was when I was chasing baseballs and dodging my dog. But these kids aren't there by choice, nor are they behind the fence to be taught the value of physical activity. These kids are sentenced to be there. They're offenders living at a correctional facility about an hour away from us, here in Minnesota. Their days and nights and weekends are spent behind the fence, shuttling in groups back and forth between the various red brick buildings where they eat, sleep, go to school, where some go to chapel, and engage in different activities.

They're there because they broke the law and got caught and while they are there, the staff tries to help them accrue life skills that will help them avoid returning to that facility or one like it once they're released. They are there as punishment for breaking the law, but they're also there, hopefully, to transform their lives from ones spent on the run, or draped in violence, or fogged in a cloud of substance abuse, to lives spent contributing to the health of their communities, of caring for the children they have or hope to have, of education and family and careers. Their rehabilitation rotates between convincing the kids to take accountability for their past misdeeds and creating in their minds the kind of vision and belief needed for them to go back to the same neighborhoods that they came from, with all of the temptations, and make different choices, choices that they may not have even really known about before being locked up. The focus seems to be to free their minds to

think beyond whatever paradigms they existed in beforehand so that they can imagine and create a different future.

I'm there, for eight sessions, the fifth of which is this afternoon, to lead just a few of them through an *Exploring Your Spirituality* curriculum. This is a continuation of an extension of Unity Church's ministry into correctional facilities, a continuation of re-working the popular Unitarian Universalist Association curriculum, *Building Your Own Theology*, for use in settings other than our congregations. Melissa Ziemer, last year's intern, did this with adult women offenders at Shakopee, and I'm trying it with juvenile male offenders at this facility.

The *Building Your Own Theology* curriculum guides groups in leaning into the ambiguous winds of defining and clarifying the liberal religious theologies that we live but sometimes have trouble putting to words. It deals with ethics and experience, with human nature and God, with making meaning and making credos. It's based on the assumption that we are free to determine our own beliefs — to develop and state them as we wish — and that working in a group to mine the depths of our own life experiences can help shore up our own self-awareness and public witness of what's at the core of our beliefs. Freedom is the central value espoused in the curriculum — not so much by overt expression, but by the subtle lures innate in the exercises that encourage participants to expand their minds through open-ended processes of deepening and clarifying beliefs and experiences.

The freedom assumed in the curriculum reminds me of the approach of the main character, Pi, in Yann Martel's absolutely fabulous novel, *The Life of Pi*. Pi is a little boy from India who was raised Hindu. In the course of his young life he finds himself exposed at various times to Islam and Christianity as well, and as his frame of experience expands to include meaningful encounters with all three faiths, he decides that he is indeed a follower of all three faiths. Hindu and Muslim and Christian leaders all try to get him to pick one but he doesn't. His experience is that all three add meaning to his life and choosing one and excluding two seems like an unnecessary net loss to him. Pi built his own theology from the religious traditions and practices around him, and he sort of built it as he went, collecting planks of belief from the faiths he encountered and feeling more than free to do so, even in the face of authorities who felt otherwise. His determination of his own beliefs clarified as his choices expanded. And that's even before the main storyline of the novel in which he finds himself stranded in a boat in the middle of the ocean with a tiger. It really is a fun book, and if no one has checked it out it should be in the library upstairs, or a library anywhere, probably.

Pi's natural interest in religion led him to experience an expansion of choices, from one to three, to be exact. And used those three options to create a fourth which was the one he actually choose. Pi sort of stumbled across this expansion of choices, but the intentional introduction of more choices into a given situation, which seems to be the focus of rehabilitation efforts at the correctional facility, is the height of relational ethics in the very Unitarian Universalist-influenced school of thought known as process theology. The ethic is not to make the decisions for someone else, which would necessitate a limiting of their individual freedom. Rather, introducing more options into the lives of those we're in relationship with enhances their right to make free choices because there are more options to choose from. The term creativity is often used to describe this process in the sense that it involves creating more options for other people to explore in the manifestations of their freedom. It's giving job training to people who are having trouble finding employment. It's giving resources to people with little for them to use in ways they see necessary.

This is important in working with the kids at the facility because this process holds considerable theological value for these kids. While the Unitarian Universalist curriculum that we're working with is open-ended in terms of an individual's theological destination, it is not at all open-ended in terms of what its values are in the process of determining that theology: freedom and creativity in terms of facilitating an expansion of choices. This is a powerful implicit theology in this popular curriculum, and it's why the curriculum can be a powerful tool in our larger world. And it's an example of how sometimes our implicit theologies are easier to identify and just as powerful as our explicit ones.

We're seeing this expansion of choices being lived out in the work of Unity Church's Anti-Racism Team right now. Like many churches in our faith, Unity seeks to understand how it can move toward becoming a more fundamentally anti-racist church. Not just a church that is tolerant, or welcomes diversity, but a church whose very identity includes a commitment to dismantling structural, institutional racism wherever it exists, both inside and outside of these walls. Part of this work, then, involves some institutional soul-searching, some deep explorations of our history and current reality that can elucidate that status of racism and anti-racism in our church structures. The Anti-Racism Team has been doing that work for a while now, and their ongoing presentations during the month of April will offer the church much needed information, study, and some ideas for the future that can help form a tighter bond between the ideal of anti-racism and Unity Church. The uncovering of our history through the lens of anti-racism introduces into the dream of being an anti-racist church the hidden factors and experiences that may be inhibiting our movement toward our dreams. The introduction of this information can only help increase our freedom to more fully and confidently move toward that church that we dream of.

The boys at Red Wing value freedom a great deal. Of course, they value their physical freedom, probably now more than ever since they don't have much right now. But even given that, the ones that I'm working with have expressly valued their own right to determine their beliefs and at the same time, expressly valued each other's right to determine beliefs that are different than their own. This makes our Unitarian Universalist approach to exploring spiritual issues particularly valuable for some of these kids, as they're OK with not agreeing with their neighbor about religious ideas. Their explicit theologies do not need to be the same. But the implicit ones do.

The ethics of freedom and of creativity are their common values in our time together. They're what lead to mutual respect and to the expansion of ideas that occurs when these kids share about their lives with each other. They find commonalities in their stories, in their beliefs about God, in their understandings of what religion is, in the experiences of great joy and great sorrow in their lives, in their remembrances of bad decisions they've made, in their recollections of people who've inspired them. Their frame of reference is expanded by each other as they listen to one's ideas and then bounce off of those with their own.

They do this for each other better than I, the facilitator, do it for them. In one instance I was saying to them how I believe that who we are today is not just defined by our past actions, but by our future dreams — that what we hope will happen, what we commit to working toward in the future, helps create who we are in this very moment. One of the boys looked at me and said, "It doesn't work like that in here." And he seemed hesitant to engage in the next exercise that involved in part plotting on a time line of our lives some events that we hoped would happen in the future. He didn't really seem to be thinking about the future and my rationale wasn't doing anything for him.

But as the other kids started to share about what they hoped would happen in the future. How they hoped to get clean and get free, to get jobs and get girlfriends, to get educations and cars and write poetry and be artists, his demeanor slightly shifted, and he began jotting a few things down in his timeline. And by the end of the exercise, he had some things to look forward to in the future. He had some dreams, and they were instilled in him by the dreams of other boys in the facility. They helped create in his mind, the conditions of creativity and freedom needed to imagine a future so different than the life he has lived to this point.

And yet even with this, even with what appears to be active engagement in the exercises and generous contributions to the discussions, attendance is gradually dropping off. Most of the boys aren't attending anymore. One of the Chaplains at the facility said this might happen and indicated that it happens with some regularity — the boys attend the first few offerings of something then stop coming. This is an option for them; they do not have to attend and the class does compete with visitation and recreation time.

I'm sure there are many other reasons for the drop off, too. This is my first time facilitating this series and there are some techniques specific to working with incarcerated kids that I need to learn. The sort of contemplative, comfortably ambiguous approach to religion and ethics that seems to be at home here in our faith is unusual to these boys. People of faith who approach them, at least from outside of the facility, usually have more answers than questions, and that's not really our approach. They're also teens, I have to remind myself, and talking about spirituality, well, that's not high on the priority list of many teens, whether at the correctional facility or at a teen hangout a mile away. That's reflected in many adults, too. I'm flabbergasted when people don't want to discuss theology but that seems to be the case sometimes.

Yet, just like for many of Unitarian Universalist adults who have gone through the formal *Building Your Theology* curriculum, I think the simpler versions of the exercises that these kids work through may take a while to really settle in. It's not as though adults who do this curriculum do it once and find all of their questions answered. It has to be repeated. The mind and our choices are always being fenced in by the limits of our own experiences. There's always so much that we don't know, always so many trees in the ever-deepening forests of our faith that we can't climb all of them. We get to enjoy the beauty of a couple, get to see the heightened clarity of existence from the top of two or three, then we climb back down and root around in the earth until another tree captures our imagination and we slowly and sometimes painfully climb up, to take a peek.

It's similar to how knowledge often leads to a hunger for more knowledge and how, whether its about history or health or science or poetry or photography or yoga or computers, the more we learn, the more we realize how much we don't know. These kids have no exposure to our way of doing religion. Maybe they got all they could in our brief time together. Maybe it needs to settle in. And maybe they'll find other ways to imagine with freedom and creativity better, more fulfilling lives than those they lead now. That's a gospel we implicitly share with each other all the time. It's a gospel we've got to share with the world. It's a gospel rooted in relational ethics of freedom and creativity. It's a gospel that our fore bearers worked very, very hard, and sometimes gave their lives, to place in our hands. It's a gospel we should hold dearly even as we send it forth, for so many in the world can find it helpful in scaling whatever fences contain the freedom to think, to wonder, to explain, to revise, to engage the holy on our most meaningful terms.

It's a gospel espoused by one of Unity's former ministers, Wallace Robbins, with words that I know are very dear to many of your hearts, and whose words I'll use to close this sermon:

We dare not fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association. As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith; and, in honest difference, we order our lives together.

Amen.