

## **"Planting Peace"**

**5 June 2005  
Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Bill Neely  
Worship Associate: Ray McGee**

### **Minister's Prayer:**

For the sun that warms the land and the grass that covers the ground,  
For flowers that brighten tables of food and for that food that nourishes us and those whom we care  
for,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One.

For moments of peace, of quiet, of rest, for warm blankets on cool nights,  
For art that inspires, for thinkers who inquire, for prophets who never seem to tire,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One.

For forgiveness, for redemption, for an eternal love more constant than self-judgment,  
For moments of being at home in our skin,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One

For the ties of love that bind us to each other,  
Even when those ties create in us pain because of another's hardships,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One.

For the enduring call of community  
That again and again brings seekers together to journey forward,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One.

For each on the journey, wherever we are on the path,  
For the glimmer of you in our eyes, and the dream of your eternity in our hearts,  
May our gratitude be bountiful, Enduring One.

Amen.

**Reading: *from Teaching Your Children About God* – David J. Wolpe  
(*found in Spiritual Literacy*)**

There is a wonderful Chasidic story about the child of a rabbi who used to wander in the woods. At first his father let him wander, but over time he became concerned. The woods were dangerous. The father didn't know what lurked there.

He decided to discuss the matter with his child. One day he took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder, why do you go there?"

The boy said to his father, "I go there to find God."

"That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. "I am glad you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?"

"Yes," the boy answered, "but I'm not."

### **Reading: Silence – Carol Wilkinson**

The trees flow up, they open their arms,  
tuning forks receiving  
silence. It washes through them, vibrates  
their open frames,  
soundless eternal discourse between  
stars and trees. They are sending it back,  
out to its natal place, to the turning  
arms of nebulae. Infinite  
ritual of rest and return, a colloquy  
that keeps repeating: all  
is well all is  
well

### **Sermon: Planting Peace – Bill Neely**

Flashlights off, after dark, we walked deep into the heart of the nighttime forest. Seeking a campfire circle that few of us had seen only once, we ten or so middle-school age kids walked slowly down a trail that led us deeper and deeper into a thickening web of trees that blocked off the light from most of the stars. With night as our guide, we tripped over roots and stumbled over rocks. We knew we strayed from the trail when our feet no longer felt the rocky, root-laden ground of the path and instead felt the soft cushions of decaying leaves that marked areas where feet seldom tread.

Deeper into the forest we walked, moving further and further away from the cabins where we slept, from the main lodge where we ate, and from the huge green clearings where we played. Daring each other to keep the flashlights off, we brave and intrepid pre-teen explorers of the night stared intensely through the darkness at each tree trunk for a yellow triangular marker that told us to turn left. Finding the marker, a triangle of dark gray against the deep black of the tree trunk, we turned left and made our way down a short path to the campfire circle.

We sat on a circle of benches that surrounded a fire pit and waited for the others. We sat and waited and looked up at the tops of the trees and the nighttime sky above them. The clearing that we sat in on the ground led to a clearing high above as the dark branches of the tall trees that encircled us

framed a window to the stars through which we could look up and out and toward the heavens. Our eyes had no choice but to drawn to the light and we had no choice but to lie back on the benches and breathe in the dancing branches and twinkling stars. We were silent and humble, tender and peaceful beneath those trees.

When the rest of the campers and the counselors joined us, we sat up and squeezed together on the benches as the leaders began the opening service at that summer camp. They lit the campfire and led us in singing, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Held in the enduring fortress of those majestic trees and that endless sky, seldom has a hymn felt so true. Seldom has the Holy felt so encompassing and peaceful. Seldom has a ritual spoken to the peace we knew in those moments when we felt imminently cradled by the transcendent beauty that encircled us. Seldom has that beauty felt so available for all. And yet, common are the elements that led us to those holy, peaceful moments.

They were common for us, anyway. At that camp at that time in our lives, the earth, the sky, and the trees surrounded us that night and all summer long. What are often thought of as natural resources became spiritual resources for us as their generous beauty and timeless majesty repeatedly linked us to deeper understandings of peace than many of us had experienced before. Their common abundance was uncommonly meaningful because of how connected they made us feel to each other, to the world, and to God.

An abundance of nature often has a way of bringing about those feelings, of making peace in our lives. I know from conversations with many of you here and in other places that some of our holiest, most humble, most peaceful moments are enjoyed outside. That there are times in the forest when it feels as though the water of wild streams runs through our veins and the trees swaying in the wind are bowing their greetings to us. Times when bobbing along with the waves in the ocean seems to keep the same rhythm as our heartbeats and watching ducks waddle around by a pond allows us to view the everyday concerns of our lives from a better perspective. Times when the most meaning that we can make out of our days here is better intuited by ambling along a trail, away from the comforts of civilization, encompassed by the comforts of creation.

But as with everything, there is a shadow side of that, as well. Particularly when our relationship with the natural world falls further and further away from a spiritually-based one and more toward one aimed at squeezing as much economic gain out of a parcel of land as possible, the warring instincts in our beings that Rob spoke of last week run roughshod over our inclinations toward peace. Access to nature and conflict over the use of her resources has long laid pavement on various roads to war. Whether over water use, access to the jewels of the deep earth, the availability of oil, or any of the innumerable struggles over natural resources, the use of the environment seeds or nourishes many of the world's conflicts. Keep scratching the surface of any aggression anywhere in the world and before you scratch too deeply, you're likely to find access to water, oil, timber, or land contributing to the tensions and the violence.

The Nobel Committee has recognized this, as the recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize was the Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai. The first woman from Africa to ever receive the award, Maathai's suitability for the honor was not based on any direct negotiations that she performed between warring factions. While she now serves in the Kenyan government, the principle work that led to her receiving the honor was agricultural and her current post does not involve the traditional areas of diplomacy that one might assume is the focus of the work of a Peace Prize recipient. While she has

earned numerous degrees, the fields of those degrees (Biology and Anatomy) might lead one to conclude that if she were to win a Nobel Prize it would be in Medicine, not in Peace.

Indeed, Maathai's path to the Peace Prize took an unusual route. In the early to mid 1970s, she saw the increasingly detrimental effects of deforestation in Kenya. The demand for wood, the race to develop rural areas, and the desire for short-term agricultural gains all contributed to the rapid depletion of Kenya's forests. From 1950 to 2000 Kenya lost 90 percent of her forests. In the middle of that period, Maathai saw her country's people spiraling into great poverty. With fewer trees came fewer natural resources, fewer areas that could sustain long-term agriculture, fewer wildlife habitats, and greater distances that people had to travel to acquire necessities of life. Maathai knew that women in particular had to travel further and further for wood to use in cooking and that because women in general performed a greater amount of the physical labor in village life, women were bearing most of the hardships of deforestation. Poor people bore these hardships in general, as the short-term agricultural policies and rapid development of rural areas created wealth that seemed to line only the already bulging pockets of the country's elite. As poor people lost access to the natural resources surrounding them, or as those resources were destroyed, they became poorer and in village life, that meant women, in particular, led harder and harder lives.

Seeing this, Wangari Maathai planted trees: nine trees, to be exact, in her backyard in 1977. She also resigned from the University of Nairobi, where she was the first female professor on the faculty, and founded the Green Belt Movement. The aim of the Green Belt Movement was to end the poverty that deforestation was causing by empowering Kenyans, especially women, to reforest the land and create more equitable access to natural resources. Almost 30 years later, having survived governmental leaders who used violence and detainment to try and silence her criticism of some state-endorsed development proposals, Maathai's Green Belt Movement has planted between 15 and 30 million trees throughout Kenya. The movement has produced income for more than 80,000 Kenyans and has taken root in more than 30 African countries. She also has people planting trees in the United States and in Haiti. And each tree planted changes lives.

With each tree planted in Kenya, a woman has wood to burn to cook food. With each tree planted soil erosion lessens and nutrients begin to collect in the land, making agriculture sustainable and profitable. Each tree planted provides shade from intense heat. Each tree planted contributes to the presence of water in the region's ecosystem. Each tree planted returns some of the wildlife to the area, restoring the eco-balance. Each tree planted becomes a living symbol of recovery, of a destructive past being redeemed for a peaceful, healthy future. Each tree planted becomes a signpost of hope, of a re-orientation from a past infected by greed and dominance toward a tomorrow enlivened by community and cooperation.

In his incredible novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, James Baldwin sees trees in this redemptive way. One of his main characters, Gabriel, finds himself returning to his mother's house after a night out on the town. His mother is deathly sick and he feels compelled to care for her, but he can't seem to stay away from what they both see as a sinful lifestyle. He enjoys sex and enjoys alcohol, and enjoys them both in a rather excessive way, and it is his mother's dying wish that he turn away from these excesses. On his way to his mother's house after one night of enjoying both a great deal, he passes a tree on a gentle rise that signals that he will be with his mother soon. Seeing the tree, guilt racks Gabriel. He falls on the ground in agony over his sinful life. He clutches the tree and sheds hot tears onto its roots as he feels utterly, completely without hope.

But in the moments that follow, he receives the conversion that he sought. Lying under the tree, feeling completely disconnected from God and his mother and all holiness, he hears the singing of his mother in his head. The singing lets him feel his everlasting connection to the holiness he sought, his spirit bumps up, and he knows himself as both a sinner and a child of God. For Baldwin, seeing the tree signaled Gabriel's descent, embracing the tree, signaled his resurrection.

Baldwin was mirroring a scene from the Eighth book of Augustine's Confessions. Augustine was the great 4th and 5th century Christian thinker whose writings became one of the foundation stones for all of Christian theology. Augustine, like the character Gabriel, was tormented by what he thought were the sins of his life. Desire seemed to be the great sin for Augustine, and he realized that while he could influence his actions, he could not control his desires — those impulses would always be there. The weight of this awareness crushes Augustine to the point of him wailing and crying beneath a fig tree, alone, in a garden. He then hears the voice of a young child, a boy or a girl, he isn't sure, calling him to read Scripture. He does, and the passage he randomly turns to assures him of his ultimate place with God. Again, the tree receives the embrace of the distraught person, and the tree impacts the person's perceptions so that Gabriel and Augustine could move beyond their crushing moments of crisis.

Now, of course, neither life was perfect after their encounters with the trees. Both the fictitious Gabriel and actual Augustine led hard lives and made good and bad choices after their individual conversion. Through our eyes, these days, many of us aren't sure exactly what the conversion was to. But the stories of each individual, from their own perspectives, identify the tree first with descent into misery, then with ascent into more holy lives.

Which is a pattern that we can see with Wangari Maathai's response to the deforestation of Kenya. Her simple idea to plant trees has signaled and fueled the ascent of the lives of countless women and men in Kenya. With a growing abundance of natural resources for use in sustaining life, Kenya has also been able to turn toward greater peace. The country has become increasingly democratic and formerly sparring tribes and religious groups are finding themselves more able to equitably share the country's resources instead of warring over them. Kenya still has a way to go, something that Maathai is more than aware of, but Kenya has also come a long way toward peace, a peace that was planted almost 30 years ago.

Maathai describes the success of an African state as a three-legged stool. One leg is democracy, including basic human rights. One leg is peace and security, and the last leg is sustainable agriculture. Without all three legs, the stool, or the state, will eventually fall. Peacemaking is commonly thought of to involve security and democracy, but the sustainable agriculture piece that Maathai speaks of, and the environmentalism that goes along with that, is seldom understood as essential to a peaceful state. As our understandings of conflict and war grow, however, we are able to see and understand nuances that formerly escaped our notice. Maathai, has identified and acted upon a very important one, and she has convinced others. Ole Danbolt Mjos, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, said in Maathai's presentation speech, "Environmental protection has become yet another path to peace."

Maathai's strategy and dedication has proven his words accurate, and have proven her a more than worthy recipient of the honor. Her story has also proven to be quite compelling in the larger media

world, too. Seldom has researching a sermon been this easy, although, as with many popular stories, the exact details about her life and work seem to vary some from source to source. It has been a pleasure, though, with the tone and tenor of today's news, to clip and read numerous articles honoring this creative, courageous prophet as she reaches across the ocean and halfway across the country to inspire and challenge us with her ideas.

Yet honoring her is simply not enough. It is not enough for her or for the world we all share. Honoring her may make us feel inspired, but that inspiration must lead to action. Maathai herself has urged people who wish to truly honor her, the Kenyan women, and Africa as a continent, to do so by following her example: by planting a tree.

Which is what we are called to do, if we are to make the most meaning out of her story. We should all plant a tree and do so in community. And if we're unable to do so, we should support the sort of community-level, sustainable agricultural programs that implement the sorts of programs that remind us of Wangari Maathai. We should do so because hopefully, the trees that we plant will live on longer than us and will provide sustenance, beauty, and inspiration for the generations that follow. We should do so not just to honor Maathai, but to also show faith in and dedication to the more and more creative processes of peace making that thousands upon thousands upon thousands of everyday prophets engage in everyday. Prophets in this church, in this community, in this country, and all over the earth, who, faced with war, despair, and destruction, respond by planting and nourishing the seeds of peace. Bold, everyday prophets, who plant these seeds it seems almost as an act of defiance in a world of conflict, as a way to show that one need not mimic destruction, as a way to evidence that even in a world the sometimes seems obsessed with conquest and violence, one can resist. One can creatively harness the power of peace and change the nature of existence for people far and wide. One can not just hold, but act with a vision of nourishment and sustenance for all.

Sometimes in these days of conflict and fear, our vision seems as limited as was the vision of we ten or so middle-school age kids stumbling through the dark forest many years ago. But this is precisely when we need to look up and out and upon the beauty that surrounds us so that we'll begin to understand, again, the enduring holiness whose existence we share for just a little while. So that we'll begin to think again about our place in the great span of existence, and act with the humility that awareness affords. So that we'll think about those coming after us, about those whose lives depend upon the choices that we make today. So that we'll plant the seeds of peace and community that truly honor the loving Source from which we all blossom, and to which we all return. The Koran says, "Even on the eve of the end of the world, plant a tree." We're not on the eve of the end of the world, but we are on the eve of a better one. May the seeds we sow during our days be seeds of peace, seeds of promise, and seeds of faith.

Amen.