

“EXPECT DELAYS”

Sermon by Dane Smith

Unity Unitarian Church, Sept. 3, 2017

We can give thanks on this Labor Day weekend, for lots of things of course, but how about for the approaching end of road construction season! And to the thousands of our hard-working sisters and brothers, many of them union members who are paid decently after centuries of struggling for labor rights, who've been toiling on our streets and transportation systems all summer. I also want to thank them and MnDOT signage people for providing the inspiration for this year's sermon. Last May, as I was fretting and fuming my way to an appointment in Minneapolis, listening to MPR and in a state of chronic despair about all the latest outrages perpetrated in this horrifying Reign of Error, simmering with anger about new obstructions and reversals of progress on human rights and racial equity and environmental justice on every front, worried sick about the direction of our state and our country and our big blue fast-warming marble, wondering what on earth might be the theme to give the sermon this year, how I could possibly cook some optimistic stew out of all these toxic ingredients, I saw this gigantic orange-and black sign and it hit me like a blinding flash, a sign from God.

EXPECT....DELAYS!

The analogy's not perfect, infrastructure repair is a good thing and this theme connotes acceptance or resignation when we actually also need to be persistent and energetic in our resistance, but it's also pretty good on a couple of levels. You see these signs not only for routine road work but on the interstates when

some reckless fool or road-raging bully has gotten himself and others involved in a terrible accident up ahead. And what do we do when we see those signs? We persist, we stay the course. The signs do not say, "Give Up, Go Home, You'll Never Get There!" Instead, we call or text ahead, when fully stopped in traffic of course, or we think about taking another route next time. We might even consider changing our life and our routine to rely less on the dad-blasted, climate-wrecking internal combustion engine. I suspect most of us sigh or swear, but it's not normal to turn around and go home, and it's not healthy to fly into an insane road rage ourselves, or to physically attack people the way the antifascist gangs did in California recently, or blame Gov. Dayton and the Metro Council, as one terribly errant group has propagandized. Road construction and pendulum swings in the pursuit of justice are normal, accidents happen, stuff happens. We bear it with a grin, tune the radio to something besides the latest outrage, and find refuge in Dave Brubeck or Grover Washington, or Debussy, or a Sirius channel actually called CHILL. You reason to yourself that fixing stuff right always takes time, and there's a season for everything. As that great 60s band The Byrds advised, stealing from the Book of Ecclesiastes, there's a time to build up and a time to tear down, a time to go fast, a time to sit in traffic, a time for great leaps forward in human rights and socio-economic equity and renewable energy and a time when forces obstruct this progress. The whole larger truth is that we will get there, or more realistically, continue our progress.

The "Expect Delays" theme runs through all the world's great religious traditions, as humans await all the various salvations they have imagined for themselves. Having been raised on the Old Testament as Jehovah's Witness, the story that leaps to my mind is the Israelites after slavery in Egypt wandered the wilderness for 40 years. And it was so incredibly fitting, spooky actually, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King alluded to this very idea, of patience and expecting delay, of never seeing the Promised Land himself, in the weeks before his assassination, 50 years ago next June. He did not live to see the impossible dream of an African-American First Lady and her husband leading our nation, occupying a White House that was built with the slave labor of ancestors like hers, and presiding with extraordinary intelligence and diligence and dignity over a country that was built,

not entirely but to a large extent, on exploitation of labor and poorly compensated labor. Alas, in so many other ways, for black and white and for far too many Americans, the Promised Land seems as far away as ever.

Part of the problem with this Promised Land imagery is the illusion it feeds of there being some actual final Utopian destination, after which we forever dwell in a Paradise of equality, harmony and peace. We forget that the problems we solve always seem to create new problems and every generation tends to make the same mistakes or new mistakes. We forget how tribalism and the tendency of humans to take unfair advantage of other humans runs deep and dark in the human spirit. This fight for justice against ever new challenges will never end.

Extremists and fundamentalists dwell in a mindset dominated by the certainty of apocalypse and utopia. I remember as a young Jehovah's Witness, fervently believing that we were in the end times and being taught in the 1960s that the Battle of Armageddon would arrive in 1975, and all the non JW's would be wiped out and paradise and eternal life for us who had The Truth would be restored on earth. I remember taking enormous comfort in that and thinking as a little kid that this would give me possession of the toys of all those dead families. There's what's wrong with people, we are selfish to the core. And although I had my Unitarian epiphany at 17, and left the JW's behind, I was occasionally nervous all through 1975.

Our Unitarian Universalist founders, highly educated Humanists and products of the Great Enlightenment, founded a new faith that turned away from waiting for salvation, and on the idea that we ought to try and improve our human condition ourselves, and not wait for Armageddon, the Second Coming and elevation to the Pearly Gates. Nevertheless, we too can be prone to, if not apocalypticism, certainly utopianism. We set ourselves up for failure, by promising too much and get a little too starry-eyed about the ability of our democracy to fix the human condition once and for all. Even when we can demonstrate with abundant facts the remarkable impact of progressive public policy over the last two centuries, when we promise too much and expect too much, people and voters get disappointed with our results, lose faith in democracy, and embrace the latest

Utopia promised by the demagogue. Outright racism had too much to do with recent outcomes. But a failure to deliver the goods to white working class voters, and an urban liberal disregard for the legitimate interests of rural people was a major factor too. My organization has been working on a Minnesota Rural Equity Project for about a year now, and we're trying to put together a One Minnesota policy framework that emphasizes our interdependence and that responds in good faith to Greater Minnesota's legitimate concerns.

We can remain optimistic, however, about our ability to bend the arc of history toward justice and about that inevitability. We do just need to remember the first part of that favorite quote, about the arc being long, meaning slow. Inertia is our perpetual enemy, but there's another side to inertia. People often think of inertia only as the force that resists change, but in fact, look it up, the law of inertia also applies to the fact that things in motion tend to stay in motion and there is every reason to believe that momentum toward equity and environmental preservation will carry us forward.

Until about eight months ago, inertia was with us and we were making progress in this nation and state on many fronts, and faster than many of us thought we ever would. In Minnesota since 2013 we've undone about \$1 billion of annual tax giveaways benefitting mostly those at the very top, while improving early childhood education dramatically. We've raised pay for lowest-paid workers and indexed it for inflation, we set audacious goals and are rapidly accelerating toward renewable energy, I'm telling you, solar panels and windmills are going up everywhere out there, I've seen them. We've reduced the uninsured rate by half, shaved about four or five percentage points off the state poverty rate, rejected efforts to suppress the vote, and we legalized marriage for all couples in love with each other. Racial equity became a primary and discrete item in the state budget and private-sector and bi-partisan consensus has improved on that front. None of that seemed possible as recently as 2012, and most of this has not yet been undone.

I don't have enough sugar to coat everything bad that's happening. A whole year of sermons could be devoted to listing the new threats to equity and

environment on every front. But everywhere we are finding other routes around the obstructions. Philando Castille's killer was acquitted but police departments everywhere are replacing so-called "warrior" training with new emphasis on peace-making, to avoid escalating the situation. The president may have pulled out of the Paris climate agreement, but progress toward renewable energy sources is accelerating, because previous efforts by progressive folks helped make it profitable. So profitable that there is now an actual conservative group in this state that's promoting renewables. And of us think attempted assault on the safety net and basic health and retirement protections will result in a tsunami of support for Medicare for All and public financing of universal health care entitlement, which so many of the more equitable nations have.

We hear sometimes that Unity Unitarian Church, this specific church, is too temporal, too caught up in the events of the day, not reflective or contemplative enough, not focused on the individual spiritual needs, too edgy on race and equity and environmentalism. I don't think that's true or fair, actually. I keep a close eye on the content and themes of our Sunday services, and all the other things this church does to nurture our souls, and I think we do an impressive job of balancing action with spiritual reflection. And being a rather political animal, I think there's room to do more.

And I remind us that this faith's roots, its essence, is deep in the abolitionist movement and women's suffrage and peace movements of the 19th Century, along with Quakers and many others. Ours IS a humanist awakening to the idea that this is one family of humans, that God does not have a chosen people, that neither Armageddon nor Utopia are likely to come from above, and that we've got to make things better for ourselves and our descendants in this life time, right now. That's our faith, our creed. Go to our national website, uua.org, and you will see that the pursuit of justice, on seven specific themes, is emblazoned everywhere. This is who we are.

But in the meantime, how do we cope personally? Google for this and you will find thousands of links to great ideas. A recent Psychology Today article suggests, quiet walks in the woods, getting off the grid, involvement with a good

non-profit, connection with others around positive purpose, all good stuff, and I'm sure most of us have tried to find ways. Tina Fey came up with a good one on Saturday Night Live recently.

After a good rant in which she observed that unarmed Native American protesters at Standing Rock were shot with rubber bullets, while Nazis and Klansmen in Charlottesville were allowed to march unchallenged with automatic weapons, Tina showed on camera exactly how she coped. She plopped down a heavily frosted sheet cake, bought from a bakery owned by Jewish person or a person of color, and ate the entire thing, also dipping a grilled cheese sandwich into the frosting and wolfing that down as well. I find variations of that work fairly well but seriously here's a less fattening idea. Let's keep fighting in the most loving and constructive ways we possibly can, even showering the people we don't like very much with love.

I think I'm getting a little better at this. My extended family of cousins and nieces and nephews all live in Texas and Louisiana and are pretty much all at odds with us on just about everything. These are the folks to whom Redneck Liberal Trae Crowder makes his appeal. But Trae also takes urban northern sophisticates to task for condescension and arrogance, for failing to recognize and embrace, much less understand, all that's good about the South and rural America. I've gradually learned, I think, how not to get into dumb arguments with my kinfolk. I've convinced my Cousin Bubba, an archetype of the species who plays it for maximum effect, and who depends rather entirely right now on Medicare and Social Security, that destroying these economic security programs will not be in his interest. I'm not sure whether it's my influence or not, but he's coming around. A couple years ago, after seeing one too many offensive racist e-mails, Mary and I were tempted to cut off the relationship. We didn't, and if anything, we held him closer, kept engaging and of course we were in constant contact with these folks as Hurricane Harvey battered their homes this last week. One cousin and her husband actually came to Minnesota this summer for the first time, and they were impressed by how clean and prosperous this socialist hell-hole actually is. Together we found things we liked, such as the new series, Ozark. Let's not forget that in other aspects of their lives, these people we disagree with are often

doing wonderful things. I try to remember to say “Love ya Bubba!” everytime we hang up, and I say that to the other family members too, at least once in every conversation. Jesus said a mild answer turns away wrath and showering people we love and even those we don’t necessarily like, with love, is the best thing.

I am by birth and heritage a product of white Anglo-Saxon southern conquest, extermination, domination, privilege and exploitation. I have ancestors who came to Virginia and the Carolinas in the 1600s, who fought with Andrew Jackson, who displaced and fought native Americans and Mexicans, who fought for the preservation of slavery, and I have a maternal ancestor who stitched together the first confederate flag in Brown County Texas. My mother was told by her father that she could date anybody she wanted except for a black, and he used the N word, or a Yankee. I played cowboys and Indians as a kid, although I did prefer to be Tonto rather than the Lone Ranger. I remember being informed by another Texas kid, growing up in Alaska, that despite what we might be learning in school, the Confederacy was cool and that Robert E. Lee was a noble man, compared to the uncouth Ulysses Grant. Amazingly, my parents didn’t buy into any of this, and were part of that sizeable white minority in the South that has always quietly embraced progress toward civil rights. My father told me Martin Luther King was a great hero, and in word and deed he embraced the diversity around him, volunteering prodigiously in the last 20 years of his life for Habitat for Humanity in Corpus Christi. Their conversion in the early 50s from a Southern Baptist tradition was actually progress, because Jehovah’s Witnesses, were fully integrated and one of the most embracing of the various fundamentalist Christian sects. When I was just 7 or 8 years old, my mother took me to see perhaps one of the most important movies ever made about Texas. It’s called “Giant,” based on a great book by Edna Ferber and I recommend it. It’s sprawling 1956 technicolor epic, starring Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson and James Dean, and all about the dynastic ranchers and nouveau-riche wildcatters in what we call the “awl bidness” and conflicts between generations and cultures and races. The best scene is at the very end, when big rancher mogul Rock Hudson, who by then has acquired a Mexican daughter-in-law and a mixed-race grandson, confronts a racist restaurant owner. This mean racist bully serves Rock Hudson and his

Mexican kin because he knows him, but refuses to serve another elderly Mexican couple that comes into the restaurant. What follows is a classic Hollywood fistfight in which they pretty much demolish the restaurant, while that glorious battle hymn, the Yellow Rose of Texas, rises in the background. Rock Hudson actually loses the fistfight, but as he's lying on the floor, the racist manager takes down the sign on the wall that says We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone, and throws it down on Rock Hudson's chest, symbolically surrendering, even though he won the fistfight. And the very last scene in the movie is of Rock Hudson's two adorable toddler grandsons, one Anglo the other Latino, standing next to each other in their crib, and smiling out at the audience and facing the future, suggesting optimism about a happy life together.

Please do NOT go out next week and start a fistfight with a racist. Metaphorically, however, that fight must continue, until all the signs come down, and they are still coming down, but others will go up. Inertia and momentum are with us. History is on our side, love is our weapon, and we will persist through these delays.

Y'all be good and come back real soon, ya hear?