

Choose to Bless the World

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Reading "Benediction" by the Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker

Your gifts

whatever you discover them to be
can be used to bless or curse the world.

The mind's power,

 The strength of the hands,

 The reaches of the heart,

the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting,

Any of these can serve to feed the hungry,

 bind up wounds,

 welcome the stranger,

 praise what is sacred,

 do the work of justice

 or offer love.

Any of these can draw down the prison door

 hoard bread,

 abandon the poor,

 obscure what is holy,

 comply with injustice

 or withhold love.

You must answer this question:

What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world.

The choice to bless the world is more than an act of will

 a moving forward into the world

with the intention to do good.

It is an act of recognition

 a confession of surprise,

 a grateful acknowledgment

that in the midst of a broken world

unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide.

There is an embrace of kindness,

that encompasses all life,

even yours.

And while there is injustice,

 anesthetization, or evil

there moves

a holy disturbance,

a benevolent rage,

a revolutionary love

protesting, urging, insisting
that which is sacred will not be defiled.
Those who bless the world live their life
as a gesture of thanks
for this beauty
and this rage.

The choice to bless the world
can take you into solitude
 to search for the sources
 of power and grace;
 native wisdom, healing, and liberation.
More, the choice will draw you into community,
 the endeavor shared,
 the heritage passed on,
 the companionship of struggle,
 the importance of keeping faith,
 the life of ritual and praise,
 the comfort of human friendship,
 the company of earth,
 its chorus of life
 welcoming you.

 None of us alone can save the world.
Together – that is another possibility,
waiting.

Sermon

I almost feel as though our reading this morning is sermon enough. Its author, the Rev. Rebecca Parker, who is President of the Starr King School for the Ministry, one of our Unitarian Universalist seminaries, has a way of packing a lot of wisdom and power into a few words. Since I do have a bit of time remaining, perhaps I can use it to unpack and elaborate on some of what she has to say.

She begins with the assumption that we all have gifts, and that with those gifts comes the responsibility to determine how we will put them to use. These “gifts” of which she speaks are not inherently positive or negative. As we shall see they may be used for either good or ill. Our gifts are those qualities and abilities that when brought to our living, have an effect – make an impact – on the people around us. And one gift that we all share is that of free will. We are all free to choose how to use our talents and abilities, our gifts of mind, and body, and heart. What will we do with our gifts? Will we curse or bless the world? Let us choose to bless the world.

As we look at the world around us, there is ample evidence of those who would seem to choose to curse rather than bless. Those making such choices are not only individuals, but also governments, and even religious groups. The ongoing saga of war and conflict in Iraq, in other parts of the Middle East, in Afghanistan, in Darfur, in Korea – these are all a curse on our world, growing out of myriad choices made by individuals and groups.

I mentioned that religion itself can be used to curse rather than bless the world. This happens when people are separated into the chosen and the unchosen, the saved and the unsaved.

When demeaning and violent actions are justified in the name of God or some higher purpose. When some people's lives and loves are considered lesser because they do not fit narrow definitions based on outmoded understandings. We, as religious liberals, as Unitarian Universalists must ask ourselves whether we are willing to take a stand, to be counted as people of faith whose religious tradition calls us to use our gifts to bless the world. That means embracing the conviction that there is an abiding Love that is stronger than fear and hatred, that together we *can* make a difference, we *can* heal the world, we *can* make that choice to bless the world.

I want to acknowledge this morning that, sometimes, holding onto such hopeful convictions is difficult. Despair and hopelessness continually threaten to overwhelm us and paralyze us into inaction, especially when we allow ourselves to become isolated and closed in on ourselves.

I want to share with you this morning a story from close to home that illustrates the impact that the choice to curse or bless the world can have. My sister-in-law, Cathy's sister, is married to an African from Rwanda. Louis has lived in this country for many years, but the rest of his family was still in Rwanda twelve years ago when the horrible genocide took place in which members of the Hutu tribe killed half a million Tutsis. Louis's brother, Francois, who a year or so earlier had visited in our home, shared our table, and played with our children, was a Tutsi living in the capital city, Kigali, with his wife Esperance and their infant child.

When the violence began, Francois had no chance to leave the city, and faced great danger. In the midst of this, one of his neighbors, a Hutu, opened his home to Francois's family, despite the fact that this could have meant losing his own life. The family was sheltered there through several perilous weeks. Unfortunately, Francois was eventually discovered by the roving bands of Hutu thugs, and he, his wife and baby were all murdered. Louis lost his parents and several other family members to the violence as well.

The choices made by those who perpetrated that violence cursed the lives of millions – those who died, as well as all of us who grieved over their senseless loss. As tragic and painful as this story is, it is not entirely devoid of blessings. That family of Hutus who took in Francois and his family chose to be a blessing, and not a curse. They could have simply locked their doors, closed their shutters and minded their own business. But they put their lives on the line in the name of compassion and goodness. As long as there are people like that in the world, with that kind of love and courage, evil shall not prevail, and we all will be blessed by their actions.

Rebecca Parker speaks of the importance of recognizing and acknowledging "that in the midst of a broken world unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide." In her book, *Blessing the World*, she tells a story of her own personal dark night of the soul, the survival of which depended on that kind of grace or blessing. A broken relationship and an abortion took her into the depths of despair as she grieved over both losses. Time didn't seem to heal her sorrow and she spiraled deeper and deeper, leading her to one of the deepest questions we can be brought to ask ourselves: Am I willing to live?

One night as her despair and isolation came to a crisis point, she left her house and walked toward a nearby lake, "determined to walk into the lake's cold darkness and find there the consolation that [she] could not find within [herself]." She tells the story like this:

At the bottom of the hill, the street ended and the lakeside park began. I walked across the wet grass and climbed the last rise before the final descent to the water's edge. As I crested the rise, I discovered a line of dark

objects between me and the shore, a barricade I was going to have to cross to get to the water.

I didn't remember this barricade being there before, and it was so dark that I couldn't tell what I was seeing. But as I edged closer, I discovered it was a line of human beings, hunched over some strange-looking, spindly equipment. Telescopes.

It was the Seattle Astronomy Club.

There they were with their homemade Heathkit telescopes and their top-of-the-line Sharper Image telescopes, dressed in their Gore-Tex back-country gear and tennis shoes. A whole club of amateur scientists, up and alert in the middle of the night because the sky was clear and the planets were near.

To make my way to my death, I had to get past an enthusiast in tennis shoes. He assumed I had come to look at the stars. "Here. Let me show you," he said, and began to explain the star cluster his telescope was focused on. I had to brush the tears from my eyes to look through his telescope. There it was! A red-orange spiral galaxy. then he focused it on Jupiter, and I peered through to see the giant, glowing planet. I could not bring myself to continue my journey. In a world where people get up in the middle of the night to look at the stars, I could not end my life.

I know there is grace, because my life was saved by the Seattle Astronomy Club.

Even "in the midst of a broken world unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide." Such experiences of grace may seem like random occurrences, and often they may be. But the end of this morning's reading contains some hints concerning how to increase the probability of experiences of grace. While "the choice to bless the world can take you into solitude," it can also "draw you into community, the endeavor shared . . . the companionship of struggle . . . the comfort of human friendship. . . None of us alone can save the world. [But] Together – that is another possibility." That is the power of religious community. That is the power of coming together and saying with one voice, we choose to bless one another and the world. That, I believe, is why we come together.

I recently came across a statement by the Rev. A. Powell Davies, one of the great Unitarian ministers of the twentieth century, about why he went to church. He said:

Let me tell you why I come to church. I come to church – and would whether I was a preacher or not – because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them.

It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe my fellow men and women. I must not only hear about it but feel it. In a congregation such as this, I do.

I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world, unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Workaday

enthusiasms are not enough. They wear out too soon. I want to experience human nature at its best – and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church. . . .

I doubt whether I could stand the thought of the cruelty and misery of the present world unless I could know, through an experience that renewed itself over and over again, that at the heart of life there is an assurance, that I can hold an ultimate belief that all is well. And this happens in this kind of church.

Life must have its sacred moments and its holy places. The soul will always seek its nurture. For religious experience – which is life at its most intense, life at its best – is something we cannot do without.

A. Powell Davies chose to bless the world. Though spoken over a half-century ago, those words continue to resonate with me today. They represent an important counter-cultural perspective. “The old dominant world-view says that we are self-interested individuals, unconnected and unconcerned with one another.” But there is another way that recognizes that “we are not inherently self-interested individuals. We are connected to one another, and caring for others is fundamental to our existence. . . . The purpose of life is not our own well-being in isolation from all others. . . . Our well-being enters into the well-being of others. . . . Our actions matter to us and also to all the world.” [Rebecca Parker, in *Blessing the World*] As Rebecca Parker reminds us: “Every act we commit is a contribution to the world; the question is whether our actions will be a blessing or a curse.”

Your presence here is a blessing to me. The love, the compassion, the commitment, the dedication that I see in your lives, both within this community and in the larger world, are wondrous blessings to me. I invite all of you, from the longest-term members, to the most recent seekers among us, to join me as we continue our quest to bless one another and the world. Perhaps we can one day build a land where justice rolls down like water and peace like an ever-flowing stream.

May it be so.