

Inconsolable Women and Relentless Promises
Rev. Mark Stringer and Guest Preacher, Jennifer Harvey, Ph.D.
First Unitarian Church, 1/15/2017

Call to Gather Including the words of James Luther Adams

"The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways"

Come, together, may we be that church.

Meditation Mark

In this month's Soul Matters packet on "What does it mean to be a community of prophecy?", Parker Palmer cautions us to "Avoid the bad habit of domesticating the prophet of your choice, turning him/her into a cheerleader for your way of thinking and way of life." This kind of habit is often very apparent this time of year when our nation reserves time to honor the memory and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Many reduce his call for equality and justice to an invitation to embrace diversity and ignore his demand to turn the social order on its head. Treating him as a "saint" ends up hiding how radical he truly was and how, in his day, he was seen by many, including some so-called liberals and progressives, as anything but a saint. It is in the spirit of acknowledging the prophetic voice and presence he offered through the tensions of his time, that I will lead us into our weekly time of meditation, reflection or prayer, with some of his prophetic words....

Love that does not satisfy justice is no love at all.

It is merely a sentimental affection,

little more than what one would have for a pet.

Love at its best is justice concretized.

Love... is not conditional upon one's staying in his place
or watering down his demands

in order to be considered respectable....

The white liberal must rid himself of the notion

that there can be a tensionless transition

from the old order of injustice to the new order of justice....

The Negro has not gained a single right in America

without persistent pressure and agitation....

Nonviolent coercion always brings tension to the surface.

This tension, however, must not be seen as destructive.

There is a kind of tension that is both healthy

and necessary for growth.
Society needs nonviolent gadflies
to bring its tensions into the open
and force its citizens to confront the ugliness of their prejudices and the
tragedy of their racism.
It is important for the liberal to see
that the oppressed person who agitates for his rights
is not the creator of tension.
He merely brings out the hidden tension
that is already alive....
The white liberal must escalate his support for racial justice
rather than de-escalate it....
The need for commitment is greater today than ever.

-- excerpts from MLK's - *Where Do We Go from Here - Chaos or Community?*

Reading

My UU ministry colleague Victoria Weinstein wrote last week that "one of the most urgent tasks of clergy right now is to use appropriately powerful language for what is going on. We must rewrite any liturgical resources that are euphemistic, cutesy, sentimental or shallow. We must ruthlessly cut from our repertoires any poems, prayers, or readings that are not equal to this moment."

In that spirit, I offer as our reading today a poem by Elisa Chavez, poet in residence for the Seattle Review of Books, who describes herself as "a...poet, writer, and nonprofit foot soldier. She serves on the board of Rain City Poetry Slam." This poem is not written in the voice of a white male, but I'm hoping that the dissonance of a white male reading it will have it's own kind of power. This poem contains language that some may say is not appropriate for a church setting, but I trust that you will forgive me, for I find it to be powerfully prophetic and, as my colleague would say, "equal to this moment."

"Revenge" by Elisa Chavez

Since you mention it, I think I will start that race war.

I could've swung either way? But now I'm definitely spending
the next 4 years converting your daughters to lesbianism;
I'm gonna eat all your guns. Swallow them lock stock and barrel
and spit bullet casings onto the dinner table;

I'll give birth to an army of mixed-race babies.
With fathers from every continent and genders to outnumber the stars,
my legion of multiracial babies will be intersectional as fuck
and your swastikas will not be enough to save you,

because real talk, you didn't stop the future from coming.
You just delayed our coronation.
We have the same deviant haircuts we had yesterday;
we are still getting gay-married like nobody's business
because it's still nobody's business;
there's a Muslim kid in Kansas who has already written the schematic
for the robot that will steal your job in manufacturing,
and that robot? Will also be gay, so get used to it:

we didn't manifest the mountain by speaking its name,
the buildings here are not on your side just because
you make them spray-painted accomplices.
These walls do not have genders and they all think you suck.
Even the earth found common cause with us
the way you trample us both,

oh yeah: there will be signs, and rainbow-colored drum circles,
and folks arguing ideology until even I want to punch them
but I won't, because they're my family,
in that blood-of-the-covenant sense.
If you've never loved someone like that
you cannot outwaltz us, we have all the good dancers anyway.

I'll confess I don't know if I'm alive right now;
I haven't heard my heart beat in days,
I keep holding my breath for the moment the plane goes down
and I have to save enough oxygen to get my friends through.

But I finally found the argument against suicide and it's us.
We're the effigies that haunt America's nights harder
the longer they spend burning us,
we are scaring the shit out of people by spreading,
by refusing to die: what are we but a fire?
We know everything we do is so the kids after us
will be able to follow something towards safety;
what can I call us but lighthouse,

of course I'm terrified. Of course I'm a shroud.
And of course it's not fair but rest assured,

anxious America, you brought your fists to a glitter fight.
This is a taco truck rally and all you have is cole slaw.
You cannot deport our minds; we won't
hold funerals for our potential. We have always been
what makes America great.

Reading Excerpts from the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 31.

1) At that time, says the LORD, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. 2) Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, 3) the LORD appeared to him from far away I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

12) They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. 13) Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

15) Thus says the LORD: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. 16) Thus says the LORD: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the LORD: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their own country.

Sermon Jennifer Harvey, Ph. D

So when Mark invited me to preach this Sunday in which we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (thank you Mark; . . . it's always an honor to be invited here to preach or teach), and the question was "What does it mean to be a community of prophecy?" I knew right away I wanted to preach from Jeremiah—a book about promises.

But Mark's invitation came on November 3rd. In case there's any confusion November 3rd comes before November 8th. I'm assuming you know what happened on Nov. 8th?

So, I'll tell you what prophecy doesn't mean: it doesn't mean being able to predict the future. If it did, when that November 3rd invitation came, I probably would have said "thank you Mark, but no."

Because how do you preach on Martin Luther King, Jr. day, a day when we remember not just a man but a movement of Black people that changed the nation forever; when we honor everyday, working-class, women and children and men who risked their lives—literally stood up during a reign of racial terror and said, "we will be free;" How do you preach on a day that honors that sacred story, the same week someone deemed too much of a white supremacist to be appointed to a federal court back in the '80s (that was hard to do in the '80s!) sat in Congress for confirmation hearings to the most powerful legal position in the land?

"Thank you Mark, but no."

But prophecy's not about predicting the future. And so here we are.

And, there couldn't be a more urgent time for us to ask, "what does it mean to be a community of prophecy?" Because ish is about to get real. So, I turn to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a Hebrew prophet, a prophet who--no doubt, had dark skin; who lived among a people in political and social crisis; who were contending with an unexpected change in fortune . . . from the relative peace, security, and predictability of political life in Israel, to life now lived at the whim of violent, unpredictable, war-mongering leaders who had conquered Israel and sent the people into exile.

There might be something there for us . . . yes?

How many of you have a Facebook feed?

When I sat down to read Jeremiah, it gave me the kind of whiplash I get when I open Facebook.

There's a God who talks through Jeremiah about a people who survived terror, but are finding grace; there's a people for whom God feels devastatingly absent (but then moments later appears and declares 'I have loved you with an everlasting love;' and 'I have continued to be faithful to you'). There's angry clarity that these people (Israel) have been conquered and scattered in exile because they broke promises, but then talk of God gathering them in as a shepherd gathers a flock with a promise that a new day of peace and flourishing will come.

Just like FB: news about the election being hacked; the next vile and violent thing Trump has said about people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities, women; sinister behavior of Senate going until 1:00 a.m. to deny working people health care and then . . . ooh look a kitten.

Books of prophecy (like Jeremiah) almost always create spiritual, emotional, psychological whiplash.

Which makes sense! You don't need prophetic speech when things are good. Prophets show up when injustice, violations of community, degradation of life have become so "normal" that a people's fate is in peril.

But when prophets show up they also always bring relentless promises . . . the promise peace; the promise of flourishing; *IF* there is a re-commitment to justice, to love, to nurturing life, to the work of creating conditions in which all can thrive.

But the whiplash is the hard part about prophecy. You don't get to *re-commit* until you first get honest about where you're actually at. You don't get to beautiful future unless you contend fiercely with the ugly of the now. (That's also why prophets always end up trouble; they talk about the "where we're actually at" and they put their bodies on the line to challenge "where we're actually at").

We could just leave today's sermon right there. Because, that's the basic story of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's life. He lived of all of that. He preached it daily. "No one is free if others are oppressed!" Meaning, if any of us are going to get free we have to see, name, call out, oppression. That's the story of (yes, let's say his name this morning) John Lewis. 45 times arrested in the Civil Rights Movement because of a vision of a peaceful, just future.

But we're not going to just leave the sermon there. Because, knowing we have to fight for justice today for a peaceful tomorrow is head knowledge. And my sense is that in this moment we're in deep need of heart knowledge.

What does it mean to be a community of prophecy?

So, when I preach, I always ask these questions of sacred texts Can this text tell our story? If so, how does it tell our story? Can we tell our story through it?

But when I asked these questions of Jeremiah. . .and it got dicey for me really fast.

First, there's all this stuff about God giving a special promise to chosen people. I know I don't have to tell you how dangerous that is.

Right? Chosenness got us all here in the first place? Chosenness was the way newly-white-Americans told the story of their right to dispossess Native peoples of their land and enslave African peoples to create this "chosen," exceptional nation. That kind of chosenness hovers all through the phrase "make America great again . . ."

Is that the story? It is . . . but . . .

Then, the whole book of Jeremiah, uses women over and over, uses women's bodies—violently sometimes—always as a metaphor but making women objects nonetheless.

We recognize that story too . . . but . . .

Then, I remembered being in a car on my way to Flint, Michigan last October with a powerful African American minister, the Rev. Dr. Renee Jackson. And we started talking about the violence unleashed by Trump's campaign and Dr. Jackson said, "I just wonder, what must the world be thinking of us right now?" And she went on to talk about Jeremiah and how Israel is exposed and put on display—for all the nations to see her "sin" in the book of Jeremiah. And, how that exposure in and of itself was a kind of judgment for the ways it had failed to stay committed to justice. And then she wondered aloud: is there a parallels between the injustices of Israel and that judgment of being exposed . . . and of us? today? (And that was before Nov. 8th).

Is that our story?

Knocked around by this text. But then I came upon this image that I cannot let go of and which has claimed me in return.

In the part we read, Jeremiah is talking about Israel surviving the exposure and God calling the people back, turning grief into joy, and young women dancing.

But then there's an interruption. And while the prophet is unveiling this lush promise we hear: "A voice . . . in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted because they are no more."

Rachel's children have been swept away into the exile. They're gone. And Rachel is weeping bitterly and refuses to be consoled.

And all of a sudden I found my ground and this prophetic text wasn't knocking me around anymore. Because I suddenly could see Rachel. Rachel, a dark-skinned, Hebrew woman refusing to be consoled. Rachel in a state of lament.

One of my most important mentors, rev. dr. emilies townes a brilliant womanist ethicist, wrote some years ago that we are a people searching for paradise in a world of theme parks. And townes says if we want to find paradise we have to begin where we are; we must go through lament.

Now, I don't know about you but I hate lament. I kind of want to run from it. Lament is painful. Lament means naming loss, losses so deep they defy words. That's how I felt Nov. 9th—but I'd rather forget that feeling for sure.

But townes is clear, lament is key, because lament is truthful, truth-filled, and truth-telling. And if we don't lament, she says, we'll confuse paradise for a theme park every time.

Let me give you an example: Last spring, after President's day and after clearly studying President's at school, my seven-year old, Harper, was running around talking about George Washington this and George Washington that. Constantly.

And, it was driving me crazy until finally, one morning, a story came on the radio about some politician doing something wrong, and Harper overheard it and said, "what's that about?" And I said, "well this politician is in trouble for doing something wrong."

"Is he's an adult?"

"Well, yes," I said. She looked shocked and I said, "Actually lots of adults and (occasionally) politicians do wrong things."

"They do?" she said, "like what?"

"Well, you know how you've been running around here talking about George Washington?" "Yes."

"George Washington enslaved African American people."
My daughter looked at me with horror.

“He did?” “Yes.”

And, here’s the part that took my breath away, “Mama, why? Then why does my school talk about him as being such a great man?”

Just as a side note, on the King Sunday—that kind of moment right there is where we get a glimpse of white racialization happening (push away lament; withhold the hard feelings).

And, in townes terms, my daughter’s school, amazing in so many ways, had offered her a theme-park . . .

So my daughter and I lamented together. First we lamented George Washington’s actions. And we then lamented that her school let her consume a lie. And we talked about why even good teachers choose to not give the truthful, truth-filled truth. And, then we talked about what happens when you don’t tell the whole truth about your own story. We don’t only lie when we lie: **We cease to feel because we’re refusing lament. Lose part of our humanity.**

Here’s the thing about Jeremiah. The whole book is about a relentless promises to a suffering exiled lonely people; the promise of a future of reconnection, being gathered, of peace and flourishing.

But it’s not there yet.

What’s there now is the chaos. The promise only comes when what is actually going on now is exposed. In Jeremiah the promise only gets named in the same moments people are feeling what actually is.

And you know knows and feels this more powerfully than anyone in this text?

Rachel. Rachel who is weeping and refuses to be consoled. Rachel who can’t be fooled by theme parks, because a **future** promise is no consolation for a mother who has lost her children **now**.

And here’s the heart part of how this text might claim us.

What does it mean be a community of prophecy in a nation in longstanding racial crisis and vicious anti-black and anti-brown violence? A nation in now truly frightening political turmoil and instability that comes deeply and

directly out of that same racial crisis? (We are living in white supremacist backlash right now.)

It means we re-commit to justice and recognize we get a promise for our future only through lament. It means we start by seeing Rachel and we join her in her refusal to be consoled.

I want to share another story about my children. Last fall some students at Drake organized a protest the week after Terence Crutcher and Keith Scott were killed. So I invited my kids to come, they asked if they could make signs. I said sure and they descended to the basement to make their signs.

So you need to also know that my sister and her family live in Des Moines, and Janee, is white and my sister-in-law, Tobi (her partner) is Black, and their children, Amari and Travis are Black. And our families are close.

So my kids participated in the protest. It was powerful. Because they were physically with Black and Latino people, other people of color, and a few white people, who stood together for 45 minutes to say: "no!" We will not be consoled.

My kids observed young people being brave and loud about the value of their own lives and their right to be free. And of adults responding and affirming them for making their 5- and 7-year-old voices heard. All important.

But the part of the story I want to share with you has to do with their signs.

Before the protest, when I walked into their playroom to tell them it was time to go, I beheld Harper's gorgeous colorful sign that said: "Black Lives Mater." "They mater the same as white." "Stop killing them." "People that are Blak are: travis, amari, tobi."

Let me be really clear here: I realize this is a complicated story and it is also a devastating one. But, I'm telling this story to describe, to enable a feel, of what it might mean to make Rachel's lament our own.

My child—in her 7-year-old way—was lamenting that day. She's put the pieces together about who her beloveds are and what the stakes are. And she will not be consoled.

Did my heart break that day too?

Yes, it did. And that's the point. It's still broken. And I will not be consoled.

But even as I wept that day I also felt the promise of a future in the midst of a lament: my child's lament means she hasn't yet lost that part of her humanity.

She knows something about what paradise looks like.

Our refusal to be consoled is our only hope to avoid making peace with a theme park, when we're in search of paradise.

What does it mean to be a community of prophecy? We must join Rachel in her refusal to be consoled.

So one last thing about inconsolable people: inconsolable people are not passive people. I can guarantee you when Rachel, the prophet, heard God say "you're children are coming back," she didn't sit there and wait. I am certain she took her bitterly weeping, lamenting, inconsolable self and continued to do everything in her power to mobilize all of her resources, intellect, her connections, to make it so.

Inconsolable people are active.

Inconsolable people are not immobilized in despair.

Being inconsolable is not the same thing as being hysterical. Being inconsolable means you are singularly fixated on how wrong things are and a relentlessly obsessed with setting it right.

Inconsolable people are angry; ours is a righteous anger about the moral arc of the universe (the one King says bends towards justice) being bent in ways so wrong, that we will not be quiet or sit still until we set it right.

Inconsolable people might be afraid, but our fear does not hold a candle to our resilience. Inconsolable people are loud. Inconsolable people are in the streets. Inconsolable people make our lament known everywhere, everyday and in so doing call others in to the reality things are **not right**.

Inconsolable people need others who will risk being inconsolable with them.

Elisa Chavez, the prophet, is inconsolable. "I don't know if I'm alive right now; I haven't heard my heart beat in days."

But she's not passive: Could've swung either way on the race war? ". . . now I'm definitely spending the next 4 years converting your daughters to lesbianism"

"Of course I'm terrified . . ." "I keep holding my breath . . ."

But singularly fixated: "We know everything we do is so the kids after us will be able to follow something towards safety; what can I call us but lighthouse."

Martin Luther King, Jr., the prophet, was inconsolable . . . we must "force [this nation's] citizens to confront the ugliness of their prejudices and the tragedy of their racism."

Angry: "The white liberal [[any of those here?]] must escalate his support for racial justice."

Resilient: "The need for commitment is greater today than ever."

Friend, in some ways everything changed on November 8th. But if we are truthful, truth-filled, and truth-telling ways, in fact, *nothing* changed. The movement we honor today faced down the same violence of racism and hatred that brought us this presidential moment. The work required of white liberals was no different and the urgency of us getting serious about that work was no less so on November 3rd than it became on November 8th.

And . . . the Movement for Black lives—which is where we find Rachel today!!—was naming the "death culture" [Chris Crass] of white supremacy and declaring a promise for our collective future with as much power and clarity on November 3rd as it has continued to do since November 8th.

Friends we today are afraid, we are uncertain, we are angry, we regret, we are suspicious, we are . . .

But what we are not . . . is alone, or without resources, or without incredible models from then (Rachel), (Martin Luther King, Jr.) (Ella Baker) (Rosa Parks) (Septima Clark) (so many others) to now (Elisa Chavez, John Lewis, Alicia Garza, Patricia Cullors, Opal Tometi) (so many others). . .

So far all the things we are . . . let us mostly join these prophets and be inconsolable with them. Make Rachel's refusal our own. If we do, then we will continue to know the difference and refuse the allure of theme parks, and will not rest until we find paradise.

Closing Words from Wendell Berry

“Much protest is naive; it expects quick, visible improvement and despairs and gives up when such improvement does not come. Protesters who hold out longer have perhaps understood that success is not the proper goal...Protest that endures, I think, is moved by a hope far more modest than that of public success: namely, the hope of preserving qualities in one's own heart and spirit that would be destroyed by acquiescence.”