

Opening Words Sunday, September 11, 2011

“Where were you ten years ago today? At this time in the morning I was sitting in the student center at Oakland University along with hundreds of students and staff watching the unbelievable unfold. There were cries of disbelief as the towers fell. My daughter and son-in-law were working in Boston at the time and my first reaction was to call them on their cell phones. Miraculously I got thru and that was the last time that day. They were devastated to discover later in the day that several of their friends and work colleagues died in the towers. Eventually the university closed for the day and I came home and spent the next hours and days glued to the television. Watching it over and over again – sobbing for the loss of life, for the people who had lost loved ones – for the stories of courage and bravery by those who helped others. And I felt helpless!

What I remember most about that time was the coming together of our country in a way that I had never witnessed. We were united in our grief and our love for our country. All political differences seem to melt away. We were, for that moment, truly the UNITED States.! That Sunday in church we stood with hands held and sang “America the Beautiful” and cried again.

So let us come together again today not in grief but in the joy of being with each other in this beloved community.”

Worship Associate, Judy Amir

NOW, VOYAGER

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, September 11, 2011

*Now, voyager, lay here your dazzled head.
Come back to earth from air, be nourished,
Not with that light on light, but with this bread.
May Sarton, “Now, Voyager”*

And so we come once more to this church, after a time apart. Our paths diverged over the summer, led us in many directions: we traveled for pleasure, for business, for necessity. We worshipped at home with the New York Times, in the woods and on the mountains and up north at the lake,

even in other churches (and sometimes here). We embraced those separated from us, then parted again; we said goodbye for now—or goodbye forever. Our paths diverged, we ranged far and wide.

Now, we come back to earth from air, to this place made sacred by common experience, shared hopes, borne sorrows. On this holy ground we are nourished with the bread of truths and values that we discover and create here, together.

Now, voyager:

*Here close to earth be cherished, mortal heart,
Hold our way deep as roots push rocks apart
To bring the spurt of green up from the dark.*

We go away, but we return after a time. We return to this church when we reach our limits, bump up against the edges of our compassion, bang our heads into the walls around our understanding. Life challenges us, we adapt; life challenges us again, we adapt; life challenges us further, and we cannot see any possible way to adapt anymore. So we come back here, searching for roots to anchor us that we might grow, extend the limits of what we can do, widen the arms of our love, take down the blocks to our vision.

Growth takes us away from church; the call to grow further leads us back to church. On this patch of land and woods and buildings, we settle in to watch and wait for the green to push up from the dark.

Now, voyager:

*Where music thundered let the mind be still,
Where the will triumphed let there be no will,
What light revealed now let the dark fulfill.*

This church can be too quiet, too predictable. So we roam elsewhere, looking for excitement and bustle, the kaleidoscope of new ideas and faces and places. Then the days become long, we tire of the movement, and we wearily walk back to church, to sink once again into the quiet depths here. Years of people seeking peace, creating peace, have brought a presence of tranquility to this place that soothes our frayed souls, making BUC a still point in our turning lives and turning world.

And especially today, September 11, ten years after a day that we will never forget, no matter how much we may try or want to. That day we needed more than ever a place of peace, on a day when the possibility of terror and destruction thundered into our lives more powerfully than we had believed possible. Who knew, that airplanes full of innocent people could become deadly weapons? Who knew, that a skyscraper full of innocent people could collapse? Who knew, that the innocence our nation had long enjoyed, free from war on our own soil, comfortable with seeing ourselves as the benign savior of others, could be shattered? All that we had come to believe impossible actually did, horrifyingly, become possible that day.

I remember going for a walk that afternoon, as life around me seemed to be continuing unchanged. I remember wondering if I could be strong enough to endure what was happening, to care for my loved ones. I remember being afraid that I could not.

Theologians sometimes talk of the notion of a negative revelation. This contrasts with our usual understanding of revelatory experiences as being a special kind of spiritual high, in which we receive a vision, have an insight, or are somehow brought to a new level of awareness that is exhilarating, empowering, eliciting an ecstatic response. A revelation shows us God in all the divine majesty and mystery, or shows us all life as being linked in an interdependent web, or shows us humans as creatures of infinite potential, or shows us ourselves as gifted and blessed.

But a negative revelation is a very different order of experience. While it may still come as a vision, an insight, or a new level of awareness, what it brings us is not uplifting or empowering, but shattering, perhaps humiliating, knocking us to our knees. And though we do not want to see ourselves as needing such an experience in order to grow spiritually—I regularly insist to God or life or the universe that I actually learn quite well from positive reinforcement—the sad fact is that being human seems to mean that we do

require not only the empowerment of a positive revelation, but also the shattering of a dark, negative revelation.

Ten years after the fact, it may be possible to see the events of September 11, 2001, as a kind of dark, negative revelation for our country and ourselves, perhaps for all people everywhere. If that is true, then the revelation which came to us that day in airplanes and people leaping from buildings and terror was a revelation about the absence of love, about the desperate need for us to stretch our capacity for compassion to the breaking point and then stretch it even farther so that people we never believed possible for us to care about could become the focus of our care. Perhaps September 11, 2001, was a revelatory lesson in national arrogance, in personal arrogance as well, in the need to pay closer attention how what we believe to be our acts of goodness can be experienced by others as acts of disrespect and contempt.

No doubt as more time passes, the morning of September 11, 2001, will come to mean many different things to us. It brought losses that we will mourn all life long, and beyond. If it also brought the loss of a kind of innocence that we needed to lose in order to become people and a nation more humble, more open to learning from others, wiser about our own abilities, more willing to see those different from us as not just different but

valuable for who they are, as they are—then maybe, just maybe, that was a loss that someday will feel like more than just a terrible loss, but a mysterious kind of gain. At least we might try to remain open to that possibility.

Now, voyager:

*Here close to earth the deeper pulse is stirred,
Here where no wings rush and no sudden bird,
But only heartbeat upon beat is heard.*

We go away, and then we return, looking for a community that we long for but cannot see elsewhere, wanting to restore the connection we did find here. Gathered in this sanctuary, joining voices in speech and song, cherishing our own and one another's children, wrestling with questions that strike at the foundations of our being, listening to each other and ourselves proclaim joys and lament sorrows, seated in rows Sunday after Sunday, week after month after year, growing, losing, broken and bound up: through all we experience together, in the short hour we spend here each week, the deeper pulse is stirred, we are transformed from a collection of isolated individuals into a community. Though we leave to resume our separate existences, we remain this community, knit together in a common life, braving time.

*Now voyager, come home, come home to rest,
Here on the long-lost country of earth's breast
Lay down the fiery vision and be blest, be blest.*

“We live our lives, forever taking leave” (Rilke). We outgrow our mother’s womb, and leave it; we outgrow our childhood home, and leave it. We leave schools, jobs, churches, temples, relationships, communities. We leave one mindset and meaning for another. We set aside dreams, abandon hopes, discard beliefs as we keep moving on, on. In time, we leave our very lives in death.

Yet all this lifetime of leaving has a balance, a counterweight: for we also live our lives, forever heading home. Each journey, regardless of how long it lasts, how far it ranges, has a return, a homecoming. Restless, searching creatures we may be, but we also are drawn to settle down and settle in, to finally lay down the vision that propels us, and come home to rest.

For some of you here this morning, the voyage that took you away from BUC has been a brief one: you took a vacation, skipped a few Sundays, and have now returned to your usual seat in the sanctuary. For others of you, the voyage had a longer duration, a farther range: you needed some time away to attend to other parts of your life, to rest and heal from an overwhelming effort, from an experience of confusion and pain, to get your head straight,

clarify priorities. And some of you, like me, have been voyaging for a lifetime, unable to find a place to call home.

We go away because we must. Something in our nature restlessly pushes at us to search, to roam. We go, and we return. So on this first Sunday of our church year, I welcome all of you back. I am happy to see your lovely faces again. I hope your journeys were meaningful, and I am grateful for your safe return.

And now, voyagers, come home, come home to rest. Here in this sacred community of memory and hope, you can lay down your burdens, and here be blest, be blest.