

All I Ask of You, Oh God

May 14th, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Welcome, dreamers and seekers of spirit, so bold or so bashful in the quest. Welcome, wanderers and worshipers, here so give their souls a rest. Welcome to the open and to the broken ones, blissfully imperfect, blessed and beloved, caring and compassionate beneath the stars above. Held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds. To all souls, I say, “Good morning. It is so good to be together.”

Today is Sunday, the 14th of May and I'm very glad to see you this morning. It is good to be together. The title of this Sunday's reflection is All I Ask of You (Oh, God). It is a reflection about a depth of spirit that we all may have in common. I am open to that possibility. I am present to the

possibility, to that reality even...although I realize that the reality depends on us. It is a beautiful responsibility. Are we ready for it? ...because the new world is coming. Surely, it is. As Arundhati Roy reminds us, “Another world is not only possible, she’s on her way [and] on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

We are being asked to grow. We are being made to grow. In the deepest sense, we are being asked and made to blossom...and blossom we will—by choice, by luck, by grace—or kicking and screaming—we will all bloom. They say that April showers bring May flowers. I think that’s true...whether or not we get the weather we wanted.

Did anyone out there ever really want to be a meteorologist? ...you know, like in your soul? ...like it was your calling? I wonder if one is called to this vocation if one grows up in a desert climate...or in the tropics...or in Antarctica...where it seems like the weather rarely changes.

Of course, there must be striking changes that are obvious when you live there. I remember first learning that the Eskimo-Aleut have more than 50 different names for snow. I grew up in New Jersey. This was unfathomable to me. Snow, snow bank, snowflake, fine snow, snow on the ground, soft deep snow, fresh snow, frost...frozen falling water...freezing rain, floating, fluffy... I was insensitive. It was all the same to me...partly, because we didn't have that kind of variety in New Jersey. It was all the same.

A friend told me a groaner of a joke the other day over lunch. He said, "A penguin walks into a bar. He waddles up to the bartender and says, 'Has my mother been here?' and the bartender says, 'I don't know. What does she look like?'" I found that hilarious. I don't know what that says about me but I enjoy the joke that make you groan...as long as they are not too offensive.

All this is to explore the question if one does grow up in a climate in which the weather changes only slightly or not at all, is one less inclined to become a meteorologist? Life becomes more beautiful, more meaningful when we allow ourselves to speak openly and honestly about such things.

[☺] A poet writes,

Turned on the weather man just after the news
I needed sweet rain to wash away my blues
He looked at the chart but he look in vain
Heavy cloud but no rain

Sometimes we don't get the things we need to grow.

Sometimes we get the deluge and other times, we get the drought. The poet continues,

Well, the land was cracking and the river was dry
All the crops were dying when they ought to be high
So to save his farm from the banker's draft
The farmer took out a book on some old witchcraft
He made a spell and a potion on a midsummer's night
He killed a brindled calf in the pale moonlight
He prayed to the sky but he prayed in vain
Heavy cloud but no rain

Sometime, we don't get what we need to grow.

This idea is troublesome to mothers—mothers whose job it is...whose imagined job it is to provide the child with everything that the child will need to grow. But how do you know. If one's child will grow up to become a man like Mitch McConnell who's in the news (something about the pressure that he is facing about raising the debt ceiling), how do you know what Baby Mitch really needs? If one's child will grow up to become a woman like Monica Lewinsky (a woman who withstood the scowls of a voyeuristic nation), how do you know what Baby Monica really needs? And if one's child will grow up to become a man like Martin Luther King, how does one know what Baby Martin really needs? It's puzzle. Who among us knows how to figure that out?

Baby Mitch, Baby Monica and Baby Rev. Dr. Martin...
They are all among us, right here and now. What do you

think they need in order to become the best possible versions of themselves?

As the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford reminds us, it was in a prophetic, final speech that King revealed that he was not afraid. Bravely, he said,

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.... And so I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord"

And when he did, he was quoting a Unitarian. He was quoting a woman who was raised Episcopalian but became a Unitarian in 1841. Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison and John Tyler were all Presidents of the United States that year. It was decades before the Emancipation Proclamation and the ensuing Civil War. It was decades before Julia Ward Howe would write The Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage
 where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fatal lightning of his terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

That was her first verse. She wrote,

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me:
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

That was her last verse. It was a deeply theological text. It was a spectacularly Christian text. I wonder how we feel about that now.

I love it, I must say. I absolutely love it...for however anxious or injured we are (or have been) about the religious experiences that may have harmed us and have influenced who we have become, we cannot change who we once were. I like that we have to grapple with the reality of that. I think this makes us stronger.

Julia Ward Howe is also the author of the original Mother's Day Proclamation of 1870. It was a rousing, anti-war message. It was revolutionary for its time. She wrote,

Arise, all women who have hearts, whether your baptism be that of water or of tears! Say firmly: "We will not have great questions decided by irrelevant agencies, our husbands shall not come to us, reeking with carnage, for caresses and applause.

"Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn all that we have been able to teach them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another country to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs."

After the attacks of 9/11, author and public intellectual Arundhati Roy echoed his sentiment in a rousing, anti-war message of her own. In September of 2002, she said:

None of us need anniversaries to remind us of what we cannot forget. [] The grief is still deep. The rage still sharp. The tears have not dried. And a strange, deadly war is raging around the world. Yet, each person who has lost a loved one surely knows secretly, deeply, that no war, no act of revenge, no daisy-cutters dropped on someone else's loved ones or someone else's children, will blunt the edges of their pain or bring their own loved ones back.

In 2002, Arundhati Roy, who hails from Delhi in India was rubbing literary elbows with the words of Julia Ward Howe from 1870. Small world.

When I think of Mother's Day, I think about how complicated it is... because motherhood, itself, is super complicated...because raising a child is a fantastic challenge in life...and because that can go in so many different directions, ALL OF THEM SACRED...and because not everyone who wants to be a mother becomes a mother in a physical or biological way...and because not everyone who does has an easy raising that child. Some of us become mothers rather unexpectedly while others of us try with all our might and it doesn't come to pass...and because the relationship between a mother and a child is always so complicated...and because of all of the other because that make life so baffling and brutal and beautiful. Yet, something simple remains, infinitely accessible to human

imagination—a mother’s wish, a mother’s hope, a mother’s longing, a mother’s prayer. However flawed and however imperfect the parent, something simple remains. In that window of time between conception and birth, I imagine that there must be a universal wish, a collective hope, a shared longing, a common prayer. “All I ask of you, oh God, is that this child be made ready to thrive. All I ask of you, oh God, is that this child be made ready to thrive.”

Earlier this week, David shared a song with me that the two of us discussed at length and found beautiful and fascinating. It was called All I Ask of You, Oh God. I am going to attempt to play it. David, would you mind sharing the words with the congregation? I just gonna go get myself prepared.

DAVID:

Solo le Pido a Dios

Solo le pido a Dios

Que el dolor non me sea diferente

Que la reseca muerte no me encuentre
Vacío y solo sin haber hecho lo suficiente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente
Que no me abofeteen la otra mejilla
Después que una garra me arañe este suerte
Solo le pido a Dios
Que la guerra no me sea indiferente
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que el engaño no me sea indiferente
Si un traidor puede más que unos cuantos
Que esos cuantos no lo olviden fácilmente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que el futuro no me sea indiferente
Desahuciado está el que tiene que marchar
A vivir una cultura diferente
Solo le pido a Dios
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente

Leon:

So, beautiful, David, but as you know, my Spanish is so rusty. Can we go through verse by verse and I will offer back the translation you shared with me.

DAVID:

Solo le Pido a Dios

Solo le pido a Dios

Que el dolor non me sea diferente

Que la reseca muerte no me encuentre

Vacio y solo sin haber hecho lo suficiente

Leon: Ok. So, that's:

All I ask of you, God

Is that I not be indifferent to suffering

That shriveled death won't find me

Alone and empty, not having done enough

DAVID:

Solo le pido a Dios

Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente

Que no me abofeteen la otra mejilla

Despues que una garra me arañó este suerte

Leon:

All I ask of you, God
Is that I not be indifferent to injustice
That they won't slap me again across the face
After they have already clawed away my fate

DAVID:

Solo le pido a Dios
Que la guerra no me sea indiferente
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente

Leon:

All I ask of you, God
Is that I not be indifferent to war
War is a huge monster and it crushes
The innocent people like you and me

DAVID:

Solo le pido a Dios
Que el engaño no me sea indiferente
Si un traidor puede mas que unos cuantos
Que esos cuantos no lo olviden facilmente

Leon:

All I ask of you, God
Is that I not be indifferent to corruption
If a single traitor can do more than a few honest people
Those few do not easily forget

That's slightly different from what you shared with me. Are you ok with that? I'm not translating precisely. I'm just trying to convey the meaning in the context of this morning's message. Is that ok?

DAVID: [answer]

Solo le pido a Dios
Que el future no me sea indiferente
Desahuciado esta el que tiene que marchar
A vivir una cultura diferente

All I ask of you, God
Is that I not be indifferent to the future
Completely without hope is the one forced to leave
To live in a different culture

[Leon begins the music.]

Solo le pido a Dios
Que el dolor non me sea diferente
Que la reseca muerte no me encuentre
Vacío y solo sin haber hecho lo suficiente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que lo injusto no me sea indiferente
Que no me abofeteen la otra mejilla
Despues que una garra me arañó este suerte
Solo le pido a Dios
Que la guerra no me sea indiferente
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que el engaño no me sea indiferente
Si un traidor puede mas que unos cuantos
Que esos cuantos no lo olviden facilmente
Solo le pido a Dios
Que el future no me sea indiferente
Desahuciado esta el que tiene que marchar
A vivir una cultura diferente
Solo le pido a Dios
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente
Es un monstruo grande y pisa fuerte
Toda la pobre inocencia de la gente

There is a poem by Michael Hedges entitled Woman of the World. Almost secretly, that song lives within my soul in a way that is not just poetic but very real.

No one hears the way she whispers every changing season
Through every falling rain I listen without reason...
Without reason...until the woman of the world shows me
The secret seed she planted in my heart
Her breath is cool to sway me
Roots shoot down and her eyes begin to shine
My love runs leaf and vine through the woman of the world...

This is part of my mother that lives within me...without translation. There are no words for the sacred precious gift of life itself.

In David's Opening Words, he said that would be willing to bet that in some ways, all of us long to "mothered." The word mother is a verb...is a code verb...is shorthand for being loved, respected, and cared for...in David's example, by Mother Earth, feeling the warmth of the sun caressing our faces as we are eager witnesses to the grand renewal of spring.

I had a tearful conversation with my mother yesterday. It was lovely. So beautiful. I cried. We talked about her husband, my father...who passed away. We talked about my sister, her daughter and we talked about the ways of the world. We talked about the big picture ways of the world—peace and love and possibility. We talked about the small picture ways of the world that still have the power to annoy me. We are an average family, average an extraordinary. We are witness to the blessings and the miracles of life...and we bicker and get shallow and get caught up in the craziness and bogged down in the weeds. All we can ask is that we find the blessing in all of this, that we care for ourselves and one another on this journey that we share.

May we do so in beauty and in kindness and in grace.
May it be so. Blessed be and amen.