

*Sermon Complexify Your Life*

The First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

March 15, 2015

10:30 a.m.

It is fair to ask the question, what have I, a middle-aged white woman who has not suffered soul-destroying oppression, and her people have not suffered oppression, what have I got to say from this pulpit. My only answer is: I will say my part. I will do what I can. I will learn how to change from those who would challenge me. And I will hold myself accountable to something greater than myself – to the suffering beyond any I have known.

Raise your hand if you are perfect. I don't see any hands.

Raise your hand if your home is perfect.

Raise your hand if your life is perfect.

Look around you, there are no hands raised. That's right, our lives are not perfect. We are in the wilderness. We *are* the wilderness. Our pilgrimage through our wilderness is rough. We disappoint ourselves and the ones we love and the ones we work with. Our children and our parents and our spouses and our friends have blessed us at times and failed us at times. Our bosses and our teachers and our ministers have raised us up and let us down. We have all done things we are proud of, and things we regret that stick in our memories like cuts that never heal. Yet through it all we spend our days trying to make sense of a world that doesn't make sense. We are here not because we are perfect, but because we want to learn from our mistakes. We are here not because we want to never hurt, but because we want to forgive and be forgiven.

*John 8 A Woman Caught in Adultery*

Early one morning, Jesus came back down from the Mount of Olives and returned to the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and to teach them about repentance and forgiveness and what being a worthy person in the eyes of God meant. As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

"Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

They were trying to trap him into some inconsistency they could use against him, but Jesus ignored them and stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, all right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

"No, Jesus," she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

Early one morning, Jesus came to the Temple courtyard to teach. He was tall and dark with dreadlocks, a long flowing robe and a staff like the staff of Moses. A diverse crowd of commuters had stopped to listen to his stories when they were interrupted. A crowd of Unitarian Universalists and skeptics had brought a white supremacist and flung him down upon the paving stones in front of Jesus and the crowd. "Teacher," they said, this man was caught wearing an SS tattoo and a Confederate flag. The law of public opinion says to stone him. What do you say?

Oh, my people, said Jesus. Were you not listening when I told you the story of the prodigal son? Were you not listening when I told you about the plank in your eye? All right, all right, said Jesus, go get a rock, but let the one who has never

treated a person like me with suspicion, never been afraid, never had a fleeting racist thought, be the one to throw the first stone.

One by one the Unitarian Universalists slipped away until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the white supremacist at his feet. Jesus prodded with his staff like the staff of Moses the man wearing the tattoos and the Confederate flag. The man looked up at his worst nightmare. Where are your accusers, said Jesus to the man. Didn't even one of them condemn you? No, Jesus, he said. And Jesus said, Neither do I. But go and sin no more.

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. Where were power and love and justice in this story? It moved around a bit, didn't it?

The sun is not shining. It is hard to pray. It is hard to be virtuous. It is hard to be cheerful. It is hard to be rewarded. It is hard to be religious when we're not perfect and neither is anyone else. We may not have the language of faith to do any more than accept our own imperfection. Accept me as I am, we say. Don't try to change me. So we rely on this culture of witness to make the world right, rather than a culture of self-transformation.

This afternoon we're going to talk about the movie Selma and I know some of you will be thinking "When do I get to seize that megaphone?" Rosemary Bray McNatt is right. We want to feel good and worthy before we demand change. But we will fail if we demand and protest our own innocence. We have to know ourselves, see ourselves, the way we never have before. We have to see ourselves the way strangers see us, the way God see us. To pick up the megaphone, to carry the banner, to take a stand, we have to take responsibility for the evil that is done and understand our part in it. We are not simple creatures. We are creatures who emerge from a complex, interconnected system of oppression and we bear responsibility for its existence and what it does. Turning around and seeing where we have come from, and taking responsibility for where we are now and the future we create is the work of a lifetime. It is the work of all of us.

In June of 1996, the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in front of the city hall in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Seventeen Klansmen assembled, protected by police in riot gear. They were confronted by three hundred anti-klan protesters. One officer remembers thinking: "Behind the faceshield, what bugged me was when the crowd chanted, "The cops and the Klan go hand in hand!" Inside you want to scream, "No! No! Don't you understand that is completely false? I'm here because it is my duty to protect all of you." Outwardly you stand, you say nothing and get ready to duck if necessary." (*The Story Of This Black Teen Who Protected A White Man From An Angry Mob Continues To Inspire* [The Huffington Post](#) | By Rhonesha Byng Posted: 10/29/2013 4:52 pm EDT)

At one point, a man sporting SS tattoos and a confederate flag shirt walked through the crowd. The crowd gave chase, including black teenager Keshia Thomas. It turned ugly when the crowd started hitting him with sticks and kicking him as he lay on the ground. Thomas remembers "When they dropped him to the ground, it felt like two angels had lifted my body up and laid me down." (Ibid) She literally pushed her way forward and lay down upon the man to protect him. Mark Brunner, a photographer, captured the entire incident. He thought "She put herself at physical risk to protect someone who, in my opinion, would not have done the same for her," he said. "Who does that in this world?" (Ibid) Today, Thomas continues to work to make a difference, by doing simple things each and every day. "The biggest thing you can do is just be kind to another human being. It can come down to eye contact, or a smile. It doesn't have to be a huge monumental act." The simplest things can make a difference.

We are here in this sacred place, not because we are innocent, with clean hands and pure hearts. We are here because we are not. So how can we, how should we be allowed to, make a difference? We cannot approach this work, we cannot embody anti-racism and anti-oppression, if we also want to be innocent. We cannot embody this work if we want to be blameless. We cannot embody this work if we also want to be righteous. We can only do this work by deeply understanding what will keep us from picking up the stone or the bat or the boot.

It requires of us time to unlearn everything we have learned about how to be with the stranger, to be with those in power, to be with those we love. It requires of us practice, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our church meetings, in

our chance encounters on the street. A little every day. While we are in this sacred process of unlearning, we need to stop ourselves from picking up the stone as much as we need to stop ourselves from picking up the megaphone.

“A time may be coming when the love we hold dear will require a more practical expression. It may no longer be enough simply to counsel peace in a world where there is no peace; as the life of this world grows more violent and dangerous, perhaps the time is coming when we must give up our culture of witness and pick up the heavier burden ... called discipleship. It may not be long before we risk becoming aimless hypocrites if we are not willing to put our own bodies and lives on the line to protect those who stand in harm’s way.” (McNatt, *ibid*)

We will be weak until we know ourselves to bear responsibility. We are the wilderness, and our power will come from the wilderness, and our love will come from the wilderness, and our justice will come from the wilderness and our cry of the heart for peace.