

A Burning Coal on the Tongue

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

September 16, 2007

I begin with this poem by Langston Hughes:

THEME FOR ENGLISH B

The instructor said,

*Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you---
Then, it will be true.*

*I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:*

*It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York too.) Me---who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white---
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me---
although you're older---and white---
and somewhat more free.*

This is my page for English B.

OK, I thought we would begin a little differently this year and most Sundays I will be giving you homework. Even though we say we are a 'free church' and a 'free faith,' it doesn't mean there is no cost. The free stands for freedom, not cheap. So your homework for this next week is to write a 600 word

essay answering the question 'Who Am I?' These will not be graded, unless of course you turn them in to me and I will grade them – not that the grades will ever be shared, however.

It's been some time now, but I can remember back to my adolescence and starting to wonder, in a new way, who I was. It was probably early in my teen years. For some of us it may begin earlier and for some later, but at some time we all begin to wonder who we are – really. Who we are at the deepest level; who is the real 'me?' We stop being children at some point and understand that we have a place in this world – a place as a self, connected with and independent of others. It is heady and it is frightening.

The world's religions and philosophies revolve around this question: who are we?

And most of us, I would guess, when we begin this, look for some help – we look to those older than us to see how we might become; we look to the arts – to stories that present us with pictures and possibilities.

All of us here in this room are products of the modern world. Most of us grew up in the US. All of us are here, now at least – and so the question of self is central – the individual self. It is a particularly American question, and ours is a particularly American faith.

The first principle of UUism is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Most religions begin with some statement about the largest category – god or the sacred, about what is sacred or transcendent. The Ten Commandments is an example of this. But we – well, we start with the smallest unit, with the individual person. I don't know if this is good or bad – no doubt it is some of both – but it is central to us. We are quite unlike other faiths in this – we begin at what is for others the end and end up with what is for them the beginning. We have no dogma and no creed – we choose what we believe. We encourage our children to find out what they believe perhaps more than trying to teach them what we believe.

Funny, isn't it? I grew up – I bet most of you did – being taught what to believe, but we turn that around. The self. Think about that – rather than teaching our children what to believe, we encourage them to find out what they believe. We do the same with adults, too. Is that good? Something to think about.

Back to my teen years. I read a lot, looking for images of the world that made sense. I read poetry and novels and short stories – younger generations have added movies and TV to that more I than I did. Some were good and some were not. I remember reading, especially Catcher in the Rye.

But there was another story I read when young that has stayed with me – one of the rare science fictions stories I ever read – never been a science fiction or fantasy reader. The story was by Harlan Ellison and the title is 'I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.'

It is a dystopian story, about a time when computers have taken over the world – those damn computers, probably all are PCs – one computer becomes supreme and it hates humans, notably because it is not human itself. There are just five people left and they are tormented by the computer endlessly. They live in despair and wish to die but the computer will not let them kill themselves – seemingly eternal, there is no exit from their pain. Awful, yes?

As the story goes on, the humans, always starving, hear that there is a large cache of canned food some distance away and they go on a quest. These stories always include a journey, don't they? The canned food is in a large ice cave, and they finally find it, but then discover they have no means of opening the cans.

In despair, one person kills another. Surprisingly the computer does not stop the murder and the remaining three quickly know their way out – they can kill each other and three are soon dispatched. But it leaves the last – Ted is his name – and before he can do anything, the computer turns him into an amoeba like creature with no appendages and no mouth – his torment is even greater – and hence the title – 'I have no mouth and I must scream.'

It is an awful image. Having no mouth, no voice, no way of expressing who you are or what is happening. Remember the movie *The Miracle Worker* about Helen Keller and the frustration then the triumph over finding a voice. We understand this, I believe – the importance of finding our voice. The civil rights movement – for People of Color, Women and gays and lesbians, has been described this way – of giving voice, or finding voice, and of telling our story.

The title for the sermon comes from – though I am sure all of you immediately recognized this – from the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah – that is in the Hebrew Bible by the way.

After the glory days under David and Solomon, lasting until around 900 BCE Israel split into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the South. The Northern Kingdom fell in about 720 BCE to the Assyrians, the Southern Kingdom stayed alive, though mostly as a vassal state, until about 590 when it fell to the Babylonians. The city of Jerusalem was in Judah.

The prophet Isaiah lived in the south, during the time of the Assyrian conquest of the North. He was a prophet for as many as 60 years [kind of like Daniel Shorr]. He saw the demise of the Northern Kingdom as a judgment, and thought the same would happen to the south. Like many of the classical Hebrew prophets, his message was one of faith and justice. Isaiah thought God hated the frills of faith – all of the ritual – and instead asked that his people be righteous. This was a constant theme of the prophets: what is demanded of us but justice and righteousness, to care for the poor and the grieving, to comfort the sorrowful.

And Isaiah was central to that prophetic tradition. He writes, at the beginning, that he could not speak because he was a sinner. And then, so the Bible claims, a seraphim – one of the angels that hovers around God – takes a coal with tongs and touches Isaiah's lips, and he is then free to speak.

So Isaiah prophecies – he rants and rails against the kingdom and the religious leadership – always in the name of God. He expects the nation to repent, and if they do, he foresees a time when the lion will lie down with the lamb and swords will be made into plowshares – yes, that it is that Isaiah.

We could use some of that today – the ranting and raving if not the swords into plowshares. Like many of you, I followed the testimony of Petraeus and Crocker this last week. It is obvious there is no plan to end this war, no suggestion that in a year things will be any different that they are now. No plan to bring American troops home; no plan for peace. It is a fiasco.

How do we give voice to the suffering so that it might be heard? How do we give voice to the many who have died? I lived in Washington D.C. for many years and would regularly go down to the Viet Nam Memorial and read names. They were men and women, individuals who had died, and that memorial stood in such contrast to the heroic memorials scattered here and there on our nation's great Mall.

We are in a time of memory right now. The High Holy Days of Judaism and Ramadan in Islam – a time to remember the underpinnings of faith. a time to remember for both great faith communities that God spoke to them – through the Torah or through the Koran - and called them to a higher vision of justice and righteousness. A time to remember the promise of the Holy – that we can lead better lives, that ethics matters more than theology or ritual, that our faith is intended to help us live better lives.

A time to remember. And so I have been thinking about death: over 3700 soldiers dead and an untold number of civilians; an untold number of Iraqis, perhaps as many as a million. And more to come. And on Tuesday we remembered the carnage of September 11, 2001. Who are they, all these people who have died, in part because of the idolatry of believers and the perversion of religion and politics.

Here is a poem by Billy Collins to remind us that all of these dead have names – they are like you and me, persons with families, likes and dislikes, persons: this was written a year after 9/11 and the names are from a list of those who died on that day:

Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night.

*A soft rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze,
And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows,
I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened,
Then Baxter and Calabro,
Davis and Eberling, names falling into place
As droplets fell through the dark.
Names printed on the ceiling of the night.
Names slipping around a watery bend.
Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.
In the morning, I walked out barefoot
Among thousands of flowers
Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears,
And each had a name --
Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal
Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.
Names written in the air
And stitched into the cloth of the day.
A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox.
Monogram on a torn shirt,
I see you spelled out on storefront windows
And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city.
I say the syllables as I turn a corner --
Kelly and Lee,
Medina, Nardella, and O'Connor.
When I peer into the woods,
I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden
As in a puzzle concocted for children.
Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash,
Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton,
Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.
Names written in the pale sky.
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
In the evening -- weakening light, the last swallows.
A boy on a lake lifts his oars.
A woman by a window puts a match to a candle,
And the names are outlined on the rose clouds --
Vanacore and Wallace,
(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unfound)
Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.
Names etched on the head of a pin.
One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel.
A blue name needled into the skin.
Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,
The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.
Alphabet of names in a green field.
Names in the small tracks of birds.
Names lifted from a hat
Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.
Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.
So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the
heart.*

Who will call to task our leaders? Where is our Isaiah? Would that there were a vengeful God to call us to task for how we ignore the poor, and keep so many in poverty, how health care is denied often

to those most in need; how we have spoiled our environment and refuse to take action; how we start a war and will not end it; how we have denied rights and privileges to group after group after group. How we have used faith as a sword – the list is long and we should probably be thankful that the God our current leaders say they believe in, and their religious supporters, does not exist.

This notion of giving voice and finding our voice is central to religion. It is what we do here, and I hope that we do it in two ways – one is to remember, like Jews do now or Muslims, and to know where we come from. Each of us has our own history – of joys and sorrows, failings and triumphs, and we should know our own story. What brought you here – this matters.

We are beginning signups for Chalice Circles today – small groups that form and meet throughout the year to discuss and share thoughts on spiritual issues and concerns – a great way for your voice to be heard and to hear other voices. Sign up after the service – I especially encourage newer members to do this, and some of you who have been in Chalice Circles for the last two years might want to wait and let others have a go at it first.

Giving voice – like last week in our rally, like remembering those who have died, like sitting here, in silence so that we might hear our own voice. Finding our voice – finding that burning coal that loosens what binds us. Giving voice.

Throughout the year I will be commenting on our 7 Principles – often in oblique ways like today. Our RE program is exploring them as well. This first one – about the individual – worth and dignity inherent in each of us might be understood as our historical conviction that we all are linked with what is holy – that God is in us and we are in God, that what is sacred lies in us, waiting to be expressed. That our stories have value and we should give them voice, and that we have a responsibility – we who are so privileged – to work to ensure that the voices of those who have been silent might be heard.

Amen