

Love and Light: A Sermon for Hanukkah 2015

Rev. Jan K. Nielsen

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Little Rock

December 5, 2015

Opening Words

*"Kindness is a mark of faith,
and whoever has not kindness has not faith. . . .
Even as the fingers of the two hands are equal,
so human beings are equal to one another.
No one has any right nor any preference
to claim over another.
You are brothers. You are sisters. You are children of God."*
- from the prophet Muhammad

Chalice Lighting

*"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*
- The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Reading

"Chanukah" by Lynn Ungar

Sermon

This isn't the sermon I had imagined for today. This is one of those Sundays when events in our world call the preacher to change plans. "The preacher," students of preaching are told, "must walk into the pulpit carrying the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other," a saying attributed to the 20th century theologian Karl Barth. A Unitarian Universalist minister, of course, needs to carry in her hand (at least metaphorically) not just one sacred book, but many, including the wisdom of the poets and the physicists, and these days, to know what's going on in our world, the 21st century preacher had better have in the other hand not only a newspaper, but also her Smartphone and maybe a tablet, too. No preacher can ignore the events of the day. It's been another hard week in our world. Today, both my responsibilities as a preacher and the ponderings of my heart call me to speak to what we, in these past days, have witnessed and heard.

How many of us, I wonder, when we heard the news of the shots fired in San Bernadino said, "No, no -- not again." It was three years ago this month, that I stood in a pulpit just forty miles away from Newtown, Connecticut after the shootings at Sandy Hook school and tried to find words to speak about an unspeakable tragedy which, in the years afterward, would be followed by still more equally unspeakable tragedies. A few weeks ago, we here lit candles and lifted our prayers for the people of Paris. Last week, we mourned the senseless loss of life at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado. And today, here we are again, this time holding close to our hearts the people of San Bernadino, and standing in solidarity with people everywhere who yearn for a world at peace. Violence may have been always a part of the human story but never has it been so easy for people bent on destruction to

hurt the common good. Almost anyone, it seems, can get what amounts to weapons of war and amass vast arsenals of guns and ammunition. And those communication advances that help keep us connected and in the know, like Smartphones and tablets and social media, also can make it easier to incite and coordinate those deadly acts that bring dread to our hearts. This week, along with our shock and sorrow, it's hard not to feel fear, to feel vulnerable -- and also to feel a deep anger. These past days, I've felt all of that -- fearful for the safety of the people I love, vulnerable no matter where we might be, angry that we, as a society, for all our smarts and sophistication, can't do better. It's time for us, all of us, to do whatever it takes to make, not just our homes and our country, but also our world a safer and more loving place for all beings.

I speak today as a minister and as a mother. Mothering has been so much a part of my spiritual journey and is so central to who I am that I cannot separate within myself the voice of the minister from the voice of the mother. As a minister, I am called to love and serve humankind. As a mother, I labored long and hard to bring three lives into the world and I continue to work long and hard to nurture those lives I so cherish. As a minister and as a mother, I cannot stand by and watch us pretend that things are okay and that there's nothing we can do to make our world more safe and more loving. Too many people have died; too many lives of the living have been torn apart. We have to do better. I don't for one minute think any of this is anything less than the intricately complex web of problems that we face. We are facing an epidemic of violence, made all the worse by easy access to instruments of death. (On Friday, *The New York Times*, for the first time in 95 years, ran a front page editorial calling for tougher gun laws.) We are facing terrorism, both foreign and domestic. We are facing racial injustice and racial strife. We are facing the disease of fear of difference -- fear of those who look or sound different, fear of those who come from somewhere else, fear of those who may live next door but practice a different faith and different way of life. Just because the problems are big and hard, though, is no excuse for sitting around and doing nothing.

The answers may be, in part, political and now I am not talking blue or red, liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican. I am talking about people coming together and finding a way to serve the common good. How we decide to live together in this world is politics and none of us can afford either to stay away from the political process or to stay uninformed. President Obama will address the nation tonight. I'll be tuning in and, whatever your political leanings, I hope you will too. And I hope that our leaders, and the rest of us, can put aside our differences to come together and find a way toward a nation where mass violence is not an every week event, a place where people can live their lives in peace.

I am convinced, though, that politics alone will not get us to a safer and more loving world. Our challenges are not only political; our greatest challenges, I believe, are spiritual. We gather here Sunday after Sunday because we believe that life is a gift to be celebrated. We gather here because we believe that all beings in this world are worth of honor and care -- that as the prophet Muhammad taught, "*Even as the fingers of the two hands are equal, so human beings are equal to another.*" We gather here because we believe that there are many paths to truth and many ways to know and name the Divine. We gather here because we believe in the power of humankind to make this life more caring and more just for all people and to build a safer and more loving world. This is our faith. Our faith calls us to stand up and say no to fear-driven prejudice and to stand by our Islamic sisters and brothers when a fear-driven culture would cast them aside as different and therefore suspect. Our

faith calls us to stand up for our values – love and kindness, compassion and peace – even when the world around us may seem to be headed down a very different path. Our faith calls us to stand by one another, the people in our families and here in our church, even when the stresses and tensions of living in this world, make us want to strike out and of course, the easiest targets are those we love and those who love us. As your minister, I say, now as never before, let love lead your words and deeds, especially with those closest to you. And when you, or someone else, slips and snaps out, step back, take a deep breath, and then let it go. If we turn on each other, fear will have won. If we stand by each other, love will win.

Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah. Jews around our world at sundown tonight will begin their celebrations of the time, generations ago, it seemed the light of their faith might go out for good. They tell again the story of the time the people in the temple had enough oil to keep the light of the lamp lit only for a day. But the oil lasted for eight days, long enough to make more oil, even during a time of war, so that the temple's light would shine on for all to see. The Hanukkah story is not all sweetness and light. It is a complicated story of battle and sacrifice, a story about a time of fear and terror when tyrants tried to snuff out the light of the Jewish faith. And, of course, the Jewish people would again face tyranny and oppression and worse.

The Hanukkah story is a Jewish story but it is also a human story. Life will always bring challenges, trouble, dangers, the story teaches us but, even so, life calls us to celebrate, to bring down from the shelf the lamp and the candles, *“to remember,”* as Lynn Ungar says, *“a life gentled by daily acts of domestic faith – the pot set to boil, the bed made up, the table set in calm expectation that then the sun sets we will still be here.”* This is a message for Hanukkah 2015, and it is a message for our time. Last week as I followed the news and shifted from Smartphone to tablet to newscasts, my body and my spirit yearned to set the tea pot to boil and the table with good food, to light candles, to listen to beautiful music, to be close to people I love. These small everyday acts, I realized, are acts of defiance in the face of fear, ways to be angry at forces that would keep our world in chaos, without turning on myself or the people close by. As I followed the news of the world, the more I read and heard, the stronger my sense that it is time that we, as a people of faith, make known to ourselves and to our world, as Lynn Ungar says, *“(our) presence, (our) loyalties, the truths for which (we) do not expect to have to die.”* If we let fear and anger divide us, or paralyze us, or silence us, the forces of fear can win and it is we who would lose. Some may say *“it would take a miracle to carve . . . a solid life out of the shell of fear,”* but *“I say,”* along with our poet, *“You are the stuff from which such miracles are made.”*

We live right in a now world darkened by despair. We live also, you and I, in a world of abundant light. Sometimes the light seems to go out – but I am here to testify: the light never goes out. We bring light to one another when we gather, when we light with our words and with our deeds the lamp of love, when we speak our truth that all beings in our world are worthy of honor. *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness;”* said Dr. King, *“only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate;”* he said, *“only love can do that.”* Whatever life may bring, it is my hope, for the sake of our children and our world, that we will let love lead our lives and wherever we go, give light.