

Worship transcript for May 31, 2020

Opening music

“Yonder Come Day”

Yonder come day! Day is a-breakin’
Yonder come day, o my soul
Yonder come day! Day is a-breakin’
Sun is a-risin’ in my soul!

Welcome (Rev. Robert Hardies)

Hello All Souls, and welcome to our online worship service. I’m so glad you’ve joined us.

My sermon this week is called “Holding On and Letting Go.” It’s a sermon, really, about saying goodbye.

As you know, we are in a season of goodbye. It’s hard for me to believe it, but next Sunday, June 7, will be my last sermon as your minister. On Monday, June 8 at 7:00 PM we will host on zoom a final Ritual of Gratitude and Love, to celebrate our long ministry together. I hope you will join us for these final opportunities to say goodbye.

Speaking of transitions, if you are watching our worship service on Sunday morning, I hope you’ll join us on Zoom at 11 am for our annual Bridging Ceremony in which we honor the young people in our congregation who have completed their high school years and are moving forward into new and exciting opportunities. You’ll find the log-in information for this service in the e-mail I sent to you this morning. Following the ceremony, we’ll be hosting a virtual coffee hour! I hope you’ll join us.

At this time, friends, I invite you to make yourself comfortable, and to prepare your home chalice, if you have one. As I invite Rev. Norman Allen to share our chalice lighting and opening prayer.

Chalice Lighting (Rev. Norman Allen)

Hello. If you have a chalice or a candle ready, I invite you to light it with me now. Take a moment to gaze into the light, to consider its meaning. In the course of our time together, this chalice flame will undoubtedly waver, flicker a little, grow strong and steady, then waver and flicker again. Like our own spirits, like our lives. As we enter into this time of worship, let us be mindful and unafraid of all that is changing, let us embrace the cycles of our lives, and let us remember the deep truths, the love, the light, that remains, always present.

Congregational Concerns, and Pastoral Prayer (Rev. Allen)

Each week we take a moment during the service to share our joys and our concerns. This week, in particular, we join in spiritual solidarity with members of the All Souls community who find

themselves in periods of deep and personal sorrow. We lift up our prayers and send thoughts of support and companionship to:

Anjali Jain, whose father, Dr. Indra Narayan Gupta, recently passed away. A seismologist, he was also a lover of movies and ping-pong;

We share our prayers with Mark Ewert, whose brother died of a heart attack in his sleep;

Jean Hubert, who has seen several family members suffer from COVID, and whose sister recently passed due to complications of the disease;

Jacqui Gallagher, whose dear friend Jack Sorensen has died after struggling with Parkinson's Disease; and

Esther Strongman, whose mother, Dessie Williams, has been diagnosed with inoperable stomach cancer.

In the silence that follows, I invite you to speak aloud the names of those whose joys and sorrows are on your hearts today. [Silence.]

Moving from that place of deep sorrow, I invite you into a place of deep joy, as the children of the All Souls Religious Education programs share with you a moment of gratitude.

[Video of Teacher Appreciations]

Thank you to all of the teachers who draw forth the wisdom of their students, and thank you to everyone who participated in that wonderful tribute.

Now, at the end of this week – this month – of profound challenges, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer and contemplation.

Spirit of life and of love. Spirit that moves through and among and within us. Spirit that brings us together and makes us one. We gather today in mourning. We mourn for more than 100,000 individual life journeys cut short by COVID-19 in this country alone. We mourn for the gifts those lives might have brought to the world. We mourn in solidarity with the families and friends who are left behind.

Spirit of life and of love, we gather today to mourn the lives lost to violence, violence often perpetrated by the very people who have vowed to protect and serve, violence directed against black men and women like George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. We lift up their names today knowing that they represent the many whose names we'll never know.

Spirit of life and of love, as people of faith, as people of the Unitarian Universalist movement, our grief comes partnered with anger – a good and healthy anger, anger against injustice, against racism and oppression, against violence in all its forms, against health systems that favor some

over others, against national leaders who call for increased violence when they might call for change and offer healing.

As people of faith, as people of the Unitarian Universalist movement, our good and healthy anger leads us to action. It leads us to the voting booth, to the hallways of power, and onto the streets. It leads us to self-reflection and self-assessment. We remember the words of Rev. Theodore Parker – and later of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. – who taught us that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. Spirit of life and of love, we hear those words and know that it's up to us to make them true.

May we rise to the occasion. May we answer the call. May it be so. Amen.

Music (All Souls Virtual Choir)

“Spirit of Life” (words and music by Carolyn McDade) (sung in English and Spanish)

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compassion
Sopla al volar, sube en la mar
Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida
Arraigame, liberame
Fuente de amor, ven a mi, ven a mi

Spirit of life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Reading (Rev. Hardies)

Our reading this morning is an All Souls favorite, a poem by Mary Oliver called, “In Blackwater Woods.”

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
Everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it
against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it
go,
to let it go.

Sermon: Holding On and Letting Go (Rev. Hardies)

Well, that was some real talk from the poet there, wasn't it? That part at the end, where she says: "To live in this world you must be able to do three things... To love what is mortal. To hold it against your bones, knowing your own life depends upon it. And, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

Those last lines of Mary Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods" make for a brief but remarkably thorough manual for living and for loving. Throughout my time at All Souls, I've returned to these words often, offering up to you their wisdom. And in this season of our letting go—as we

say goodbye to one another as minister and congregation—I thought we might revisit these wise words one last time together.

To put it all in context, though, I'd like to first share with you my definition of religion. Or at least one of them. I've got a few. This one is a riff on words spoken by a former colleague of mine, the late Rev. Forrest Church of All Souls Church in Manhattan. Forrest used to say that "religion is our human response to the dual reality of living and having to die." He believed that the process of finding meaning and joy in our lives, given our inevitable death, is what religion is all about.

My definition is a slight variation on Forrest's. For me, religion is our human response to the dual reality of loving and having to die. It seems to me that love and death are the two great mysteries of our lives, and that much of our spiritual journey is an attempt to better understand these mysteries—on their own, and in relationship to one another. And Mary Oliver gets right to the heart of the matter when she advises us that: "To live in this world we must, first, be able to "love what is mortal." In other words, we must learn to love what will die. Or if we think of it more broadly, we must learn to love what is transient. What is impermanent. In this broader sense, everyone and everything that we love is mortal.

And that means two things. It means, first, that love is incredibly precious. Because it doesn't last forever. The objects of our affection, like us, will one day be gone. So we should treasure love. Savor it.

But the other thing that loving mortals means is that love is risky business. There are no safe bets with love. (I like to say: you can practice safe sex, but you can't practice safe love.) To love what is mortal is by definition to risk losing what you love. Some of us have weighed this risk and wondered at times if love is worth all the broken hearts. But when we consider the alternative—to not love—we realize that this is a far worse fate than to have loved and lost. In the end, we don't really have much choice in the matter. After his failed courtship of Ellen Sewall, the great love of his life, Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal: "There is no remedy for love, but to love more."

And that's why the poet advises us to throw caution to the wind: to not only love what is mortal, but "to hold it against our bones knowing our own life depends on it." She's saying: Love fiercely. Love Passionately. Love extravagantly. Give yourself to love with all your heart, mind, body and soul. Because your very life depends upon it.

And it does, doesn't it? If we didn't already know it, this pandemic has made that clear. I've spoken with so many people who are living alone through this time, who tell me they haven't hugged another human being in nearly three months. For many—not all, but many—this lack of physical human contact is a source of loneliness and pain. We're discovering just how much our lives do depend on holding tight to those we love.

Last week, I read an article about an extended family that was gathering, for the first time since the pandemic began, to celebrate the birthday of the family matriarch. The article included a photograph of one of the woman's adult sons giving her a big birthday hug. But what was

remarkable about that hug was that, in order to protect his mom from contracting the virus, the son had hung between him and his mom a very thin plastic sheet, through which they hugged. The image bore poignant witness to the lengths to which we'll go to hold tight to those we love. And the lengths to which we'll go to protect those we love.

Friends, these last nineteen years have been, for us, a season of holding tight to what we love. Whether we were blessing and raising our children. Or celebrating our weddings and our unions. Whether we were caring for one another through hard times. Or bidding loving farewell to our dearly departed. And our work for justice was always born of our fierce and passionate love for the Earth, for our democracy, for Black Lives, for our immigrant brothers and sisters. And friends, we helped make a way for love when there was no way, helping lead the struggle for marriage equality.

We haven't always loved perfectly. But have loved faithfully and tenderly and passionately and covenantally. And in this way we've held one another close. We've held close all that we love.

And here's the beautiful thing about it. All that love? It's ours forever. None of the love we've shared over these last two decades goes away because we're saying goodbye. It lives on in your life together as a congregation. And it lives on in each of our hearts. I know it will live on in mine.

And you know what, the good news about our love is even better than that. Because not only will our love endure, over the years it has spread and multiplied like the loaves and fishes. Ever since we moved our services online, I have heard from countless former All Souls members, from family and friends of congregants, and from other Unitarian Universalists who've visited us only once or twice. They're scattered all over the country and the world. And their message has been that the love they experienced here at All Souls affected them in a profound way, and has lingered with them to this day. And they're so grateful to be reconnecting to All Souls now through online worship.

Over twenty years, friends, we've sowed so many seeds of love. And the wind has blown and scattered those seeds all over the world. To this day they take root and blossom. That's what love does.

I'm so grateful for all the love we've created and shared and given away over these last nineteen years.

And now, friends, for our final expression of love for one another, we can say goodbye. Goodbye is not the opposite of love. A good goodbye is another expression of love. This is the final piece of wisdom from our poem. That after we have held tightly to what we love, "when the time comes to let it go...we must let it go." Notice how the poet has to say "let it go" twice. That's because it's the hard part. Harder even than the holding on, sometimes, is the letting go.

But it matters. How we let one another go matters. It matters that we tell the story of our time with one another. It matters that we share all our good memories. It matters that we honor the loss and grief that some of us feel. That we honor whatever it is we're feeling. It matters that we

forgive one another our failures and celebrate together all that we've accomplished over two decades. A good goodbye is an act of love. A final blessing we can give to one another.

Now, most of you know that I'm a hugger. And it pains me that, because of this pandemic, we are unable to be together and embrace one another as we say goodbye. I wish I could hang a thin sheet of plastic out on the front steps of the church and through that protective barrier, give each and every one of you, a big goodbye hug.

But the hugs will have to wait for another time. Our online goodbyes and celebrations have been surprisingly and blessedly rich. And now, we have these last two Sundays together, as well as our final Ritual of Gratitude and Love on Monday June 8th at 7 PM. I know they will be beautiful moments of letting go. And I hope you'll be there for them.

But here is an important thing for us to remember. A letting go isn't merely an ending. It's a beginning. And a good goodbye isn't only a gift we give to one another. It's a gift we give to our future. To the future of this congregation.

As we say goodbye we bless and release one another, freeing us up to love again. It's a critical step in helping the congregation embrace the wonderful professional staff who remain with you after I leave, as well as the ministers who will come after me. A good goodbye is the first step to saying hello. To saying welcome. To the future, and to all that it will bring.

And I want you to know I will forever care deeply about this congregation and its future. Having shared twenty years of life with you, how could I not? You are a beautiful people. You are a strong, loving and resilient community. And as you approach the congregation's bicentennial, I have great faith in you and your future.

To live in this world, you must be able to do three things
To love what is mortal,
To hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends upon it.
And when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Friends, may God bless us in our holding on and in our letting go.

I love you. Amen.

Music (Rochelle Rice, vocals; Janelle Gill, piano)

“In the Real Early Morning” (Jacob Collier)

In the real early morning
With the sun slowly rising
I was walking out slowly, wandering free
When out in the distance, over the valley I saw an old friend waiting for me.
She was a young girl.

She was an old soul,
As fair as the ocean, timeless and free.
She was my mother.
She was my daughter.
She was my lover.
She's my everything an old friend could be

I said, "It's been such a long time since we have spoken
I've so much to say to you, I want you to know
I wish you could tell me all that you've seen here,
But we haven't got long now for soon you'll be fading
And soon I must go"

She said "mmm...I know the way home"

She said, "You are a soldier.
You are a father.
You are a wise man.
You are a friend.
You were my first love. I won't forget you.
I'm walking beside you
I was there when you started.
I'll be here til the end."

And now it's the evening.
There's a moon slowly rising.
There isn't much more that I wanted to know.
And I am alone now.
She isn't beside me no more,
But I feel no sorrow.
I'll come tomorrow.
I'll be on my way home.
I'll be on my way home.

Offertory/Benediction (Rev. Allen)

As we near the end of our service, I invite you to consider making a gift to All Souls. Throughout these strange and challenging days, our All Souls community has continued in its work, providing worship experiences like this one, offering a range of online gatherings and classes, reaching out to those in need, opening our doors – while following appropriate guidelines – to support the work of the Mutual Aid Network's food delivery efforts.

If you are able, I encourage you to support the many forms of All Souls' ministry. You can make a one-time or recurring donation by going to our homepage, by mailing a check to the church, or by texting your gift. Thank you for your generosity.

If you've joined us on Sunday morning, I hope you'll return at 11 am on Zoom for our annual Bridging Ceremony in which we honor the young people who have completed their high school years and are moving forward into new and exciting opportunities. You'll find the log-in information in the email that was sent out this morning. Following the ceremony, we hope you'll stick around for a virtual coffee hour and a chance to chat.

As we leave this sacred time together, let us consider again the chalice and its light. A beloved symbol of our community, it makes visible the Spirit of Life and of Love that brings us together across all divides. We extinguish it each Sunday to mark the end of our time in worship, but the light – the true light – cannot be extinguished. It remains ever-strong and ever-present, bringing us together across time and space. And for that we are forever grateful. Amen.

Postlude (Gordon Kent, vocals and piano; Jen Hayman, Amelia Peele, and Rochelle Rice, vocals)

“With a Little Help from My Friends” (Joe Cocker)