

Worship transcript for September 6, 2020

*Prelude (Lila Benavente, vocals; Elias Cohn, guitar)*

“Put Your Records On” (Corinne Bailey Rae)

*Welcome (Rev. Tony Coleman)*

Good morning, friends, members, and visitors of All Souls Church. My name is Tony Coleman, and I serve as minister of adult spiritual development. We welcome you to this week’s long-distance worship service. You’ve heard us say it before, and we’ll keep saying it: though our building is closed, our church is very much open.

This is the week before homecoming Sunday and the start of the new church year! We have a ton of exciting and enriching opportunities for you to deepen your spirit, grow your connections with our church, and join us as we continue to seek justice and build the beloved community. So, stay tuned for more information about all these opportunities.

This church is special, not only because of its history, not only because of its size, not only because of its location, but, more than anything else, because of you. So, we thank you for joining us this Sunday as we come together for worship.

*Hymn (members of the All Souls Choir)*

“I Know This Rose Will Open”

*Chalice Lighting (Rev. Louise Green)*

Hello All Souls.

I am Rev. Louise, Minister for Congregational Care.

I light the chalice today with the words of Donna Schaper.

How to find purpose in times like these?

Especially since we don’t know the name of the times

or what the old name for the old times really was

or what the new name for the new times will really be.

What story will we tell about ourselves during the pandemic?

I was fine.

I survived.

I coped.

Or:

I call myself beloved,

And the earth called my name back to me.

*Pastoral Concerns and Prayer (Rev. Green)*

On this Labor Day weekend, we begin with gratitude for so many kinds of workers in the stress of the COVID pandemic: hospital and healthcare workers, educators in schools and homes, delivery workers, restaurant worker, grocery store staff. May we honor those we know, and those we will never meet, as we thank them for their work.

This morning I lift these names and situations into our sacred space:

Bonnie Manwell, celebrating her birthday September 5, and surrounded by family and care in home hospice.

Bob Bloomfield, now in hospice care in the Clarksburg home he built, along with his spouse and caregiver Barbara McCann.

Justis Tuia, whose grandmother Edna died peacefully in her sleep in Honolulu on August 20. She was the matriarch of a beautiful extended family of six children, 16 grandchildren, and 25 great-grandchildren. Justis asks that we celebrate her full life, and hold him and family in love and support as they mourn this great loss. She will be sorely missed.

Your names into the silence that follows.

Prayer by Mary Luti

Bless, O Spirit of Life,  
he unanswerable  
The hypothetical  
The possible.

Bless the silence  
The shrug  
The hard to say  
The “who knows?”  
The “have to wait and see.”

Bless the markers  
The absence of markers  
The path  
The no path  
The indistinct  
The clearing.

Bless the arriving life  
The nothing-normal-about-it new normal  
The un-scouted

The future  
The unknown.

Bless you in it  
The presence  
The firm  
The knowing  
The power  
The same love

Bless you in it  
The center  
The serene  
The hidden near  
The gleaming  
The boundless mercy  
The same love

The same love Here and there  
The same love Now and when.

*Hymn 123 (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.

*Sermon (Rev. Coleman)*

The first church I ever attended was called Calvary Baptist. I was eight years old. The church would send around school buses to the apartment complexes in the surrounding area to pick kids up and bring them to Sunday school. The community was small and intimate. Everyone's name was prefaced with either “brother” or “sister.” On any given Sunday we would sing songs, play

games, and learn about Jesus. I loved church. My parents, on the other hand, weren't particularly big on going, and I didn't exactly understand why, at the time.

The one and only time they both did come, though, was the morning I was baptized. I can still remember getting suited up in my waterproof, baptismal gown. I remember walking out to the steps of the pool built right into the architecture of the sanctuary and situated directly behind the pulpit. I remember looking out and seeing the smiling faces of the adults, including my parents. I remember the pastor putting one hand on the small of my back and the other over my face as he dunked my entire body backwards into the chilly, holy water. And I remember the gasp I made when I came back up for air, and the laughter and applause that followed.

What formed my spiritual life even more than my baptism, though, was what happened just a few hours afterward. The pastor came to our house, I thought for a celebratory chat. I thought that maybe, now that I was officially a Christian, he might be there to talk to me about what I do next—some new set of Bible verses I needed to memorize or some special acts of charity I needed to take on. Instead, he was there to talk to my parents. He was there to explain to them that their relationship was sacrilegious because it was interracial. I don't know what the pastor thought about my racial background before the Sunday when he met my parents, but, I do know that he thought it was wrong. Quoting some passage from the leather-bound Bible he carried in tow, he told my parents that people of two different races cannot make a home together. My black father and my white mother had committed sin, he explained.

That was my last Sunday at Calvary Baptist. The intimate and loving community that had prompted me to take the plunge into those chilly baptismal waters, was nothing more than a lie, I learned that Sunday. However, I was still convinced that there was some church out there that could do this Christian thing better than they. I was still convinced of a myth, that there existed, somewhere, a better, more perfect, more faithful community than they.

So, we went “church shopping.” We went to a mega church with hymn lyrics scrawling on LED screens. We went to a smaller, more progressive Methodist church. We went to Black churches and white churches, churches with big praise bands and churches with formal choirs. We searched, Sunday after Sunday, for a place to grow closer with Jesus, and in every case, something went wrong. Folks quietly disapproved of my family or the pastors talked too much about money for my parents' taste; the leadership proved to be corrupt or the membership felt fake. Still, we decided, even if church is broken, even if the human inventions of race and class stood in the way of a communal experience of our faith, we could still have a relationship with Jesus. Jesus, who is fundamentally good, fundamentally right, fundamentally perfect. That's what I thought, at least, until some years later, I encountered the following biblical scene in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 15:22-28. The text reads:

22 A Canaanite woman ... came to [Jesus], crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”

23 Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

24 He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

25 The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

26 He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

27 "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

28 Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed at that moment.

When Christian ministers preach about this text, they tend to focus on the woman's devotion and persistence, and they tend to highlight Jesus's mercy. What folks tend not to discuss so much, though, is the fact that he calls her a dog. However, I couldn't stop wondering when I first encountered this text: how could a perfectly compassionate savior call another human being a dog? How could he look down at this hurting person and dismiss her in such a blatantly shaming manner?

Let's keep in mind, friends, that this was before the age of the canine companion. This was well before a time in which you might see a person pushing a stroller down the street, look into the carriage and be almost as likely to see a chihuahua as you would be to see a child. This was before the reign of the French bulldog, before dogs were considered the adopted children of the human family. In the ancient world, dogs were seen as dirty, vile creatures, lowly and completely other from human beings. To call a person a dog was to enact a separation between them and you that justified treating them like an object, justified ignoring their needs, justified dismissing their humanity. And what's more, Jesus calls this woman a dog for no more complicated a reason than the fact that she was different. He was an Israelite, and she was a Canaanite. He was one of the chosen, and she was a person who worshipped a different god, a person who belonged to a different ethnicity, a person who lived across the river. "I am here for the children of Israel," Jesus says, "It is not right to take what belongs to the children and throw it to the dogs." When I encountered this moment in Jesus's ministry, I had to stop and ask myself a pain-ridden question: was my Lord and savior just as guilty of racial othering, just as susceptible to identity-based prejudice, as that close-minded pastor at Calvary Baptist? First, the myth of the perfect community failed me and, now, I struggled as I wondered, perhaps my image of Jesus was nothing but a myth, too.

But, of course, we live in a world built out of myths, don't we? There are the myths that organize society and justify oppression: the myths of otherness and foreignness. And, there are the myths that animate our lives, the myths that come to direct and define us. The myth of immortality, for instance, that justifies unthoughtful actions in our youth or beyond. There's the myth of the perfect partner, the one who will complement us in all the right ways, the one who will always remember special dates in the year or do the dishes without needing to be asked, the one who won't ever nag us about things that don't matter. There is the myth of infallibility, the myth that somewhere out there exists some leader, some community, some religion, some church that finally has it all right, that is immune to the problems everywhere else, where the people are always kind and the teachings are always correct and the sense of belonging never falters.

You don't need me to tell you that, at one point or another, these myths are bound to break and shatter all over our laps. It is only a matter of time before they crack open and let out all the fears they were intended to conceal. Maybe it happened to you when you realized that your parents don't actually know everything, that they're just flying by the seats of their pants, like everybody else. Or maybe it happened when you realized that you weren't as strong as you thought, when

that diagnosis came or that bout of grief knocked you off your feet. Maybe it happened when you learned that a person you dearly admired wasn't exactly who you thought they were. Whatever it was, you probably already know the feelings of doubt and fear and vulnerability that come when your myth crumbles into oblivion.

When our myths do shatter, the temptation is to go in search for something else. The temptation is to go find another partner or friend group or church or savior, something else that will help us maintain the myth that the infallibly right thing is out there, somewhere, if only we try hard enough to find it.

However, friends, I believe that the story of the Canaanite woman from the gospel of Matthew presents us with another way. This story suggests that when our myths finally shatter, we don't have to go looking for something else to replace them. Instead, what the Canaanite woman shows us is that we have the opportunity to claim our own story. Jesus condemns her as foreign, other, and subhuman. Rather than leave and go in search of some new source of healing, some new and more perfect teacher, what the Canaanite woman does is claim the power and dignity of her own story. She refashions language and pierces through the myth of perfection to help this man see how he can become part of her story. She names her identity. She owns the truth of her own humanity with elegance and poise.

That's the charge, as I see it, friends—to disavow the myths that have kept us chasing perfection and seeking safety. Myths we've long kept about our own goodness or wokeness or righteousness are shattering in light of new understandings of white supremacy. Myths we've long held about our country's immunity to disease or even fascism are crumbling all around us. In the midst of all these broken myths, we may be tempted to think that with the right training, the right protocols, the right vitamins, the right actions and behaviors, we will finally arrive. We may think that with the right tweaking, we may finally "get it," "fix it," "find it." Instead, friends, what we can do is let these myths go and take up our own story. That's what shattered myths present the opportunity to do: to take the pieces of what we knew and to craft with them the story of who and what we are. For my own part, though the myth of my perfect Jesus and the myth of my perfect church shattered, I found a new set of truths. I discovered in my broken myths a new way to experience Jesus' teachings. I discovered what matters most to me about religious community. And with these truths, I am creating my own story with the divine, each and every day.

The alternative, I believe, friends, is to persist in a world of myth, to search for a new fantasy after the last one shatters, to turn our lives into an endless seeking of partners that are perfect, for teachers who are never wrong, for religions that have immaculate pasts, for communities that never fail. We can spend our lives managing our myths, or, we can do the liberatory, life-giving, and life-changing work of defining our own story.

Somewhere out there, I like to think, there circulates a story, passed down from generation to generation. It's the story of a mother who loved her sick daughter so much that she unrelentingly pursued a way toward healing. I like to think the story goes that this mother encountered a man, a foreigner, an Israelite, whom everyone said was a great healer. And, I like to think the story goes that she asked that man to help her daughter. And even though he said no and called the mother a

dog, I like to think the story goes, she helped him to see the greater truth that human need has no ethnicity. I like to think that maybe they call this story “The Mother and the Israelite Man,” and I like to think that this story serves as a reminder, to all who hear it and know it, that no one can define us but us.

Ashe and Amen.

*Music (members of the All Souls Junior Choir)*

“No Scars to Your Beautiful” (Alessia Caracciolo)

*Offering (Rev. Green)*

We ask that you consider your generosity to All Souls, our work with each other, and our work in the world. Thank you for pledges, and your online offering gifts now, 10% of which go to our assistance fund for people who need it right now. Your financial support is always in our hearts and appreciated.

*Hymn (members of the All Souls Choir)*

“Building Bridges”

*Benediction (Rev. Coleman)*

Let us go forth into this week, ready to share and claim our story, ready to encounter ourselves, ready to show up for one another, and ready to live into this world, fully, wholly, and deeply. Amen.

*Music (members of the All Souls Junior Choir)*

“Time After Time” (Cyndi Lauper and Glen Ballard)