

Yearning to Breathe Free

*A Sermon preached by Pilar Millhollen for Independence Day, July 8th, 2018
Readings: from “Civil Disobedience,” (Henry David Thoreau); Ezekiel 2:1 – 5*

Do you know about the night Thoreau spent in jail? Well, it’s a 1969 play about Unitarian transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, but it also describes the actual event that inspired one of Thoreau’s most famous works, the essay “Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau, a northeastern poetic writer and philosopher, refused to pay a poll tax – what was then a general per person federal tax – for six years because he did not want his tax dollars to fund the Mexican-American War, where the U.S. had annexed large parts of Mexico and were protecting slaveholders in the southwest. On a hot day in July, Thoreau, who had been living alone in his tiny cabin on Walden Pond, went into town and was arrested by the local sheriff for his tax delinquency. He only spent that one night in jail, but legend has it that his friend and colleague, Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to visit him that night and asked, “Henry, what are you doing in there?” to which Thoreau replied, “Ralph, what are you doing out there?”

Thoreau was fortunate; he was a white, educated, upper class man living in Concord, Massachusetts and had the ability to do what he did and write what he did without major physical consequences. The same could not be said for some of his peers such as Frederick Douglass or the ill-fated John Brown. And he was not the only one to refuse to pay the tax based on moral grounds. But the essay that he wrote in order to lift up the reasons why he decided to break the law became a significant contribution in the struggle to reconcile moral conscience with law based on a constitutional democracy that was a grand experiment in putting an ideology of justice to the test. What does it mean, Thoreau found himself asking, to be a moral human being under a government that is enacting immoral policies? The answer, he concluded, was that as long as the government commits unjust actions, individuals have every right – indeed every obligation – to obey their moral conscience and refuse to participate in such policy. “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly,” he declared, “the true place for a just man is also prison.”

I’ve been hearing lately from the great prophets of our time a reminder – a reminder perhaps because we are in the month in which we celebrate a generic freedom for all that we equate with the stars and stripes of this American flag. That cry, to “let freedom ring!” is probably the most important thing that we can claim as people living in this unique nation; but with that declaration comes a massive obligation. The reminder is to turn our gaze toward our history because we have been here before. The particularities of this era are reinventions of another, and however frustrating or demoralizing that feels, I would offer that it is actually empowering. Because we have been here before, we know what we must do to counteract the wickedness in high places that challenges us to actively choose freedom, to actively participate in our body politic in order to make the phrase, “land of the free and home of the brave” descriptive rather than prescriptive. It is a high call that we have inherited from the prophets of Israel, and it’s wildly appropriate that the lectionary chose this particular passage from the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel, who found himself possessed by a spirit that would not let him proclaim anything other than the high moral demand of a people who were complacent and complicit in the face of hegemonic powers. Ezekiel really goes through it in this book; we find him today at the beginning of his call, right after he sees the fantastic vision of the four living creatures with four wheels that followed the spirit of God everywhere. If you’ve read the whole story it’s actually pretty gruesome; God is so angry God casts threats of pestilence, famine, warfare and

even cannibalism, with the recurring promise that the people will all be “scattered to the wind,” disjointed, torn from community, shattered. The dark prophecies stay dark for a good part of the book, and God puts Ezekiel through a personal hell – at once compelling him to speak to the rebellious houses of Israel and of Judah – and then striking him with silence so that they cannot hear him. God commands Ezekiel to lie on his side for 390 days as a kind of sacrifice for the number of years that Israel was punished, and then turn over and lie on his other side for another 40 days, the number of years that Judah suffered punishment. Just in the first nine verses of this chapter, the scribes use the word “rebel” or “rebellious” to describe the people of Israel seven times and then it’s repeated throughout the book, like a lament that God simply can’t get over; by chapter 22 a despondent God charges the nation, “the princes of Israel in you, everyone according to his power, have been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you.” I almost never use the phrase, “the Bible is clear about...” but I’m going to say, the Bible is crystal clear about what God has to say when the vulnerable suffer abuse.

Our modern prophets – Mama Ruby Sales, Rev. William Barber and Rev. Traci Blackmon, Rev. Jacqui Lewis and many, many more, are declaring nothing all that different than what Ezekiel declared so long ago: the country is suffering from a heart problem, a kind of walking away from the moral convictions that anchored us into a democratic context several hundred years ago. They were never perfect, but the writers knew this and put in the language of the Constitution a clause, a striving toward, when they hold us to the promise to form a “more perfect union.” Thank God for our modern prophets who keep repeating, and will continue to repeat until we admit and internalize this reality, that “What we are dealing with isn’t un-American, it is deeply American.” They refer to it almost liturgically, as “call and response;” we hear a call to justice, we feel a call to equity, a stirring that compels us to say, something is deeply wrong in this country when the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer; when we make laws to create a more perfect union and then tear them down in a backlash of fear when this striving-to-be-more-perfect union tips the scales in favor of more people instead of fewer – as if that were a bad thing. The status quo can feel safer sometimes, can’t it? But there comes a day, in the words of Phoebe Eng, when remaining the same becomes more painful than the risk to grow. And it is in the resistance of inertia, this pushing forward in the risk of growth that we’re called to, not just as Americans through our founding documents, but through our Christian and Jewish ancestors. It’s right here! The call and response isn’t original; it is running through the blood in our veins, it is the legacy of the great cloud of witnesses, our ancestors who were challenged with the same call and response in the prophets like Ezekiel and subsequently in the good news of the gospel of Jesus. At its core it begs the question, what are we going to be in light of what we have been?

In 1886, the Statue of Liberty was erected by French sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi in honor of the end of slavery in the United States. It stands as the symbolic gateway to Ellis Island where millions of immigrants have voyaged into this country, and has become a symbol for a radical American welcome to anyone who seeks shelter on our shores. But there are a few things I didn’t know until recently that most history books don’t tell you about Lady Liberty: that she was not in fact a gift from the French government to the American government; she was paid for as a joint effort between various state committees who raised funds for her creation over many years, with a little help from the French who were having their own doubts about democracy. That black people and women of various colors in this country protested the project as a cry against the hypocrisy of the so-called end of slavery against the reality of

Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the silencing of women's voices in the public sphere. But most importantly, I didn't know that Liberty was originally designed to hold not a torch lighting the way toward democracy and freedom, but a chain with broken shackles in her hand, a visual image of the end of the outrageous injustice that America had practiced for so long. I guess we weren't ready to really own those shackles in light of what we had been. So Bartholdi, in response to mounting pressure, agreed to change Liberty's design so that she held a torch, relegating the broken chains to her feet in an often unnoticed and tepid nod to the slave legacy, which says everything about who we were and who we are. "O mortal," God said to Ezekiel, "I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me."

And yet, as we press on, as we push to become a more perfect union, our job as people of this liberating spirit is to tell the stories of what we have been, not to deny them. To tell the stories of the prophets of Israel because they are mirrors to our stories as Americans. To delve into the truth of history in light of our prophetic encounters with justice even as we fail again and again, even as we are disappointed when we prevail only to see the response be an epic pushback against a more just society. When we don't tell the truth about where we have been, we cannot press forward into where and who we want to become. We raise up a lamentation against the princes of our land now as our ancestors did; for "whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." Whether they hear or refuse to hear, they shall know that there has been a prophet among them. Our responsibility is not to control the outcomes of events, but to faithfully respond to such events. We cannot hope to save the world by our own hands, but we can add to the salvation of the world in the course of history by refusing to be complicit when it bends toward destruction instead of creation. "You've got to deal with the nightmare," Rev. Barber says, "in order to have prophetic hope."

The poet Emma Lazarus, who wrote the words to which we sang our anthem this morning, became famous for this poem entitled "The New Colossus," which was a sonnet about Lady Liberty while she was being created. But Lazarus, born to a wealthy New York family of Sephardic Jewish descent, had little personal attachment to immigration or the sense of seeking refuge in a land that offered the promises that America did. Her writing was inspired initially by the Civil War and abolitionist movement, but in 1881, after seeing influx of destitute Jewish refugees fleeing pogroms in Russia, she became deeply interested in immigrant rights in light of her heritage and the anti-semitism that for so long she had ignored. Before "The New Colossus," she penned numerous works expressing the pain of Jewish identity and the injustice of being a stranger in a strange land; she advocated for socialist economic policies in response to the poverty she witnessed among refugees, and she also co-founded the Hebrew Technical Institute, which provided vocational training for Jewish immigrants. By the time she was commissioned to write "Colossus" as a fundraiser for the Statue of Liberty, she already had more than 50 poems in mainstream media, many addressing bigotry while looking toward a vision of the American dream where race, creed and class did not prescribe where the individual American journey would venture. She once wrote in a letter that though almost all her friends were Christian, "I am perfectly aware that this contempt and hatred underlies the general tone of the community toward us, and yet when I even remotely hint at the fact that we are not a favorite people I am accused of stirring up strife and setting barriers between the two sects."

She told the truth about her history, the truth about our history, even when it would be denied by the same spirit that could not face Lady Liberty's broken shackles held high over New York Harbor. She told the truth, and also penned the prophecy of the yet-to-be. Thoreau famously declared, "if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon

possessed me to behave so well?" What he meant, of course, was a regret that he had not sooner told the truth about who we have been and what we ought to become. Because of their writings, Thoreau and Lazarus join the ranks of the mostly deeply American figures of all time, prophetic voices ringing out against the clamor of ignorance, the buzzing of denial, and the thunder of shame that drives so many of our most unjust policies. Lazarus calls Lady Liberty Mother of Exiles, bursting with pride in her embrace of those at the bottom, no matter where they come from or who they are, they are welcome...

*Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore...
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

Lady Liberty does not stand static; she has one foot in front of the other, striding forward in motion. We are not yet there. We have not yet fulfilled the promise of the new Colossus, embracing the huddled masses yearning to breathe free, moving forward together, not one step back. But in our refusal not to respond, in our standing on the side of the least of these, we too are yearning to breathe free. As we speak to what we were, and who we are, and what we have promised to become, we are in fact learning to breathe free.