

BLESSED UNREST

A sermon preached by David Robb

All Souls Church, August 9, 2009

Text: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others. . . One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God."

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St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians 2:4, 3:13-14

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As many of you already know, I grew up in the Midwest and was raised in an evangelical Protestant tradition. One vital aspect of worship in that tradition was the congregational singing that was always vibrant, heartfelt and invigorating. Every once in a while hymns from that early experience will come back to me, get into my head, and I find myself recalling those early experiences. That happened to me the other day with a hymn that is quite well known in evangelical Christian circles, by a very well known hymn composer, Fanny Crosby. I suspect that some of you too might be familiar with it. The words are these:

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine
O what a foretaste of glory divine.
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.
This is my story, this is my song
Praising my savior all the day long.

The tradition in which I was raised had both a strong commitment to individual salvation and to social welfare. Most of the people I knew had an equally sincere commitment to bettering people's lives through spiritual development and to the relief of human suffering. And I am in truth very grateful for the foundation of that religious tradition and the way it shaped my early life.

As I matured, however, I began to feel uneasy about the religious message of that tradition. I was at pains to put that concern into words at the time. But I remember sensing from an early age that God probably had a lot more important things to do than to worry about my personal well being and moral development. I sensed also that the religion of my upbringing was meant to address a vague

uneasiness in people, a certain quality of anxiousness. You can hear it in the words to that popular hymn: “Blessed Assurance.” People it seemed to me, were anxious and in need of a sense of assurance, in need of a special kind of security that they believed only religion could provide.

Often this anxiety was focused on the problem of salvation, a term that did not make a lot of sense to me as a young person. What I perceived was that people felt shame or guilt for their misdeeds and apparently found solace in the idea that God could forgive these and assure them of an eternal salvation after this life is over. While the adults in my world seemed to find comfort and security in this idea, I did not. I found the whole idea of heaven and eternal life to be not only puzzling, but scary. I had nightmares about living in a setting called “eternity,” a place where time had no meaning, where there were no beginnings and no endings, just a constant repetition of things. The idea of change did not seem possible, and that idea alone was truly frightening to me. Life would just keep going and going—like the Energizer bunny.

More than that, I felt a deep discomfort about the strong emphasis on individual fate and individual salvation. All the focus was on getting people to the point where they knew they were “saved.” That was the “blessed assurance” people sang about. And you can hear in the words of that hymn: how focused it is on individual salvation: “Jesus is *mine*,” “this is *my* story,” “this is *my* song, “praising *my* savior.” In the end, I felt uncomfortable with all that focus on “me” and “mine.” I began to feel that this kind of religion was not so much about God or Jesus or my neighbor, or anyone else at all. It all came down to *me*—*my* salvation, *my* blessed assurance, *my* happiness. It all seemed to me to be a not-so-subtle form of selfishness that could only lead in the end to self-righteousness. More than that, I was becoming very uncomfortable with the idea of a God who could care only about those who did whatever it was they had to do to be “saved” and rejected everyone else, including members of other great religious traditions with whom I was friends or knew about in other parts of the world. Looking back on it all now, I guess you could say that at a relatively early stage of my religious development I was already becoming, theologically, a Universalist. You of course know the old saw: How do you tell a Unitarian from a Universalist? Universalists believe God is too good to damn anyone to Hell; Unitarians believe they are too good to be damned.

As I continued to mature, I found an interesting thing happening. I did reject some of the central tenets of the religious milieu in which I had been nurtured. But I did not reject religion itself. I kept studying, reflecting, listening to others, opening up to new ideas and insights that helped me to a deeper understanding of what I had been taught. I think I was like that kid who was thrilled when he discovered to his heart’s delight his parents’ Christmas gift to him was a very large pile of manure. He leapt into it with glee and the immortal words, “I just know there has got to be a pony in here somewhere.!”

I think even at a young age I thought that a religion that was primarily about “blessed assurance,” was a religion for the anxious and worried, not a religion for the appropriately confident and hopeful. It was a religion whose major appeal was to a self-seeking that seemed even to a boy far from a healthy

self-regard-- a self-seeking that substituted an anxious concern about personal salvation for an authentic concern for the well-being of the world and our fellow citizens. It was a religion that seemed would lead to only two outcomes: either, on the one hand, to a permanent condition of despair about ones own goodness and purpose, or, on the other hand, to a smug self-righteousness that would lead one to become permanently alienated from most of the rest of the world, and to feel unjustifiably superior.

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From my earliest reflections about religion, I would say that what I was motivating me was not a quest for a “blessed assurance;” rather I was being driven by a “blessed unease.” And as I have continued to reflect on my faith and continued my religious journey through a variety of explorations, I would say that same “blessed unease” that has always accompanied me is probably the most characteristic way that I have experienced God throughout my life. While I believe that religion may offer profound comfort to any of us in times of distress, I am with Forrest when he says religion should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable—both conditions that might describe any one of us at any given moment. Many believe of course that a right relation with God is a path to peace of mind and financial prosperity. But my experience of God has always been the opposite. It is God who has always gotten me into hot water. It has been God, that “blessed unrest,” that has urged and compelled me to do something that I would never have done if left to my own devices—like go to the streets in protest, or to jail.

I deeply suspect that it is a “blessed unease” that is the most characteristic experience that unites all of us who gather to worship as Unitarian-Universalists, that draws us to a continuing exploration of faith and our religious identities, howsoever each of us might define that in substantively different ways. It is a “blessed unrest” that drives us to seek, to question, to understand more perceptively. It is a “blessed unrest” a holy dissatisfaction that is deeply disquieted by the suffering of millions of our brothers and sisters in this country and all around the globe, and compels us to do what we can for the sake of social justice. It is a “blessed unrest” that unnerves us about the rapid despoliation of the earth’s resources, of the unrelenting drive to produce more and more nuclear weapons and arms of all kinds, of the unconscionable disproportion of the world’s concentration of great wealth and even greater poverty in our own country and throughout the world. And it is a “blessed unrest” that compels us to put our time and money and imagination to work to counter these development even when the odds seem stacked against us.

Blessed Unrest is also the title of a splendid book by Paul Hawken, a long-time activist on behalf of issues related to both environmental and social justice. It is a book that I commend to anyone who is active in the causes of peace or social justice or reclaiming the environment. It is a book that will inspire and encourage us all, for Hawken argues that we are all part of the largest social movement in history. It does not look like a movement because it is not directed by a clear ideology—it includes conservatives and progressives—and does not have definable leadership. But it is a movement nonetheless that includes

millions of people world-wide all committed to the task of making this planet safe for all its people and all God's children. Any of us who work in some small way on that agenda are part of this monumental human movement.

Hawken took his title—*Blessed Unrest*—from a conversation between two highly regarded artists—the dancers and choreographers Martha Graham and Agnes De Mille. DeMille, who had choreographed a ballet for Aaron Copeland's setting, *Rodeo*, had met for dinner with her friend and fellow choreographer, Martha Graham. She was quite despondent because of what she felt was the degeneration of the piece over time due to cast turnover. After dinner she recorded the conversation and Graham's comments to her that she later published in her biography: *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*. DeMille begins by describing her own state at the time:

“I was bewildered and worried that my entire scale of values was untrustworthy.

I confessed that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be.

Martha said to me, very quietly:

“There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. . . You have to keep open and aware directly to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. . . No artist is ever pleased.”

“But,” DeMille interrupts, “then there is no satisfaction?”

To which Graham responds:

“No satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.”

It is that “blessed unrest,” that “divine dissatisfaction” that Martha Graham senses at the core of every artist's calling that I suspect is also at the core of every authentic religious quest. That quest does not lead to a divine safety net or any heavenly insurance policy of a “blessed assurance.” It is to be discovered only in that journey into a deeper and deeper mystery, one in which we may never rest completely at ease or completely satisfied, one in which we can never be certain we have the truth. That is the adventure of faith, an adventure to be sure that will eventually lead us to a deeper awareness of our authentic self. But not to a self that is secure in its own rightness and rectitude, not the self that is certain in the knowledge that it has been “saved.” The self to which religion must lead us is a self that is aware of the profound interconnectedness of our being with the life of all other sentient beings on this planet, a self whose ultimate security is inescapably bound to the security of all peoples and the security of our earthly home that sustains all life.

Here are the reflections of one pilgrim on this sacred journey describing the life to which a divine dissatisfaction will probably lead. The writer is Barry Lopez, and it is taken from his book *Arctic Dreams*:

How is one to live a moral and compassionate existence when one is fully aware of the blood, the horror inherent in life, when one finds darkness not only in one's culture but within oneself? If there is a stage at which an individual life becomes truly adult, it must be when one grasps the irony in its unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox. One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.

“Leaning into the light.” Perhaps that is as good a way of putting it as any. Perhaps that is what we who gather together for worship week after week seek to engender in ourselves and encourage in one another. Not a quest for a “blessed assurance,” but life that is lived with grace and gratitude, one that accepts the paradoxes and unanswered questions, but one that continues in the face of all odds to *lean into the light*. Or as the poet Adrienne Rich once so beautifully put it:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save.
So much has been destroyed.
I have cast my lot with those
 who, age after age, perversely,
 with no extraordinary power
Reconstitute the world.

“Natural Resources”
from *The Dream of A Common Language*