

On Pandemics, Waves and Peace
First Parish Church in Weston, UU
Outdoors in the Memorial Garden
March 15, 2020 / The 3rd Sunday in Lent /
The last in-person service as the Pandemic began

Opening Quotation:

We have nothing to fear but fear itself. ~ FDR

Chalice Lighting:

This morning we light our chalice in honor and recognition of many ways we are both amazingly and frustratingly connected to people around the world. All of us, regardless of opinion or party or country – All of us, regardless of race, class or gender, are caught up in an inescapable web of mutuality, where, (to paraphrase Martin Luther King,) a threat to our wellbeing *anywhere* can become a threat to our wellbeing *everywhere*.

We therefore light this chalice in recognition of the profound truth once summed up the Rev. William Sloane Coffin a few decades ago, namely that:

The world is too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

May those words guide us and be with us in the days to come. Amen

Reading:

Pandemic by Lynn Ungar 3/11/20

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)

Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

Benediction by Jeff Barz-Snell

Go forth from this place while maintaining distance, but fully aware that you are not alone.
Go forth from this place knowing that your anxieties, fears and concerns are not unique, but
harbored much in the same way by those around you.
Go forth with some understanding and hope that the best thing any of us can do right now is take
care of ourselves and be kind to those around us.
Go forth, knowing that you are part of a larger whole, a greater community and a loftier
kingdom, one we usually only faintly discern, but is just as real as the breeze and sunshine in our
midst this day.
Go forth, knowing that we are all more dependent on one another and a larger Grace than we
most times care to admit. May that Grace keep us all in the coming days and weeks.
Amen.

Sermon for Sunday, March 15, 2020, outdoors in the Memorial Garden:

Thank you for joining us this morning. Our world and lives have changed abruptly and will need to be this way for a short, albeit memorable period of time. Everyone alive on the planet today will share an experience that very few of us have ever had before. A pandemic like this has not occurred during almost all of our lifetimes.

I read a powerful opinion piece in Friday's *Boston Globe*. It was by the Italian journalist, Mattia Ferraresi. He was writing from his apartment in Lombardia in northern Italy, where he has been quarantined with his wife and two sons for more than ten days. He describes how overwhelmed the hospitals are right now in Italy, and the heartbreaking decisions that doctors are forced to make, as they manage a growing number of critically ill patients and must ration treatment. He describes doctors weeping quietly in the hallway before they go into a hospital ward to decide who gets to be put on a ventilator and live, and who does not.

As I read this article and other reports over the last few days, I have had an image pop up in my mind. Imagine that a massive tidal wave has been spotted off the coast of New England. It is a wave so large and so powerful that it could potentially wash through and decimate large sections of Eastern Massachusetts including where we are standing/sitting right now. We know two things about this never-before-seen tidal wave or tsunami: first, we know with some certainty that it will hit our region sometime in the next 12-15 days. All we can do is prepare. Second, and this is the strange part, the severity of the incoming wave is dependent on how we respond between now and when it arrives and floods our state. That is in a sense what we now face as a country and region. We can take proactive steps to reduce its impact. We know what is happening in Italy and we know that their situation and infection rate was very similar to ours 13 days ago. As of March 15, almost 1,200 people have died in Italy, some of them because intensive care units and ventilators were already being used by other critically ill patients.

This wave *is* coming and it is comprised of all of us in this region and nation. Therefore anything we can do to slow down the spread of the virus, any steps we can take to reduce the rate of infection may very well save more than a few lives in the weeks to come, perhaps even lives we know and love ourselves. While it is hard to imagine an enforced quarantine here in the United States, we are all being asked to reduce or eliminate large public gatherings indoors, maintain social distancing, cough into our elbows, wash our hands, and stay home and stay put as much as we can. This is very hard and very strange, since none of us has any experience with something like this. And yet if we listen to the recommendations of folks in China, South Korea and Italy, if we listen to the Centers for Disease Control and the Governor, we know what we need to do. The tidal wave is coming and by limiting our freedoms temporarily, by committing to sheltering in place, we can reduce its impact and save lives.

This is the Season of Lent in the Church calendar. It is a time when we are encouraged to assess our bad habits and impulses and consider anew what changes in our lives will help us to become kinder and more loving people. So I encourage us to look at the disruptions we all face as opportunities – opportunities to walk outside in the fresh air. Opportunities to clean the closet we've never tackled; opportunities to spend time with our family; opportunities to read that big

novel - or better yet write one! It's an opportunity to care for ourselves and one another by staying put. This is not normal time; this is special time.

This will be hard for many of us and I have no doubt that some of us will find ourselves overwhelmed. I encourage us all therefore not to just stay put, but also to reach out – reach out at a distance. If someone seems lonely and down, don't not respond. This is one of those times when we New-Englander's need to overcome our deeply-rooted cultural reticence and reach out. If you want some support with any of this, feel free to call me or other members of the congregation you know.

I also encourage all of us to find ways to reach out and help people who will be struggling across our larger area. I noted in my newsletter column this week that public health officials anticipate an increase in the demand for food pantries. They also expect a larger number of people, mainly women, falling on hard times and seeking the support of domestic shelters. Some of us are in a position to support groups like the Greater Boston Food Bank and / or the Second Step shelter in Newton, and other groups locally. I encourage all of us to consider ways we can support agencies that are in a position to make an immediate difference in people's lives over the next 4-8 weeks.

This is a unique opportunity and challenge in our lives as Americans – by giving up temporarily our individual freedoms to move around, we are able to help people we don't even know, especially the sick and elderly. By staying by ourselves and limiting our close interactions, we can save lives, together.

The poet and minister Lynn Ungar makes this point in our reading. In writing about what we are each being asked to do, she asks:

*What if you thought of it as the Jews consider the Sabbath—the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel. Cease from buying and selling. Give up, just for now, on trying to make
the world different than it is. Sing. Pray. Touch only those to whom you commit your life.
Center down.*

Center down indeed. Blessed are they who commit to this holy act of sheltering in place.

Blessed are they who limit their life for the sake of others, for they will ensure that lives are saved and our community is strengthened. May it be so. Amen.