
Sermon
The Nurturing Spirit

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
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First Reading: An excerpt from "Timesweep" by Carl Sandburg.

There is only one horse on the earth
and his name is All Horses
There is only one bird in the air
and his name is All Wings.
There is only one fish in the sea
and his Name is All Fins.
There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world
and her name is All Women.
There is only one child in the world
and the child's name is All Children.
There is only one maker in the world
and His children cover the earth
and they are named All God's Children.

Second Reading: An excerpt from a sermon by the Rev. Mark Belletini

I . . . remember a sermon Priscilla preached to me once. Early one Sunday morning, she stopped me in the hall, speaking urgently with an indeterminate Slavic accent. Since I was just about to enter my office to finish my own sermon on the Czech roots of our faith, I was none too happy that she cornered me so well. Knowing my sermon topic, she told me she wanted to show me her beautiful antique book on Jan Hus, the greatest of Czech reformers. Then, setting the book aside, she started to pour out the story of her life. She described the day the Nazis came to town. "There are the Jews!" the townsfolk said, pointing to her house; and so the Nazis shot her parents before her eyes. She elaborated the terrors of surviving in a concentration camp so long. She spoke of her losses, and her life-distorting grief and rage.

But most of all, I remember her remarkable testimony about the Hussite freedom-symbol which we now call "the flaming chalice." You must know that the Czech version of our symbol has a motto underneath it, "Pravda vitezi," which translates, "Truth overcomes," or "Truth prevails." Every single morning in that terrible camp, Priscilla told me, she traced a picture of a flaming chalice in the sand with her finger. Then she wrote the motto underneath it. "It gave me the strength to live each day," she said to me. "Whenever I drew the chalice in the dirt I knew in my heart that the assertions of Nazism would one day be overcome by the greater Truth that no human being may claim power over any other human being."

Sermon

Mother's Day is an unusual holiday. Unlike the majority of the "special" days we are called upon to celebrate it is not the invention of the marketing department of a multi-billion dollar company that sells greeting cards. In case there is any doubt in your minds, I confess to a considerable amount of cynicism about the majority of the special days that dot the calendar – but I have none when it comes to Mother's Day. In this country it is a day, a celebration, that began with Julia Ward Howe. Appalled by the slaughter and carnage of the Civil War she called on women to rise up and promote an international Mother's Day to celebrate motherhood and peace:

In the name of womanhood and humanity, I earnestly ask
That a general congress of women without limit of nationality
May be appointed and held at some place deemed most convenient
And at the earliest period consistent with its objects
To promote the alliance of the different nationalities,
The amicable settlement of international questions.
The great and general interests of peace.

After a few years it was apparent that Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day lacked staying power and its celebration faded away, but a few years later, in 1908, inspired by her example, Anna Jarvis began the movement that produced our modern Mother's Day. With a narrower focus on motherhood, the idea spread rapidly. Not surprisingly there were companies that saw Mother's Day as a commercial opportunity. The *Florist's Review*, a publication of the floral industry, is reported to have said, "This is a holiday that can be exploited." Anna Jarvis fought against that exploitation, but she could not prevent it. But despite the commercial veneer that is prevalent today, at its heart Mother's Day – and Father's Day as well which was inspired by a 1909 Mother's Day sermon – is about the nurturing spirit, about the difference that love makes in the lives of people.

This last Thursday morning just before I sat down to begin writing this sermon I saw evidence of how big a difference love can make in a person's life. The evidence came in the form of a television interview of a young man named Wes Moore. He's every parent's dream. He graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a degree in International Studies and is a member of Phi Beta Kappa. He went on to be a Rhodes Scholar and to study at Oxford. He became an army officer who served a tour in Afghanistan with distinction, served a year in the White House as a special assistant to Secretary of State Condoleza Rice, was a featured speaker at the 2008 Democratic National Convention and was recognized by Ebony Magazine as one of the "Top 30 Leaders under 30" for 2007 and as one of the "40 Under 40 Rising Stars" of 2009 by Crain's New York Business". And that's not a complete list.

And he is now a published author. His just released book is titled, *The Other Wes Moore*. After hearing his interview I bought his book. It tells the story of how just a few months after he became a Rhodes scholar and was profiled in his local paper, he picked up the paper and saw an article profiling another young man from the same area

where he grew up who had a similar family history, both growing up without a father. His name was also Wes Moore. But this other Wes Moore was not a Rhodes Scholar. The other Wes Moore and his brother had just been arrested for the murder of a police officer. This other Wes Moore is now in prison where he will spend the rest of his life. Wes Moore, the Rhodes Scholar, was drawn to discover his doppelganger, to understand how their two lives – which had so much in common – could have gone such different paths.

Any person's life is complicated and there is risk in trying to find the how and why of it in a single incident. But in the opening chapter of his book he describes an incident that surely comes close. He was three and-a-half years old and playing with his older sister. Their usual routine was for him to chase her through the house, never catching her. But that day was different. He unexpectedly caught her. Not knowing what to do he pulled back and punched her. The playful punch of a three year old is not dangerous, but his mother reacted angrily and sent him to his room. He heard his parents argue about it until his father came to talk to him. He explained that his mother loved him, but wanted him to know that a man must never hit a woman. A man must always protect women. It doesn't matter who it is, a man must always be a protector of women – even at the age of three. As a child he did not fully understand, but as an adult he did. He learned that his mother's first, brief marriage had ended when her first husband physically assaulted her. She left him swearing she would never allow anyone to strike her again. And she raised Wes to understand that there are some absolute lines that must never be crossed and that he had to be responsible for not crossing them – not just when someone was watching him, but when no one was watching.

But life is not easy. Within a few months of that incident Wes's father, a local TV newscaster, died suddenly of a rare disease. His mother was left to raise him by herself. And she did. It was not always easy. Within a few years he was getting into trouble – on the verge of getting into serious trouble. At great financial sacrifice his mother sent him for a year to a military boarding school. He ran away five times before, as he says, giving it a chance. By the end of that year it was no longer outside discipline and threats that controlled Wes Moore. Wes Moore had learned to control himself, to discipline himself.

I believe that is the ultimate goal of nurture. His mother loved him. She loved him enough to demand that he be a defender of women, not someone who would hit a woman. She loved him enough to demand that he grow up and achieve self-discipline. She loved him enough to demand that he excel. She loved him enough to insist on the absolute best from him. She would not yield one iota in her high expectations of him.

For the other Wes Moore life was similar, but different. His father was also gone, but not because of death. His father abandoned his family. His mother loved him. But at crucial times she did not demand the best from him. At crucial times she was not there to insist that he toe the line. The other Wes Moore did not learn to discipline himself.

As I read the story of the two Wes Moore I was reminded of a conversation years ago with a group of Jewish Rabbinical students. One of them remarked that he could not understand how one could read the Garden of Eden story and discover in it the

basis of the doctrine of Original Sin. From a Jewish perspective, he explained, the story is about growing up, leaving home and being responsible for yourself and your own life. The doctrine of Original Sin, therefore, suggests an image of God as the God who would control people through the threat of burning in hell for all of eternity. The God of that Rabbinical student was a different kind of God – to my ears a more nurturing God, a God who wants people to grow up and be responsible for themselves and their actions in the world, a God who wants people to behave well not because of the threat of eternal punishment, but because it is the right thing to do.

Suppose Wes Moore the author had been told he should not hit a woman – even his nine year old sister – because if he did, he would be hit in return. Would he have learned that a man should always protect a woman? Or would he have learned a different lesson, a lesson that said whoever hits the hardest determines what is right? I believe the nurturing spirit is one that requires what is often called “tough love”. Tough love can require laying down the law for those we love. But the ultimate goal of tough love is not about one human being claiming power over another. On the road to maturity, on the road to being a fully functioning human being, that is only a temporary measure. True maturity requires not power over another, but power over the self.

I believe that is the heart and soul of what a covenantal community is supposed to be. I believe it is supposed to be a nurturing community. I believe that means it is to be a place where we have high expectations of one another, unrelentingly high expectations. And in turn, high expectations of ourselves. It is not enough to recite a creed or set of principles or anything else. We are here – in the spirit of the Beloved Community that is a nurturing community – to be fully functioning human beings in the best sense of those words – just as we want our children to grow towards that goal. That is why the foundational principle of our youth programming is based on responsible adult leadership – adult leadership that is nurturing in the sense of never wavering in high expectations of ourselves as adults and of our children and youth as they grow towards adulthood. It is not always easy. As the poet said,

But now her truth is given me to live,
As I learn for myself we must be hard
To move among the tender with an open hand,
And to stay sensitive up to the end
Pay with some toughness for a gentle world.

The line between the two West Moore’s is a narrow one. Wes Moore the author writes that much of what drew him to first correspond with the other Wes Moore and then visit him in prison over and over again was the realization of just how close the trajectory of their lives were to one another. He knew how close he had come to a life that could have ended with him in prison. He knew how close the other Wes Moore had come to being the kind of son that mothers dream of having.

Having that kind of nurturing environment doesn’t work every time. There are those who have that kind of loving environment and go down the wrong path. There are those who have the wrong kind of nurture, but rise above it. In my opinion one of the problems our society struggles with is the mistaken belief that nurture is everything. If a

person goes bad as an adult it's because of what happened to him as a child. Poverty and abuse become excuses. I don't accept that. Poverty and abuse may, in some instances, explain why, but they not justify, they do not excuse. Ultimately each of us is responsible for our choices. That is true of Wes Moore the author and Wes Moore the man serving life in prison for murdering a policeman. Each of those two men is responsible for the decisions he made. But I do not doubt the influence their mothers had on their lives. And I do not doubt the influence that communities such as this church can have on a person's life. It is why I believe church is important, but not just any old church. Churches and synagogues and temples come in many varieties. Some will believe in one God or no Gods at all, others will believe in hundreds of Gods, still others believe God is three in one. But as Thomas Jefferson said,

[I]t does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.

Of far greater importance is what a church teaches its children, how it nurtures its children and what kind of parents it expects its members to be. That is our challenge as a church community. What expectations will we have of our children? What expectations will we have of one another? And most importantly, what expectations will we have of ourselves? That's the challenge of the nurturing spirit.

Amen.