



"Let your yes be yes, and your no be no"

Rev. Krista Taves

August 3, 2008

Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Message

Story - The Stranger's Visit – adapted from One Hundred Wisdom Tales from Around the World

Once upon a time there was a village that had fallen into hard times. It hadn't always been this way. The village had been known for its kindness and hospitality. But when the hard times came, people started looking for someone to blame. They started complaining about each other a lot. They began arguing and taking sides and rivalries emerged. The village was no longer kind and people from nearby villages stopped visiting. It was just too hard to be there.

The village chief tried everything he could to bring the people back into their kindness, but it made no difference. It seemed as if the village was doomed.

One day, a stranger came into the village. He walked with a purpose, as if he knew exactly why he was there. He saw the sadness and despair in the chief's eyes and they began talking and the chief told him everything. When he was done, the chief asked the stranger, "Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't have an answer for that, but I do have a secret, would you like to hear it?"

"Of course" said the chief and he leaned in close.

"Someone in this village is the Messiah!"

"Do you know who it is?"

"No. I do not. Only that it is someone who lives in this village."

The chief was so surprised. The stranger seemed to be a good man. Perhaps he was right! When the stranger left, the chief couldn't keep quiet. He told his best friend the secret. His best friend told another person who told another person who told another person. Soon the whole village knew and everyone wondered, "Who could the Messiah be?"

People began looking at each other differently, because who knew, any one of them could be the Messiah. They began speaking more kindly of each other and to each other, they became more patient with each other, and bit by bit the village began to look and feel like it had once before. In fact, the village became known for its kindness, especially to strangers, and people came to visit a lot. The whole village lived like they were there for a reason, that they had a common purpose. It was wonderful.

The stranger never visited again. He didn't have to.

Reading: "Be impeccable with your word." From "The Four Agreements by Don Miguel Ruiz.

Be impeccable with your word. It sounds very simple, but it is very, very powerful.

Why your word? Your word is the power that you have to create. ... The Gospel of John in the Bible, speaking of the creation of the universe, says, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with



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God, and the word was God." Through the word you express your creative power. It is through the word that you manifest everything. Regardless of what language you speak, your intent manifests through the word. What you dream, what you feel, and what you really are, will all be manifested through the word.

The word is not just a sound or a written symbol. The word is a force; it is the power you have to express and communicate, to think, and thereby to create the events in your life. You can speak. What other animal on the planet can speak? The word is the most powerful tool you have as a human ... But like a sword with two edges, your word can create the most beautiful dream, or your word can destroy everything around you. One edge is the misuse of the word, which creates a living hell. The other edge is the impeccability of the word, which will only create beauty, love and heaven on earth. Depending on how it is used, the word can set you free, or it can imprison you even more than you know....

The human mind is like a fertile ground where seeds are continually being planted. The seeds are opinions, ideas and concepts. You plant a seed, a thought, and it grows. The word is like a seed, and the human mind is so fertile! The only problem is that too often it is fertile with the seeds of fear. Every mind is fertile, but only for those kinds of seeds it is prepared for. What is important to see is what kind of seeds our mind is fertile for, and to prepare it to receive the seeds of love.

Message: Let your yes be yes and your no no.

This has been a difficult week for the Knoxville Unitarian Universalist churches. It has been a difficult week for all of us. I gather some of you heard the news of the shooting at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church when you were here, together, last Sunday. I'm glad you had each other. I was in a grocery store in Cape Girardeau getting last minute supplies for a camping trip when I called up Ken and Betty Maag, longtime and beloved members of this church. Betty answered, and told me what had happened. It was hard to believe that as I stood under florescent lights and tasteless grocery store music, that someone had entered one of our religious sanctuaries and opened fire on those who had gathered to worship. Who would violate a worship service, and why? This is something that happens in other places, like Iraq and Pakistan, places far removed from here, easy for us to distance ourselves from. But there is no distance here.

That night, in a state park on the banks of a mosquito filled Southern Illinois swamp, my partner Laurie worked to pull in the evening news on our small television. By then rumors were circulating that the killer had targeted the church because of its liberal views. The next morning those rumors were confirmed. A four page letter filled with hatred for everything liberal and everything Unitarian Universalist had been found in David Adkisson's apartment. This was a hate crime. He hated liberals and he hated gays and he saw both in the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church where his ex-wife was a member, and that hatred is what motivated him. And dare I say it is that hatred that has put fear into many of our hearts. This was cold-blooded and pre-meditated and Unitarian Universalists were specifically targeted. This hasn't happened to us in a long time. It's been a long time since windows were broken in our churches for supporting desegregation, since James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister, was beaten to death as he marched in Selma. It's been a long time since the McCarthy era, when the FBI and CIA engaged in surveillance of our churches and members.



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But more disturbing is that David Adkisson used to be a Unitarian Universalist. This wasn't some strange unknown extremist who came from out of nowhere. This is someone who used to be in our midst, one of us. He attended the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute with his wife three times, often playing guitar for the hymn singing. There's even a published recording of UU music and he is on it, singing and playing. Covenant groups met in their home. And now he and his wife are divorced, she has a restraining order against him, and he has entered a Unitarian Universalist church and opened fire as children sang at the front, leaving two dead and many wounded. What happened to him?

There is a great deal of speculation about why he did what he did and many are demanding that the police release that four page letter that he wrote. Thus far the police have refused. Some critics of this decision are crying censorship, and argue that we have a right to know. David Adkisson violated the public with his killings, thus the public has the right to see that letter. Others are clamoring to know if the David did this in isolation or was spurred on by hate literature, or hate groups. Could there be more killings?

Others see it differently. Why should the hateful words of this man gain any audience at all? We know the general content of the letter. Do we need anything else? Some are saying that the demands for releasing the letter are not simply about access to information. It is a demand fuelled by the blood lust of a society hungry for the kind of fear-based sensationalism that the media has made into its bread and butter, the same kind of morbid sensationalism that gives shows like Law and Order and CSI and others like them such large audiences. And to be honest, I have to tell you, I love Law and Order! There is a certain draw to the morbid and the darkest aspects of humanity. I am deeply curious about what is in that letter and don't think I'm alone. But does my curiosity merit its release? This shooting isn't fabricated tv violence. This is real life. Real people, our brothers and sisters, died. And the hateful words of that letter are directed at real people – including you and me. In my opinion, releasing the letter feeds a fixation for glamorized hatred and violence that makes a mockery of the very real violence and hatred that rips into millions of lives every day. Releasing that letter isn't going to bring those people back. It's not going to help any of us feel like we're in control again. It's not going to bring that deeper justice that is much more than a prison sentence. Let's not give the hateful words of that man any more power.

Mexican mystic Don Miguel Ruiz says that our words have more power than we can imagine. They have the power to create much of our reality. What we say and what we hear can very easily define who we are and how we see the world, what kind of people we can be, and the quality of relationships we can have with other people and with ourselves. Listen to what he says:

"Your word is the power that you have to create ... the gift that comes directly from God. Through the word you express your creative power ... you manifest everything. ... What you dream, what you feel, and what you really are, will all be manifested through the word."

He goes on.

"The word is a force. The most powerful tool you have as a human. It is magic. But like a sword with two edges, your word can create the most beautiful drama, or your word can destroy everything around you."



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With his words, David Adkisson created his own hell and he took that hell and tried to impose it on the object of his hatred. And what I want to hold up today is that with our words, we all create our own heavens and hells, and contribute to the heavens and hells of others. The key to spiritual liberation, says Ruiz, is to nurture in ourselves the kind of grounding that allows only heaven to take root in who we are. The challenge is to undo the kind of grounding many of us have that allows hell to take root in who we are.

Think of our children's story this morning. Those people in that village had nurtured the building of hell. They turned against each other. Sowing hatred against each other. Choosing distrust over trust. Choosing bitterness over love. They had nurtured in themselves the kind of grounding that allowed hell to take root. That village is a metaphor for what exists in so many places in the world, and also deep inside our hearts. We all have the potential to create this kind of hell.

Ruiz has a very unique understanding of those hells that we create. He says that hell is primarily about self-hatred. When we are at our most negative, even when that is completely turned out to others, what we're really doing is hating and hurting ourselves. And it's remarkably simple how this works. What we are most prone to criticize in someone else, is likely something we have great difficulty accepting in ourselves. The root of hell is that internal struggle each of us has inside to truly love ourselves. And if we can't love ourselves and accept ourselves fully for who we are, then we will be much more vulnerable to criticism directed against us, and we will be much more likely to engage in criticism of other people.

When you're struggling with loving yourself, that's a drain of energy. And one of the easiest ways to get energy when you're in a lack of love is to feed on the negativity of other people. Ruiz calls this negativity gossip. As the old saying goes, "Misery loves company." It makes us feel less alone. It can momentarily give us a sense of importance, of value, like we count. So in this village, they gossiped each other and themselves into hell, and they came to value themselves and other people by the grievances they held. It came to define who they were. They wouldn't have known who they were without them. No wonder the village leader felt so powerless to change that.

Well, the thing is, he couldn't change it because it wasn't up to him. You can't make people into what you would want them to be. We have no control over what other people do. Think about it, how much energy do we spend trying to turn the people in our lives into what we need them to be. How many of you have tried to turn people into what you wanted them to be. And how far did you get? The only control we have is over what we choose to do in response to what's around us. We can choose how we respond to negativity, wherever it comes from. We have the power to nurture the kind of grounding that allows heaven to take root in who we are, so that no matter how strongly the forces of hell, whether that hell rests in ourselves or in others – no matter how strong that draw, we can choose heaven.

And this is why Ruiz tells us that one of the keys to the kingdom of heaven is to be impeccable with your word. Choose what you say carefully so that with every word you utter, you choose heaven. The stranger who came to that village, could have looked at all the bickering and said to the leader, "Man, this village is in rough shape. These are some nasty people! You poor man!" And he would have added his little piece to that vortex of hell. But what did he do? Instead, he planted a piece of heaven. He said to the leader, "One of these villagers is the Messiah." Did he have any control over how the leader would hear those words? None. But, the leader did make the choice to hear them and let them change him. When he



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shared that secret, the other villagers had the chance to make their own choices, and bit by bit, the villagers chose heaven over hell. Now I have no doubt that this was no instant walk into the sunset. I'm sure there were some who clung to their hells as long as they could. They get pretty comfortable after a while. I'm sure there was the temptation to write some people off. "So and so couldn't possibly be the Messiah!" But, you never really know, right? And as time went on, the promise of heaven grew stronger than the threat of hell and prevailed.

I believe without a shred of doubt that one of the things that draws us into religious community is that we want to be the kind of people who choose heaven and we know that we will need good people to journey with as we learn and relearn how to make that choice. Because hell is always there beckoning and I hope by now you realize I'm not talking about that abusive hell of fire and brimstone that scares so many people into submission. That's not the kind of hell we talk about in Unitarian Universalism. I'm talking about this worldly hell that we have the power to create and un-create. I firmly believe that each one of you, deep down, wants to be the kind of person who chooses heaven when faced with the hells we create here on earth.

So this week, as we learned about the shooting, we have had a choice. Are we going to choose heaven or hell? Will we become fixated on the terrible truth of what has happened. Will we cling to victimhood: "Oh poor us. How hard it is to be liberal in a conservative culture." Will we begin scanning unfamiliar faces with suspicion and fear?

Well let me tell you what's been happening at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church this week. On Friday night the Thank You Committee sat down and began writing notes of appreciation to the hundreds who have sent cards and flowers. . This morning there are volunteer parking attendants and extra parking spaces ready in anticipation of overflow crowds, extra volunteers at the welcoming table, and they've wired the Fellowship Hall for sound in case they can't all fit into the sanctuary. A tent has been put up to increase room for coffee hour. A banner reading "Love is the Spirit of this Church" will be hung by the road. The church's young people have filled the sanctuary with paper flower bouquets. And, there will be a rededication ceremony to reclaim their sacred space. Our brothers and sisters, in the face of a hell it would be been so easy to walk into, have chosen to walk into heaven. No doubt, all is not well. There are still moments of deep grief, fear, incredible anger, feelings of helplessness and despair, but they are choosing the path of heaven.

And so can we. I would invite you as you are willing and able, to join me in the spirit of prayer and meditation:

Prayer for the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and Westside Unitarian Universalist Church

Spirit of Life and Love, God of Grace and God of Mercy, living power that is in and of all things:

There is so much violence and hatred in this world. Hell abounds in many shapes and forms around us, and this past Sunday it leapt into our midst, and we are left with the deep need to reach out, to express our caring and love, to come together in community to bear witness to the loss, to express our sorrow and condolences, and to raise up the truth that violence against one is violence against all, and that good will overcome all evil.



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We pray for the members, friends and staff of the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church. We grieve with them for those loved ones who died, we feel with them the betrayal and violation of their sacred space. Our religious homes are to be safe places to bring the most vulnerable parts of who we are. That sacred trust has been violated and betrayed. And yet, we rejoice with our sisters and brothers as they reclaim that trust and turn from the violation and betrayal towards new life.

We pray for the children. Childhood is to be a time of unfolding, of innocence, of profound acceptance. To be faced with such merciless hatred is a deeply sad thing. We pray for these children, and are filled with gratitude that they have loving communities to hold and shepherd them through this time.

We pray for those whose lives have been prematurely ended. We grieve for what might have been, all the hope and possibility that are now no more. We pray for their families who have entered the long journey of grieving.

We pray for the injured, grateful that they are with us still, knowing that we but dimly understand what it must be like to grieve the loss of loved ones while being thankful to have been spared.

We pray for the leaders of these churches – lay and ordained. Much is asked of those who lead, especially in times of tragedy and sorrow. They themselves suffer from the same loss and trauma that has befallen those they serve. We pray with gratitude that many have come to their aid so that they have also been held and cared for.

And finally, we pray for the man who unleashed this tragedy upon the women, men and children of the Tennessee Valley and Westside churches. Our Universalist heritage teaches us that no one is beyond the unconditional saving love of God. Revenge and retribution will not undo the violence unleashed by his hatred, a hatred he allowed to poison him, festering in his heart and mind, guiding his hand. This hatred has likely left its damaging mark on friends and family. We pray for those who loved him, who will struggle with the truth of what he has done.

If there is anything we might lift up from this tragedy, let it be that we can see more clearly how desperately our liberal religious gospel of freedom, acceptance, and unconditional love is needed in our hurting world. We pray for ourselves, that the assault on the foundational truth of our faith will not lead us to shrink back in fear. We are called to more. We pray that the blood shed by our brothers and sisters not be shed in vain, and that the beacon of Unitarian Universalism, with its covenantal promise of grace and renewal, will burn even more brightly.

Spirit of extravagant mercy, with hands outstretched we pray. Let this prayer be our protest against all that is evil and ugly and impoverished, trivial and wretched and tyrannical, in our world and in ourselves – that we may be poured out for the world.

Victorious God, Co-creator with Humanity, who breaks the powers that strangle and bind us, liberate us so we may join to dismantle what divides and destroys.

In the name of truth, love and unfathomable mercy, this we pray. Amen.