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## **Prayer**

Today's prayer is about blessings, and given that we are surrounded by diverse and sometimes competing understandings of what it means to offer and receive a blessing, and given that many of us have been hurt by the religion of our early years, and given that we are a unified people with diverse understandings of the ultimate, it would seem important to say a bit about what a blessing might mean in a Unitarian Universalist theological context. In our covenantal faith tradition, a blessing is always offered within the context of a relationship between the person being blessed and the person or persons offering the blessing. A blessing is about what we hope for someone or something that we give ultimate worth to. A blessing contains our highest hopes and dreams, and gives voice to the values that we wish would envelop this whole world. A blessing is about affirming and holding as high as we can our sacred connection to all of life, as manifested in the person before us or even in ourselves. So in the spirit of this holistic understanding of blessing, I invite you to join with me in prayer or meditation as you are willing and able:

Spirit of Life, source of all things, God or Goddess of ever expanding hope and light,

May that which created us from love and for love  
heal and bless us – embracing us in the tenderest of mercies.

Many have sacrificed for us – long dead ancestors, parents, partners, children, dear friends, and others - so that we would have good fulfilling lives. They carried and sometimes still carry our deepest needs and desires as if they were their own and in this we have been so blessed. May our gratitude for these blessings and in turn bless those who blessed us.

We would also see as blessings those things that show us how frail we are. We need to give and receive forgiveness, we yearn to name those things that are unresolved, we hunger for reconciliation. May these difficult blessings awaken us, and perhaps in time, comfort and strengthen us, and restore us to trust and love.

May we find the blessing of peace in the love of those who surround us, understanding each others' strengths and limitations, trusting in each other's good intentions, so that once again we find in our midst a people and a place that we can call home.

May we bless our world in the spirit of hope, justice, and compassion. Amen and blessed be.

## **Story**

*Lessons* amended from the original by Natalie Babbit in her book, "The Devil's Other Storybook"

There was once a parrot which lived with a lovely old woman and was her pride and joy. His name was Columbine, and instead of growing up with pirates, and learning all kinds of bad words, he spent his childhood with a Unitarian Universalist, and learned a whole different way of speaking.

Then his owner died and he moved to the old woman's cottage where he learned to say things like "Sweetheart, kiss me quick!" and stuff like that.

Still, Columbine was no sissy! He sat all day on his perch and watched out the window for trouble! The old woman lived on a busy road so there was lots to watch! When someone went by who looked suspicious, he'd say "oh oh!" Or "look out" and sometimes even "Lock the doors!"

One day, the devil came down the road disguised as a strolling musician with a fiddle under his arm! Columbine, having been raised by a Unitarian Universalist, knew exactly what was under that costume. "It's the Devil! It's the Devil! Fire! Fire! Run for your lives! Lock the door!"

He made such a racket that the old woman hid under her bed!

The Devil stopped right in front of the parrot.

"You shut up!" he hissed to Columbine, "Or I'll take you away!"

But Columbine wouldn't shut up! He kept screaming and flapping his wings, and saying the weirdest things! It was like nothing the devil had ever heard!

"Standing on the side of love!" he cried. "The inherent worth and dignity of every person!" he screamed. "Fairness for everyone!"

"Stop!" said the devil. "You're scaring everyone away!"

And indeed the whole road was empty. Everyone had gone home. Columbine kept going.

"Come, Come, whoever you are!" said Columbine.

"Oh that's gross!" screamed the devil.

"World peace" said Columbine.

The devil covered his ears. "You're hurting my head!" he yelled.

"All people need a voice" said Columbine.

The devil started to run away.

"Be kind in all you do," said Columbine.

And the devil ran right back into hell.

Soon the old woman came back out from under the bed and the road became busy again.

Down in hell the Devil muttered to himself. "Someone out to teach that bird a lesson!"

But of course, someone already had, thank goodness!

### **Stewardship Moment**

Early in July, a 4 year old Shera and her nomadic family moved from their home area in Somalia toward a refugee camp in Kenya. The drought had killed their small goat herd and they no longer had food or water even for themselves.

In light of the dire humanitarian crisis in East Africa, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee opened the Somalia and East Africa Relief Fund on July 28, 2011. In every disaster, UUSC's Rights in Humanitarian Crises Program identifies which groups are most marginalized in the mainstream relief efforts and seeks to partner with local organizations that can most effectively reach these groups. Working with local organizations is the most cost-effective and sustainable way of ensuring that UUSC shepherds the available resources through the best channels to reach those in need.

UUSC has hired a local employee who is currently conducting an on-the-ground assessment of the situation in Somalia and East Africa. She is reviewing the situation in the Dadaab camp complex in Kenya, where Shera and her family located, and among refugee populations in Ethiopia and northern Somalia.

UUSC's response will focus on women, children, and youth. These groups constitute the greatest percentage of refugees from Somalia and also the greatest percentage of those suffering from the effects of the drought in Kenya and Ethiopia. UUSC is doing the following:

- Providing immediate relief (such as food and medicine) for Somalis affected by the famine.
- Supporting communities in Ethiopia and Kenya that are hosting Somali women and children refugees, in order to prevent famine conditions in those communities.
- Assisting existing UUSC East African grassroots partners in mitigating the effects of the disastrous lack of rain and extreme strain on food sources.

Every Sunday we, with one voice, announce to anyone who will listen our common call to worship, our common call to be together as a congregation ... "Love is our doctrine...to serve life to the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine..." When we think of this, we might come up with differences in what it means. And, when we reflect on this with our principles, in particular our first principle (which affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all persons), we must ask ourselves how we as a congregation walk this talk? How do we serve life showing the inherent worth and dignity of all people?

As a congregation, Emerson UU Chapel, has chosen to use our collection plate to further our mission and vision, and yes, our ministry, in the world by sharing our abundance through giving voice to our values. During the next three months (Oct, Nov and Dec) we honor this commitment through our donation to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. This nonprofit (which is a separate entity from our association, the UUA) was founded in 1963 by uniting the Unitarian Service Committee and the Universalist Service Committee (both founded in 1940 as a reaction to Hitler's acts in Europe). The initial witness and social action to the abuses in Europe have continued today through social justice work and human rights concerns.

Each Sunday when the collection plate passes by you, you have a choice. In our early days, in addition to our pledge checks, we added any cash we had in our wallets to cover the babysitter. That hasn't changed much. However, now, we use our cash and other undesignated checks to support our ministry in the world. Over the next three months, will you open your heart and your wallet or checkbook as you are able to support the global outreach which we can achieve in partnership with UUSC? It is now in the great spirit of generosity that we will gratefully and joyfully receive this morning's offering.

...Barbara W. Brown

## **Reading**

The Dueling Beatitudes  
*The Gospel of Matthew*, Chapter 5

Blessed are the well off and those with ready answers for every spiritual question;  
they have it all.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the comfortable; they shall avoid grief.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the self-sufficient; they wait for nothing,  
they have everything they want, and they have it now.

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who are not troubled by the injustice experienced by others;  
they are content with realistic expectations.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.

Blessed are the ones who gain the upper hand;  
they take full advantage of their advantages.

Blessed are the merciful for they receive mercy.

Blessed are those with a solid public image and a well hidden agenda;  
they are never exposed and see people in a way that suits their purposes.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.

Blessed are those who can bully others into agreement;  
they shall be called empire builders.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who can point to someone else  
who is a worse person than they are, they will always  
look good by comparison.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they.

## **Sermon**

When I first heard about the movement called Occupy Wall Street, I'll be honest and say I really didn't pay much attention. I value those who are willing to take to the streets and make their voices and values heard. I've done it many times. But perhaps, like so many, I've grown disillusioned and cynical, quick to dismiss the ability of ordinary people to make big changes in their world. Even when I do choose to join a protest, I rarely expect any change. I go because I believe I must witness to my values, but I've really moderated my hopes as

to what I can achieve. So when I heard there was this group taking to Wall Street with placards and slogans, protesting the growing inequality that has defined our society, I dismissed it as one more doomed attempt to change a very large system that seems pretty set in stone, and with the political machinery to maintain it. I am very concerned about the growing inequality we have seen over the last 30 years, but I am skeptical about our ability to change the trend.

It's not surprising that it would be easier to dismiss a bunch of people camping out in some little park in New York City, than to hope that their commitment to sleep under the stars, dim as they are in New York City, and to brave the elements while shouting slogans and waving signs on behalf of the 99%, would add up to much.

Hope is a vulnerable thing. It is much safer to doubt and to criticize and to dismiss. Cynicism is a great way to protect ourselves from the possibility of being let down. In fact, many people who strongly agree with the political values of Occupy Wall Street dismissed the movement as a fly by night kind of thing. "It's unorganized!" they said. "There is no core platform!" they proclaimed. "It will come to nothing." Everyone was protecting themselves from the vulnerability of hope.

Interestingly, this is the same thing that was said of the Tea Party just two years ago. It was unorganized, with no core platform. It would go nowhere. Look at where the Tea Party is today. Granted, the Tea Party had corporate backing from the beginning. Occupy Wall Street is on the outside of that kind of power. Most truly progressive movements are. As Naomi Klein said in an interview on NPR this week, all Occupy Wall Street has is the power of bodies, which is why they are being so creative in resisting the many ways the authorities have tried to disperse the occupation. We saw that this weekend. Mayor Bloomberg announced that the park needed to be cleaned, and all understood what that meant. The Occupy Folks would be removed, and that would be the end of Occupy Wall Street. So what did they do? They got rubber gloves and soap and buckets, they cleaned up the trash and scrubbed the sidewalks! Mission accomplished!

So here we are, four weeks later, and Occupy Wall Street has occupied the news in growing measure day by day! Using the tools of social networking, livestreaming and online donations, it has drawn the support of millions from around the world. It also used the tools of the Arab Spring. Go to the Occupy Wall Street website and you will see that the organizers make a direct link between what happened in the Middle East and Northern Africa last spring, and what is happening now. The Arab Spring consisted of millions of mostly young people who took to the streets and just never went home. Their goal was democracy. They had little financial backing, just their bodies and their smartphones and their perseverance. They stayed in constant contact with the world through facebook, twitter and youtube. The Occupy Wall Street folks are not only copying their tactics, they are intentionally connecting the goals of the Arab Spring to their own. This is about freedom and democracy, which is really about equal and fair access to power and resources.

And now it's growing. There's Occupy St. Louis and Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego and New Orleans. There have been Occupy marches in every state of this country. Internationally there are Occupy marches happening in Tokyo, Seoul, London, Paris, Manila, Berlin, Rome, Frankfurt, Toronto, Vancouver, Cologne, Munich, Vienna, Zurich, Madrid, Lisbon, Moscow, and Sydney, (I'm sure I've missed some) and last but not least, in almost every city of Greece, where many are taking to the streets as their country prepares for an orderly declaration of bankruptcy. Who is going to pay the price for Greece's defaulting loans? The banks or the people? The people of the world have been watching our country and they know who paid the price and is still paying the price for the financial missteps the led to the recession of 2008. It's the 99%, and it is that fact that has propelled thousands of people onto the streets of cities around the world.

So I would have to say, that even in my usual cynicism, I'm getting a little hopeful! Now I know what happens in these protests. I've been to many. There's always the hotheads, the ones looking for trouble, who goad the police, then get in trouble and scream police brutality. Happens at every march. We're seeing a lot of that on the news of course because it's a very convenient way to dismiss the other 99% who are standing there

peacefully holding their little signs asking to be counted and valued. Those 99% are the true Occupy Wall Street, and this is where I am getting my hope.

My partner and I got a call from our nephew this week. He's just moved away for college to Easton Pennsylvania. This 18-year old millennial generation young man, fresh out of Springfield Missouri, got himself on a train to Lower Manhattan last weekend, and he found himself at Zucotti Park and spent the next three days there. It was an amazing experience. First of all, it's very well organized. There's a kitchen area, a medical tent, a charging area for cell phones and laptops, a clothing and blanket area, a communications area, and a teaching area. One of the things he said to me was, "Look, I don't even remember Clinton. I came of age during Bush, from 2000 to 2008, and I don't remember any of us ever getting a break. Everyone was poor, everyone worked hard. Everyone was prudent and they still seem to struggle. And everyone pretty much kept quiet because no one was supposed to complain. So to see this, it was a breath of fresh air. We were all in this together. It was a community, the backbone of America, the 99%, and I wanted to be part of it." As he spoke I wondered if Occupy Wall Street would be his generation's Vietnam. There's no telling yet.

Now most of you know that my partner and I don't have kids. K. is the closest we've got, he is our pride and joy, and I've got to tell you this was the closest I have ever come to what it must feel like to be a proud Momma! I so want my nephew to have the opportunities he deserves. He's got some strikes against him. Bi-racial, raised by a single mom, grew up in poverty. Even now at a private college where he got a full scholarship, the kids around him don't bat an eye when they need something – clothing, toothpaste, books, sports equipment, an afternoon snack. He has to always be thinking ahead. He can't take anything for granted. He wants a life where he doesn't have to be so worried all the time about whether there's enough to get to the end of the week. He doesn't mind working hard, but he wants to know that his hard work will be rewarded with a living wage that isn't going to decrease in value, has decent benefits, and will give him the ability to someday provide his children what they will need, so that they won't struggle like he had to.

In my mind, this is what the Occupy Movement is about. It's about dignified work that pays us what we're worth. We are the 99%, our work is the backbone of this country, and it should be protected and valued and treasured. This movement is not about ending capitalism, it's about ending crony capitalism. To use the words of Sally Kohn, a writer from Fox News, "The protesters are not anti-American radicals. They are the defenders of the American Dream, the decision from the birth of our nation that success should be determined by hard work not royal bloodlines." <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/10/14/understanding-occupy-wall-street/#ixzz1awpZz7wF>

It was much easier to be cynical and dismissive before K. went to New York, but after hearing his story, I started to care a lot more and it wasn't just about having the courage to hope, but the moral imperative to hope. For our children's sake, we have a moral imperative to hope. Hope isn't a luxury, it's a necessity, and I wonder if that's what happens when you become a parent, you have to be willing to be vulnerable enough to hope. You owe it to your children.

In the preamble to today's prayer and blessing, I talked about what a blessing means in Unitarian Universalism. A blessing is always offered in the context of a covenant, a sacred set of promises that is made between people. When we enter into lifetime partnerships, we are blessing each other. When we bring a new life into this world or adopt a new life into our presence, we are blessing each other. When someone makes the decision to enter into the covenant of membership, we are blessing each other.

The masses who flocked to the streets during the Arab Spring were blessing their countries with the inextinguishable hope for democracy. The Occupy Movement is, I think, searching for a blessing. It's asking, who is blessed? Who gets the blessing? Is it the 1%? No one wants the 1% to give up their blessing, this is not about punishing the 1%, but about inviting them to share the blessing, to enter into a covenantal relationship of

accountability and mutuality. This is what organizations like Patriotic Millionaires for Fiscal Strength are all about. They are calling for tax hikes on people like themselves because they are affirming their place in the covenant, and their desire to share the blessing within that covenant.

When Jesus stood on the Mount and offered the Beatitudes to the masses who followed him, he was talking about exactly that covenant, and he was being extremely and unabashedly political. Modern Christianity has often made the Beatitudes into little platitudes you can stamp on slabs of resin and hang in your bathroom. These words were a direct political challenge to the cynicism and disillusionment of his people. Occupy Wall Street camped outside Citibank yesterday, and Jesus stood outside of Jerusalem, facing the Romans, a most vicious empire that sucked its colonies dry. Roman culture made a religion out of brute strength and obsessive wealth accumulation at the upper levels of society. It often economically raped its colonies and used the plunder to line the pockets of the already wealthy. This economic rape plunged Israel into an economic depression the likes of which we can't even understand. Farmers were evicted from their lands and hired back as cheap labor. The production of goods and services was ripped away from small Jewish businesses and given to Roman entrepreneurs. People who used to run their own businesses were then hired back as cheap labor. Unemployment sky-rocked, and even for those who worked, economic independence was a thing of the past.

So for Jesus to stand there and say, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," dared them to hope.

Imagine what it meant to say, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" to a family grieving the loss of land they had held for generations?

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled," spoke to the physical and spiritual hunger for fairness and dignity.

"Blessed are the peacemakers," challenged those who felt drawn to armed insurrection both as a form of divine retribution and a path to freedom. To use our children's story, it's like he was saying, "Don't listen to the musician with the fiddle under his arm! That is not the music you should be dancing to. It will be simply another hell. Choose peace, and you will be blessed."

For Jesus, the blessing didn't just start in some mythical future time of complete justice and equality, it started in that moment. "You are blessed now!" he was saying, "So acknowledge your blessing, be filled with gratitude for it, and offer that blessing back to the world." In other words, "Get off the pity pot, and live as if the kingdom of heaven on earth is already here."

Jesus invited those who followed him into the vulnerability of hope, to turn away from cynicism and defeat and toward the willingness to take the risk of being disappointed, to witness like a parrot on a busy road, shouting out values that the fast moving traffic may not have been in any mood to hear.

And so now it's those who flock to the Occupy Movement who stand on busy roads around the world, shouting slogans and waving placards that many of us are scared to look at and consider. Do we dare hope?

I don't know about you, but I've shifted from dismissal and cynicism to hope. I think we owe it to our children. I think we owe it to ourselves.

Yesterday evening as Occupy Wall Street protesters lined up at Citibank to close their accounts, the police, at the request of Citibank, dragged them out into the streets, and just like in the Arab Spring, every blow was digitally captured. More than 5000 of us watched it on livestreaming, and I know that because you could see the numbers of viewers rise and fall. Those videos are now going viral over facebook and youtube.

I had to ponder the words of the beatitudes "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for

theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I have to hope that this will make a difference, that we are being blessed by those who have the courage to speak and those who have the courage to listen.

May the blessings of the spirit be with you and yours, today, and forever more.

Amen and blessed be.

### **Benediction**

Go in peace.

Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly.

Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your own compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Do not desire to be wealthier than your peers and stint not your hand of charity.

Practice forbearance.

Speak the truth, or speak not.

Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift.

Crave peace for all the people in the world, beginning with yourselves, and go as you go with the dream of that peace alive in your heart.

...Rev. Mark L. Belletini