

ASUUC Sermon: RELEASE AND JAMES BALDWIN by Reverend Roger Butts

During the start of the pandemic, early when things were so chaotic and uncertain, I knew that I was sitting on some stories about the pandemic that might need to be told. Stories of nurses being everyday saints and heroes. Stories of families even more paralyzed in the face of illness than often happens.

I had been a chaplain for a number of years, 7 or so, and I had seen a lot. Everywhere I turned it seems there was a story. The time the very observant Muslim young father died on the cancer floor and how the Muslim funeral home had a certain ritual and procession that they used to take him off the floor and how the nurses made sure that all of the patient doors were closed and in this catholic hospital all the nurses stood outside their rooms, hands clasped, heads bowed, as this devout Muslim man was led out with his Imam and his young family and myself, heading to the back elevators of the hospital to take him to the funeral home. The honoring of that moment, the sacredness of it.

Or the little old lady, a late Friday night, 7:30 p.m. or so. No one really calls the chaplain on a Friday night at 7:30 unless it is bad news. But this particular night, years ago, I got a call from a nurse on the fourth floor. There is a little old lady up here who is going to hospice in a few days. Her family is gone home for a few hours and she is pretty confused and I think she could use a visit. Of course, I said. I'll be up there. So, I left the floor I was on and I headed to the fourth floor and as I was going in the room, dark and quiet, the nurse looked at me and said: Oh, Roger, she's in there praying, over and over, the Lord's Prayer. I walked in and sure enough she was in and out of awareness but she was praying the Lord's Prayer just as he said. I thought to myself: Well, I know this prayer (working in a Catholic hospital teaches you deeply the beauty and power of the Our Father/ Lord's Prayer). I think I'll join her.

I held her hand. She was weak and tiny. We were at the part towards the end and where we had said forgive us for our trespasses and help us to forgive those who trespass against us, and we are nearing the end. She's not especially aware of my presence, but as we get towards the very end, she notices me and says: Oh well, I've forgotten the end. But thank you God for everything."

She went back to sleep. I held her hands for a while longer. And in that quiet little moment on a Friday night, I got the best ending for a prayer ever from a little old lady I had never met and would never see again and who would be dead within a day or two. Thank you God for everything.

Stories were everywhere and because I was speaking around town, a lot of them had been gathered in various spots on my computer.

Then there were the stories from almost 20 years of ministry—the story of the death of the Buddha, where all those folks around him are scared and they look at him as he is dying: What

now, what do we do? And he gives 'em a look like: hey, I've done all I could. It's your turn, make of yourself a light.

And Muhammad's Night Journey when he goes up to see Allah to ask how often his community should pray. 50 times Allah says. Muhammad makes his way back to our regular old world and sees Moses, who knew he was going to ask that question and Moses says to Muhammad: What did God say: How often should you all pray. 50 times. And Moses was like: No way. Not possible. Go back and so Muhammad goes back and back and forth it goes until finally Muhammad says Allah says five times. Perfect. Which is a story, I take it, about interfaith cooperation AND the idea that no matter how devout, you can't spend all day praying. You gotta live in this world, no matter what. No escaping the idea that if God appears at all, God appears as your life.

And I had all these prayers because I write for a couple of different outlets and as a chaplain, they are awfully important. As a chaplain, you have to get in touch with your insides and your foibles and your quirks. In order to really know yourself and be somewhat together so you can help others. Otherwise, mines are hidden all around.

So, I had prayers like this one:

I am a hospital chaplain. I cling to silence and stillness, like a person in a shipwreck clings to the piece of wood keeping him afloat.

At the height of our surge this time around, maybe 2 weeks ago, I walked with 11 deaths within 7 days. That is a lot of death. That is a lot of tears.

When you walk into a hospital room, especially after a death or just before a death, there is often a stillness and a calm and a silence that is the very definition of mystery and sacred space.

First, walk gently.

You're entering into the great mystery.

Sorrow, regret, anger, grief, relief.
You never know what you'll find.

So, you may as well walk gently into that room,
which will likely be dark and quiet.

Second, talk gently.

The dead dream.

And the survivors do too.

They are in a fog,
or out to sea,
or in the deep woods.
Pick your image.

But talk gently, that mystery
will one day be you and yours.

Third, act gently.
Your gentleness
will invite whatever needs to happen
to happen.
If at all possible,
make it so the wife/husband/
mother/child
Hardly knows you are there.

Listen gently.
Listen with your eyes
and your ears
and mostly your heart.
The stories will come.
Be there to hear them.
Stories remind the wife
that she still is alive
And is alone and is not alone
all at once.

Be the Spirit
or Jesus
Or Muhammad
or the Buddha

Pick your guide and be that person.

Mary. Dorothy Day.
Thomas Merton.
It matters not.

Of course you are the best option.
So be you, in all of your quirky,
unexpected, beautiful, flawed,
perfect essence.

So I began to realize, I have all these stories, all these prayers. What if I combine them?

So I had all these stories, from real life, and from the sacred wisdom of the world's religious traditions and so I had a friend who was willing to put them out in to the world in the form of a book and one story that I knew would make it, no matter what, was the time that James Baldwin realized he could have murdered someone, easily.

Here is the story.

The writer James Baldwin gave us so much insight on what it meant to be a Black man in mid-century America, what it meant to be a Black man and gay. His book The Fire Next Time is a world treasure. It is truly prophetic and it calls forth our better angels, for the good of all. But it is his book Notes of a Native Son that I want to explore. One small scene that is a profound insight into the limitations one reaches in the midst of oppression and in the face of hatred, both individual and systemic. Baldwin was in Trenton, New Jersey with a friend. He was told, "We don't serve negroes here." He snapped. He was spinning out of control and wanted to lash out. He says he wanted to crush the white faces that were crushing him. He walked a few blocks and found a fashionable restaurant where he knew that even an intervention by the blessed virgin would not get him served. He quickly walked in and sat down at a nearby table. The waitress apologetically came over and said, "I'm sorry. We don't serve negroes here." The apologetic tone made it worse for Baldwin. He pretended like he couldn't hear her so she'd come closer. She did come closer but not by much. The phrase "we don't serve negroes here" was ringing in his head like a nightmare. He figured he would strike from a distance. The only thing on the table was a glass of water. He flung it at her. It missed and crashed into the mirror at the bar. He came to and realized that he was in imminent danger. He ran for the door. His friend stood outside and told the white mob and later the cops that Baldwin went one way when Baldwin really went another way. His friend lied and saved Baldwin's life. Baldwin went home, heart pounding. At home that night, Baldwin realized: "I could not get over two facts, both equally difficult for the imagination to grasp, and one was that I could have been murdered. But the other was that I had been ready to commit murder. I saw nothing very clearly but I did see this: that my life, my real life, was in danger, and not from anything other people might do but from the hatred I carried in my own heart." Protect your heart. In this season and always. Stay connected to your heart, your mind, your deepest loves and to all of humanity.

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As we begin 2022, what do you feel needs to be released in your life? What would you like to let go of? What needs to be refreshed and renewed?

Liberation theology in the UU context means standing with the poor and the oppressed, releasing all of those dynamics in our society which dehumanize and marginalize whole communities. We will always be committed to that.

But liberation also means releasing those dynamics in our own spirits which imprison us, individually—shame, regret, guilt, fear, hatred, and so on and so on.

Baldwin, in order to live his best life, had to come to grips with his hatred and rage—to redirect it creatively towards something else. What about you? What needs to go?

Amen.