

Homily, 3/8/20

“People are stupid.”

This, and comments like it, have been surprisingly frequent this week, as people anxious both about elections and viruses, bemoan the actions of others.

And while my internal dialogue is frequently something like “no, people really aren’t stupid, just scared,” I’m finding it necessary to slow down even further, take a moment to breathe, and hear the worry.

Because the worry is there.

I can’t tell you not to worry at all. It wouldn’t be vaguely responsible to do so.

What I do know is that it’s helpful to calm our nervous system. I know that good planning matters. And I know that when we’re focused outward, rather than inward, something shifts, bringing a sense of peace and connectedness. Lastly, but importantly, I know that community is the place to practice living into the unknown.

So that’s today, though not necessarily in that order.

Let’s start with practicalities. For now, we’ll continue to have coffee hour but we not include food, as multiple hands on food isn’t exactly a germ reduction measure. We’ll continue to meet, though you’ll see some more changes to our closing circle.

We'll have a little more hand sanitizer around, though of course that's limited and it is always better to wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds.

For now, meetings will continue, staff will be present, etc, with the understanding that anyone sick will self-select to stay at home or seek medical care. If there's a time when, even briefly, it's advisable to not meet in person, there are plans being formed for online worship. We're watchful as things evolve and we'll shift if and when we need to.

That said, we're not going to become an outlet for medical advice, unless the CDC or the state makes some sort of major announcement that needs to be shared. There's a lot of news and some of it conflicting, and we're not the medical experts here.

All that said, if you're scared, reach out for connection, whether with me or someone else.

I do have a favor to ask: keep gossip levels low. If you hear someone is ill, ask or share that information with me or the Pastoral Care team – Sky, Barbara, Linda, Joan Ray. As always, we'll share information as needed. But the cross current of worry and rumor, it's more harmful than helpful here.

Because people are good. There's healthy folks here who have already come to me, volunteering to help if someone is housebound and needs food, goods, whatever, delivered. You're not alone, even if you're quarantined. Our love, if not our germs, is always there.

Not just for us, either. As this virus unfolds, one of the questions emerging is about those at risk not only because of age or medical condition, though that too, but those who don't have stable housing or enough money to purchase two weeks of food. Not just within this congregation, either, but with those that use this building, in the local community. There are people much more scared than many of us are, because they have less protection.

And there's those lovingly putting themselves, potentially, in risk's way. Healthcare staff, especially at hospitals. Home health aides or CNAs, or a myriad of other sort of work, that continues even as we think about protecting ourselves. Teachers, nursery workers, hospice workers, pharmacists, and the list goes on.

What I fear most isn't the pandemic, but instead that reflex to protect US, instead of using our safety to assist others.

My very unscientific but I believe proven belief is that when we use our heart muscle in caring for others, when we remember our part in a larger and interconnected world, when our focus shifts from inward to outward, our immune systems get a rush of something good.

If you've glanced at the insert to your order of service, you'll see that we're making our love manifest, sharing our love. The plan is simple: we're asking you, next Sunday, to bring certain non-perishable goods with you. After service, with those who want to help, we'll build care packages for those who might need them. Food, toilet paper, and the like. I or the pastoral care team will distribute those boxes as needed, whether to a member

or friend, or simply someone we know in the local community who would benefit from that help, that love.

This is the direction I'll continue to encourage us. Panic set to low, and generosity of spirit set to high.

This is the practice of our time, of right now, of finding center, of reaching out, of staying connected, through the fear.

There's an "acting as if," a living into possibility in the midst of the unknown, that we need. A guiding of spirit. Something calls us forth, a hope for change, a belief in a truth we can not yet see. A fire of hope is lit in our hearts, and it resides there.

Because this virus is just the new arrival in a growing chain of events that surprise us, and, if unchecked, can cause fear and panic. Which is a really inadvisable place to make decisions from.

Right now, we want certainty. Where is the virus? Am I at risk? Why don't we have a specific plan? On and on.

And certainty is the one thing in short supply.

Not just about the virus, either. Our politics, legislation, courts, and very earth, are less certain than they've been in a long time.

Part of that is that we've been safe, protected, in a way much of the world hasn't been. The large pandemics of the past few decades haven't impacted us, directly. We're not the ones being stopped at the border or jailed. The realities of climate change

aren't, yet, massively impacting this little ocean state. The rollbacks of the Trump administration have yet to be felt.

The reality is that, like the virus, it's going to get worse before it gets better.

Then, how, does, Unitarian Universalism, above and beyond the regular gathering of our beloved community, how does it inform how we are with ourselves, our families, and in the world?

We act from a place of love.

We come back to that again and again. How can we be loving with ourselves and each other in the moments of fear? How can we be loving with the stranger, or those with whom we disagree? How do we keep being loving in a world that, at moments, highlights human beings acting selfishly, thoughtlessly, or cruelly?

I feel compelled to be a bit prescriptive here.

One, turn off the news. The constant stream of terrifying information isn't needed, and doesn't help. Look out your window. If you're well enough, take a walk or a ride. Ground yourself in the real and the known.

Two, reach out and keep reaching out. Scared people isolate, and even if someone is self-quarantining, there are many ways to stay connected.

Three, check in on those in your circle who might not have support, and if you have the bandwidth, offer them some.

Lastly, but not least, practice gratitude. Gratitude for what is good, gratitude for the opportunity of a new day, gratitude for each other. The list is endless.

I'm not pretending this is easy, or unscary. But I am sure there's a way through it with love and compassion, and that there can be no better path forward.