

“J'ai Faim”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County
Rev. Denis Paul and Nancy Richman
October 15, 2023

Opening Words

An American anthropologist working in Africa proposed a game to the kids of a small village. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever got there first would win it all.

When he told them to run they all took each others hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats.

When he asked them why they had run like that as one could have had all the fruits for himself they said: "UBUNTU, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?"

'UBUNTU' in the Xhosa culture means: "I am because we are"

If there is one message that I hope that comes through most loudly in Unitarian Universalism it's that we are all one. We are the same. Not just one whole group. Not just similar. But I am you and you are me.

Sometimes, that is hard to remember. Especially in times of turmoil and strife, when bodies are dropping and rhetoric is flying and we're all trying not to get hit.

And so we gather this morning to remember that we are. We simply *are*.

In the last week, there have been 5 mass shootings in the United States.

28 people were injured, and 2 killed, including:

Jamar Porterfield-Herriot Jr, 22

Kyesha Miller, 15

That's a relatively quiet week in America, in stark contrast to the horrors of the last eight days in the war between Israel and Hamas, and now Hezbollah. In times like this, numbers often seem like the only things that make sense, and the numbers contradict depending on sources, but it's safe to say that at least 4,000 have been killed and more than double that number injured. Mostly civilians including babies. And elders.

The thing we can't make sense of is the suffering and misery that profoundly affect all people of the Middle East, beyond. Jews and Muslims, no matter their nationality or degree of identity with their religious faith, are feeling this especially profoundly.

Prayers for Peace Nancy Richman

Grant, O God, that we lie down in peace, and raise us up, our Guardian, to life renewed. Spread over us the shelter of Your peace. Guide us with Your good counsel; for Your Name's sake, be our help. Shield and shelter us beneath the shadow of Your wings. Defend us against enemies, illness, war, famine and sorrow. Distance us from wrongdoing. For You, God, watch over us and deliver us. For You, God, are gracious and merciful. Guard our going and coming, to life and to peace evermore.

— *A Jewish Prayer for Peace at Night (Collected by Rabbi Lynn C. Liberman, BCC) Text of the Hashkiveinu prayer (from Mishkan T'filah)*

Praise be to the Lord of the Universe who has created us and made us into tribes and nations, that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. If the enemy inclines towards peace, do thou also incline towards peace, and trust in God, for the Lord is the one that heareth and knoweth all things. And the servants of God, Most Gracious are those who walk on the Earth in humility, and when we address them, we say "PEACE."

— *Based on the Quran, chapter 49, verse 13; and chapter 8, verse 61*

Story "The Wolf of Gubbio," based on a traditional Franciscan Tale

The Wolf of Gubbio is a traditional tale about St. Francis of Assisi. My first experience of it was a translation of a poem by Nicaraguan poet and storyteller Ruben Dario, who lived from 1867 to 1916. His writings were inspirations to the people during the revolution in Nicaragua that began in 1978. It was a time of unspeakable inhumanity.

There once was a wolf living outside of the town of Gubbio, Italy. He was a ferocious, insatiable wolf with huge fangs that dripped blood of the animals — and sometimes people — he killed. At night, the air was filled with his howling, his expression of frustration and fury.

It's said that St. Francis could communicate with animals, so one day at dawn he approached the wolf, and when the wolf lunged at him St. Francis stayed still and said, "Peace, brother wolf."

Shocked, the wolf stopped and watched Francis in his humble brown cloak. He dropped his defenses and relaxed. "It's alright, Brother," he said.

"Tell me," said Francis gently "why you live by horror and death? Why do you spill so much blood? Why do you spread so much terror? How can you stand the cries of the villagers when you cause them death and pain? You kill more than you can possibly eat."

The wolf was silent for a moment, becoming visibly more humble. He said "The winters are hard. I am lonely. Hunger is intense. There's no food in the forest so I go to the pastures." He paused. "But the blood? I've seen too many hunters chasing down boars, bears and stags, themselves stained with the blood of wounded animals. I've been deafened by the cries of the animals they have tortured. They weren't hunting out of hunger."

Francis acknowledged the capacity of humans to be cruel, especially with animals who are pure of spirit and often defenseless. But he also made a promise: If you stop killing the livestock of the villagers, they will see that you are fed and never lonely.

The wolf extended his paw in agreement, and together they walked to the village.

The villagers couldn't believe it. At first it seemed like a miracle that St. Francis had tamed the terrible wolf. Francis gathered all of the villagers in Piazza, and assured them that the wolf would live among them in peace.

The wolf wagged his tail and started to make himself comfortable. He spent his days watching people move about, listening to music from the church, and protecting the people. He went into their homes and they fed him, like a pet dog.

After a while, Francis returned to Assisi, and the sweet wolf returned to the mountain. Within days, he began howling again, with fury and rage. Fear returned to the region. Villagers began to carry weapons again, but the weapons were useless against the fury of the wolf. He seemed more ferocious than ever.

Months later, when Francis returned to Gubbio, the people of the village surrounded him complaining bitterly about the wickedness of the wolf. Sad but curious, Francis went back to the woods, and found the wolf in his den.

“In the name of everything sacred in the Universe, why have you returned to terror?”

The wolf sighed so deeply the air seemed to come from his bones. The struggle was visible in his face.

He said, “don’t come close, brother Francis. I was peaceful in the village and happy to be there. But after a time, I started to see in the piazza and in the homes so much greed, anger and abuse. Brothers at war. Spouses fighting like dogs. I would lick their hands and feet, trying to appeal to their humanity. But they would hit me, and kick me. I tried to be docile and humble, but their sneers burned, and the fury returned as I defended myself. So leave me alone in the mountains.

Francis cried. And he prayed that there could be peace and forgiveness, and that all creatures would be protected from harm, knowing it was impossible. But he still had faith the even when things were their bleakest, they would get better.

Sermon “J’ai Faim,” Rev. Denis Paul

So far this morning I have told you two different stories.

One a story of kindness, generosity and oneness about an interaction between an American adult and African children.

The other an Italian story of cruelty adopted by Nicaraguans as a metaphor of hope.

Whenever I have heard the Ubuntu story, I have figured the anthropologist has to be from the United States. First of all, he’s the game he proposes to the kids feels presumptuous, because it feels like an experiment for him, not fun for them. The thing that makes me REALLY feel like the anthropologist is American is that the game is built around ownership. The winner takes it all, and the losers get nothing. It feels so rooted in capitalism, not cooperation.

Capitalism is about what we have. Cooperation is about how we are together. But the kids make the game into something that makes sense to them. They make it cooperative.

The American really has no business intruding, taking charge, trying to control outcomes. But we do it all the time. Our government has interfered in other sovereign governments for almost as long as we've existed as a nation, so we tend to think we have the right to show up and "help" in any way we want, or just state our opinions freely. Even when we don't know anything.

And yet, the lesson taught by the kids ... the moral of the story of Ubuntu ... matters. Wouldn't the world be great if that's how it was? If everywhere, we were concerned about the good of the community? All the time? Everywhere?

Of course, if there's one thing we know it's that it's a lot easier to get along when you're all pretty similar.

Communities tend to be more harmonious when they are of the same race, religion and wealth.

It's a lot harder when you have rich living with poor. Black living with white and brown. Muslim and Jew and Christian and Hindu and atheist. It just gets worse when the resources of food, oil, or land are limited and communities are pitted against each other.

When conflict arises it's easy for both sides to see the other as the wolf terrorizing a community, even when really, we are all wolves some of the time. Especially when we are cold, lonely, hungry and afraid.

This has been a terrible week for so many people. I've talked with folks with so many different connections to Israel, Palestine, or both.

One person grew up in Jerusalem and admitted to feeling guilty about being so relieved to learn their family is okay, when so many have been brutally killed.

One studied in Egypt and Palestine decades ago and is saddened that a couple old friends have been radicalized by Hamas.

One was in a weeklong healing circle ten years ago with Israelis and Palestinians, all wanting Harmony. Her heart is breaking for all of them right now, having no idea what has become of most of them.

I've talked with many people who identify as Jewish and have unwavering support for Israel its current government.

Jews who separate their religious identity from the practices of a transient elected government they see as a brutal dictatorship.

Some who have Jewish roots feeling ashamed for abandoning their people for the privilege of being in the Christian mainstream of North America.

And so many like me who are horrified by the images and stories of the atrocity, but privileged to not be directly affected.

So many of us feel like we have no business stating any opinions other than grief over the tragedy and the inhumanity.

I will admit that it took a bit of time for the news to hit me. The last three weeks have been unusually busy, and I was fighting a bit of a stomach bug Friday to Monday last week. I kind of checked out, disconnected from the typically bad news that seems to be an onslaught the last few years.

Honestly, regular fasting from media has been my best self care practice since 2016. Fasting from media for a few days at a time allows me to sleep, exercise and eat healthfully so I don't turn into the Wolf of Gubbio, frustrated and furious about the cruelty.

Last Sunday and Monday I slept. Tuesday was 12 hours of meetings. I didn't really start to absorb the details of the terror in Israel and Gaza until late Tuesday. Wednesday it started to occur to me how much I'd missed. Not just of the news, but of the suffering of the people around me. Your suffering.

What a terrible, isolating privilege to not have to see perhaps the worst atrocities perpetrated during my lifetime, and the heartbreak of the people I serve.

I am sorry.

Through all of these conversations and news stories in the last few days, the thing that comes through is that everywhere, there is anger. Everywhere, there is fear. Everywhere, there are shock and disgust and a compelling desire to just turn it all off because it is too hard to face the reality of who we are as humans. It's hard to not become our fear. It's hard to not become our anger. Fear and anger can become who we are. Our identity.

For weeks, I've been planning on talking today about something I read by queer Irish poet Pádraig O'Tuama, who seems to keep popping up lately everywhere. He wrote"

In Irish, when you talk about emotions, you don't say "I am sad." You'd say, "ta born orm," sadness is upon me. And I love that because there's an implication of not identifying yourself with the emotion fully.

I am not sad, it's just that sadness is on me for a while. Something else will be on me another time, and that's a good thing to recognize.

That made a lot of sense to me, because in French, the language I spoke before I learned English, you say "Je suis triste," I am sad, BUT you say "J'ai faim." I have hunger. It gives you the sense that hunger will pass. Even if you are living with external conditions, like famine brought on by drought or war or foreign meddling, it doesn't define you. Hunger isn't your identity.

With all the anger and fear in the world this week, I looked it up a bunch of phrases. In Irish and French you say "I HAVE fear." In Irish "I HAVE anger," but in French "I am IN anger."

So in Irish, anger is moves through you, and in French anger is a kind of place you can leave.

In Irish I HAVE shock and I HAVE disgust, but in French, I AM shocked and I AM disgusted.

In English of course, we always say I AM.

I am hungry.

I am sad.

I am angry, afraid, shocked, disgusted.

I'm no linguist, but as far as I can tell, both Hebrew and Arabic are the same.

In all three languages, we ARE our emotions.

Where I am I going with all of this? I don't know. It might be too soon to tell.

All I know right now is that when I look at how things are going between Israel and Palestine,

how things are going between Russia and Ukraine, and how things are going right here in the United States between liberals and conservatives and our meddling all the over the world, I'm just afraid that we identify too much with our feelings, as if they are our identity and not just passing emotions we can acknowledge and move through, the way we did in our meditation last week.

We're letting our anger and our fear define us as a nation. And too often we let anger and fear define us as people.

I'm not saying we let our emotions become our identity because of how our language is structured. But maybe the structure of our language says something about how we see our emotions.

The thing is that even if we were to suddenly restructure our language to be more like Irish, I don't think it would make us any less angry or afraid. Heaven knows that anger and fear exist in Ireland, despite the gentle poetry of their language.

Changing our language couldn't change us any more than the presence of the docile wolf could change the people of Gubbio.

Changing our language wouldn't suddenly make us share everything we have with everyone around us in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Right now, all I know is, "J'ai faim." I have hunger.

I have a hunger for peace,
real peace,
not fake peace defined as a passing absence of active conflict.
I have a hunger for connection,
real connection with real people,
where they are,
as they are,
not as some kind of expression of who and what I need them to be.

Do you have a similar kind of hunger?

Tell me about it. Tell each other about it.

Part of me wants to say, "Let's stop over identifying with our hunger. Let's stop defining ourselves by the things we want but don't have. Let's start looking at our hunger as a passing state." Because I feel like if we can satisfy our hunger, we can really thrive.

The issue, the difficulty, I know, is that once we do that, once we let go of our hunger and fear and anger, just let it pass through us, we might see the world for what it really is in all of its complexity.

We might be afraid that, like the wolf of Gubbio, we will see the hypocrisy of others and be disillusioned to the point of despair, disillusioned by the huge capacity of humans to be cruel to one another.

Worse, we might be afraid that we see the hypocrisy in ourselves and the way we add to tumult and conflict.

Maybe sometimes we need to just sit with that before letting it pass. Maybe this is one of those times, to sit with the struggle, knowing no one of us can do a thing to stop it or change it.

Knowing someday this struggle will end. Someday there will be more peace.

As St Francis knew, it will get better. It'll likely get uglier before then, but someday... someday... it will get better and we will find the peace.

Someday we will get to experience Ubuntu, being one, if only for a little while.

Let's rise now, as we each are able and willing, and sing together as heartfully as we can, the gentle and hopeful #318 in the gray hymnal, We Would Be One.