

Born Ready

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There once was a poor man in the freezing cold. He had no source of heat whatsoever, and there was no public relief for him or anyone, and the temperature was bitter cold. He was frigid to the bone. The trees, the sky, his stove, the very air itself all shone with the cold that threatened his life, yet he was without any coal to warm his small home, and he was without any money to buy some. He typically seemed to have just enough money to buy just enough coal to stay just warm enough to stay alive, but for some reason, he didn't have any money during this cold spell. Maybe the cost of food went up. Maybe his pay was cut. Maybe there was a sickness in his family. Maybe he was robbed.

We don't know why, but we know that he couldn't buy the coal needed to warm himself enough to stay alive, and so he had to rely on begging. He went to the coal-dealer, from whom he often bought coal. It was after hours so he didn't get the dealer directly, but he got the coal-dealer's wife at the door. From afar, the coal-dealer thought that a paying customer was at the door and announced that they have plenty of coal to sell. The freezing man says he really needs some, but that he can't pay for it now; "not just now," he says, but he promises to pay for it later. He says this with what he calls a death rattle in his throat. He pleads with the wife to give him even just a shovel-full of the cheapest coal they have, and he'll pay them back, but the story says that she can't hear him, and she can't see him. Nor can the husband, who only can see sales. And so the freezing man is turned away, and in his words, he ascends into the region of ice mountains, and is lost forever.

Part of the story hinges on that phrase, "not just now." He says, I can pay you, but not just now. The author of this story tells us that as the freezing man says those words, the bells of a church ring nearby. As the man tries and fails to get the coal he needs to live, church bells ring. And the author says nothing else about them. Perhaps this quick absence aligns the church with the wife who neither saw nor heard the freezing man, for the church does not save him anymore than the coal couple did. Or perhaps they serve as an unheeded signal to the man that help was where the bells rang. One way or another, however, the author wanted to write the church into the story of this freezing man and the troubles he was having staying alive. The author wanted the church to be a character in this tragedy. What exact role did the church play? Well, the author doesn't really fill that in, so we can.

The author of this story is Franz Kafka, one of my favorite writers who I find of very limited use in preaching because his stories are so weird. But they're powerful. This is a very short story titled, "The Bucket Rider," and you can find the whole thing online pretty easily. And one of the questions it raises is how does the church address suffering, inequality, injustice, and other ills in the world. If we believe that in a land of plenty of coal, no one should freeze to death, how does the church proclaim that moral position? It proclaims something; it must, for the Kafka makes sure that the bells ring. But what does it proclaim, and how far, and how wide, and to what end?

In World War II, German Lutheran pastor Martin Neimoller proclaimed a voice for the church in the face Nazi atrocities that has sounded ever since. In words commonly shared today as we face the rise of a frighteningly bigoted kind of authoritarianism here in America, he said:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

Neimoller is talking about the slow roll of oppression laid out through policy by Nazi leaders in the early days of Hitler's dictatorship, and how it picked up steam to eventually include many, many people. The early silence of people not overtly targeted by oppressive forces strengthened those forces to go after more and more people. He repeats, "I did not, because I was not;" I did not speak because I was not of this identity or that one, probably to equate silence with a sense of safety. "If I don't speak, I won't be noticed, I won't be targeted, I won't be hurt."

But the progression of his writing shows this as a false sense of safety, for sooner or later, unchecked evil can get to everyone. And if only the targeted group speaks and tries to defend itself; if they are not joined by allies of other identities, or of no particular identity, soon there will be no force strong enough to counter evil before it can do enormous damage. In this case, that damage that Neimoller sought to counter was the eventual utter destruction of six million Jewish lives and another five million non-Jewish lives, a loss commemorated two days ago, on International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

But Neimoller leads us to something even more important about the church and our role in the world. By listing different identities and then saying that ultimately none of them matter before a force of great evil, we can say that ultimately none of them matter before the Source of life either. He's claiming that there is a fundamental unity of life. In his case, that became evident in the slow, speeding roll of evil over innocent lives. But that must be true in the slow, speeding role of goodness and truth too. If unchecked evil can make us realize how alike we are, expanding goodness must be able to do the same thing. And if he, as a pastor, aligns the church with checking the power of evil in the world, we know too that the church must be aligned with expanding goodness as well, and that the church's voice in both of these movements is rooted in an affirmation in the fundamental unity of life. Before evil, we are one. Before goodness, we are one. Before hunger, before injustice, before homelessness, before violence, we are one. Before grace, before forgiveness, before joy, before progress, we are one.

He said that when evil came for another, it was really coming for him. And by extension, when the Holy calls another, the Holy calls me too. And in a time of fascist, bigoted, xenophobic, authoritarian death and destruction, he aligned the church with both calls; fight evil and do holy work. There are plenty of instances in the history of our own faith where these two callings have been brought to life by Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. When sexism kept women out of the ministry for centuries, Universalists were among the first to ordain women, and Unitarians weren't that far behind. When sexism kept women out of the voting booth, members of both faiths were among the first and most active to press for women's suffrage. While sexism continues to keep women earning less than men, and offer them fewer options in balancing career and family, and continues to insist on making private, intimate healthcare decisions for them that they should make by themselves, Unitarian Universalists of all genders consistently advocate for true gender equality in the home, workplace, doctor's office, and everywhere else.

When slavery was the law of the land, Universalists were among the first, most consistent, and most radical in denouncing that evil institution. Unitarians did as well, some quite loudly, many a bite more quietly. During the civil right movement of the 50's and 60's, members of our faith marched, protested, voted, and organized in support of the right to vote, the destruction of separate but equal legislation, and racial equality across the board. Now, as we stare down the latest and most insidious form of systemic racism known as the New Jim Crow, or the deadly racism allowed in our criminal justice system, UU's are again active as a voice and a force in bringing these injustices to light and creating change.

UU's have always been at the forefront of movements for sexual orientation and gender identity equality, be it in the area of marriage, housing, employment, the military, adoption, or the integrity, legality, and safety with which one can publicly embrace their true gender. We march with immigrants of various statuses, often with bright yellow shirts and under banners that proclaim, "Standing on the Side of Love," with such dependability that among some allies we are not known so much as Unitarian Universalists, but as the "Love People," because that is what our shirts say.

And we have never countered the evil of the day or advanced holy values perfectly. We have made mistakes. And we have been inconsistent. And there have been times when we've meant well but caused harm, and there have been times when we've been quiet and allowed fear or the perception of self-interest to silence ourselves. But on the whole, we have been a faith that has looked with open eyes into the oppression and inequality that is before us and proclaimed a new way of being. We have turned toward racism and preached equality. We have turned toward sexism and preached its evilness. We have turned toward homophobia and preached love. We have turned toward transphobia and taught understanding. We have turned xenophobia and enlivened biblical values of welcoming the stranger better than many in Washington who pound their bibles in public the loudest. We have always turned, never perfectly, but turning nonetheless, toward that which was but not ought to be because we know that we are one.

We have answered none of the callings to resist what is evil and proclaim what is holy perfectly, but we have answered these callings nonetheless. And we have never answered them alone, for other faiths of progressive values and worldly mindsets have also sought to enliven God's word in the care, compassion, and justice that we offer one another. We have worked well with these groups, sometimes leading, often following. And as our faith continues to mature in our identity beyond being a religion that is "not this" or "not that," which usually just insults faiths that "are this," or "are that," we will grow in our ability to partner with religious groups seeking to create the same sort of world. If we stop letting our perceived uniqueness get in our own way, and instead place commonality of service to beloved community before us, we can partner with other faiths of not the same but similar values in ways that we can't even imagine.

And so in today's world, as authoritarianism rises in America and elsewhere, as nationalistic isolationism leads nations to view each other with dangerous suspicion, and as bigotry and hatred flow from the highest office in the land into every house, heart, and twitter account, we are called again to be a voice of resistance and proclamation. We are called, as we have always been called, to counter words of oppression with the beauty of freedom; to answer claims of bigotry with the assurance of our common humanity, to counter xenophobia with the radical welcoming of the stranger, and to preach a new, bold vision of the beloved community when our leaders would rather we hate one another.

We are called again to be this religion of love and equality and acceptance that not only reflects how we serve the Holy, but attracts others who wish to counter the evil winds of these days too. For all around you, all around me; everywhere we go, there are good people; people of different religions and politics, people of different background and identities, people of all diversities imaginable, who share a common aspiration to be good, do good, and create good in the world. The danger in times like these, in which cruelty is casually decreed and innocent ones suffer, is quietness; a response in which people who object to what is happening hear no common voices, and so they feel alone in their moral outrage. And they feel depressed. And like they can't do anything.

But then they see a faith declaring publicly that hatred and cruelty are morally outrageous, and they see that faith in action, by itself sometimes, but even better, in partnership, in board rooms and civic meetings and on the streets. They see it marching along with millions of women and their allies last week. They see it gathering on the spur of the moments in airports all over the country last night when an immoral, unnecessary, and downright cruel proclamation would harm the lives of immigrants. When an American president would declare war on the principles of America, those who would otherwise despair see the resistance and feel energized. They read signs and hear chants and they know they're not alone, and what rises is their resistance, and their eyes, and their vision of the world they wish to be.

This is our calling in these days; not to turn from that which would harm innocent people and destroy lives, but to face it with resistance and a new vision of the country that we can be. We have a theology based upon the fundamental goodness of people, centered in God's universal love, and put into action in the service of the world. We have a tradition whose strongest through-line is one of engaging that which ought not to be with that which should be. And we have communities that are partnering better and better with other groups who wish to see our common values enlivened in the world.

These are difficult, scary times. But we were made them. We were born ready for them because our tradition is one of facing times like these head on. And as hatred and bigotry sound their alarms, we'll sound our bells of love and freedom even louder, sounding them so loudly that more and more people hear them, sounding them along with those holy chimes of other faiths who also view the work of God on earth as the work of justice and compassion for everyone here and now.

And while that freezing man in the story didn't know why the church bells rang, those running cold today into the frozen winds of hatred and bigotry will know that our bells sound love. They sound a new way of being. They sound all over the ages. And they sound an invitation to create that new world, through resistance to the realization of a new vision, where all of God's children; adults and literal children, of every country and every circumstance, is safe, has a home, and finds that when the doorbell of America is rung by one who seeks warmth, they are not turned away to suffer and die in the cold. They are given that warmth freely and generously by a people of love, and goodness, and faith.

May it be so, and Amen.