

Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

April 19, 2020

“All of Us” Rev. Mary Gear

A few days ago, several thousand people stormed the Michigan State capitol grounds protesting the recent stay-at-home order issued by Governor Gretchen Whitmer. It is one of the most restrictive orders in the nation, aimed at flattening the curve of virus infection in one of the hardest-hit states. A similar rally is planned here in Olympia.

John and I received this news with worry and a sense of knowing. The disruption took place about a half mile from where we used to live in Lansing, two blocks from where I used to work, and right in front of John's law school. Whitmer was our state representative and senator when we lived there. Michigan is where I grew up and where I have lots of family still. The environment that the protest took place in—both physical and cultural—is one that I know well.

Where I grew up in Western Michigan, on the shores of Lake Michigan, is Calvinist country. The Europeans who entered the area were from Holland, bringing Calvinism with them and forming the Calvinist Christian Reformed Church. It's the church that my paternal grandmother was raised in.

John Calvin, on whose religious beliefs Calvinism was founded, was part of the reform efforts in the 1500's, like Martin Luther, rebelling against the Catholic church. But Calvin took a different theological path than Luther. Calvin taught that only certain individuals are the “elect,” predestined by God for salvation, to go to heaven. No matter what good a person might do in the world, if

they were not favored by God, they would not go to heaven. The people who receive the gift of salvation from God express it by doing good and by doing well. The elect are favored and so express that favor to others. In this theology, it is important to respect the personal conscience of individual members who feel they are led by God in the form of the Holy Spirit.

In our Unitarian Universalist history, Calvin is important because he and Michael Servetus were public voices of different theologies back in that important time of reform. We claim Servetus in our faith tradition's lineage because he argued against the trinity (against God as three--Father, Son and Holy Spirit—that's the Unitarian part) and against predestination, claiming that God would not condemn anyone who had performed good in the world, that salvation is for everyone (that's the Universalist part). The feud between Calvin and Servetus was long and public. Calvin encouraged and supported the official labeling of Servetus as a heretic, which led to Servetus' imprisonment and execution in 1553. He was our first Unitarian Universalist martyr.

So, why am I talking about ancient history right now? The tension is the same now as it was then and was before then from the beginning of human civilization: the tension between the individual and the communal.

It is not lost on me that this Unitarian Universalist minister, whose theology is all about interdependence and connection, grew up in an environment steeped in the theology and practice of Calvinism, even if it isn't recognized as that by many anymore. The feud lives on.

Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture,

expecting Mead to talk about tools like fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones.

But instead Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink, or hunt for food. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone took the time to stay with the one who fell, bound up the wound, carried the person to safety, and tended the person through recovery. Meade said that helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts.

Those who protested in Lansing last week were there because they believe that their individual freedoms have been unjustly restricted. The “Don't Tread on Me” flag gave a very clear message that each individual was able to make their own decisions about their own safety, and that power doesn't belong to anyone else. As we say in my family, “You're not the boss of me!” And, the presence of confederate flags and weapons gave the message that those with power have no intention of sharing it or having it curbed in any way, even if it means less or no freedom for others. The texts from the president yesterday further encouraged the idea that liberation means doing whatever you want whenever you want.

Most of the protestors observed the social distancing guidelines and stayed in their cars. The protest organizers asked everyone to be safe and keep their distance. The ones who didn't, made the news; the ones who stormed the capitol steps as a mob and blocked the road to the hospital so ambulances couldn't get through.

Gov. Whitmer responded to the protesters by acknowledging the tension and setting boundaries. While she was disappointed to see people congregating outside without wearing masks, she said "I respect your opinions. I just urge you, don't put yourself at risk and don't put others at risk either." Whitmer said that the rally endangered people, naming the "sad irony" that the protest may lengthen the time needed for a stay-at-home order.

Whitmer named that we are free to speak our truth as we know it, but we are not free to harm ourselves or others. Liberation doesn't mean doing whatever we want whenever we want. This can be a hard lesson to learn, and some resist it for their entire lives.

Whenever more than one of us gather, we negotiate how we will be together, sometimes formally with laws and rules, sometimes informally with norms. Unitarian Universalists call our agreements covenants. We don't always keep our covenants, but we always make them and seek to repair them when they are broken.

I have been reflecting on the ironies and paradoxes of this time. The paradox that the best way to care for those we love is to stay away from them, to keep our physical distance. Our physical safety, and the safety of others, depends on physical isolation. When our anxiety and worry is high and we need each other most, we have to keep our distance. When we most want to reach out and hug someone, we reach out virtually.

The paradox that we are asked to choose to limit our personal freedoms in service to the greater good. We limit our individual behavior so that others can be free from illness and death, worry and fear.

It is an irony that, in this month of stay-at-home orders here and around the world, the spiritual theme we've been exploring is liberation, a setting or becoming free.

It may be true that all theology comes from reaction to or tension with what came before. The theological push in the last century was against both conservative and liberal theology to create liberation theology. Liberation theology asserts that liberation means the transformation of social existence, transforming all social, economic, political, and educational systems toward justice. And, the theology part is that liberation is a religious or spiritual quest.

Religion is a tool that can be used to safeguard the status quo and justify oppression. Or it can be used to challenge the status quo and demand justice. Liberation theology says that true religion demands an effort to envision a society that promotes justice and freedom for all.

So, in this time when everything is upside down and all shook up, perhaps this is the perfect time to contemplate liberation as a spiritual practice.

How do you understand the relationship between individual freedom and the greater good?

What do you think liberation or collective liberation would be like?

What does it mean to live with justice and in freedom?

Some activists are saying that this current crisis is a dress rehearsal for what is coming—the climate crisis. This larger crisis will call on our collective action in an even greater way and will ask us to consider what liberation looks like, not just for humans, but for all life. As we heard in our story, we have much to learn from our animal cousins. Just like COVID-19 requires us to stay home even if we are well so we don't infect others, climate change will require all of us to make changes for the common good. So, we have to figure this out: The individual and the communal, our interdependence.

We can imagine that dependence is a cage; when we are dependent on someone or something, we are asked to give up control, choices and freedom. Independence is also a cage; it is in reaction to dependence and causes us to mistrust others and put up barriers to connection. I suggest that it is in our interdependence that we find true liberation, and that it is collective liberation. Poet Emma Lazarus, whose work is at the base of the Statue of Liberty, wrote: "Until we are all free, we are none of us free."

I want real freedom for all of us, even the protesters in state capitols, even those who are stoking the flames of anger and partisanship. Like Gov. Whitmer, I will support a person's right to speak their truth. And, my prayer is that we understand that there are truths other than ours, and that living in community will always require negotiation so that everyone can be free.

adrienne maree brown wrote that "everywhere there is a complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential." And in this potential lies our collective liberation. May we live into this potential with love.

On this day, may all be well.

May all be loved.

May all be free.

All of us.

Blessed Be and Amen.

Let us hold a moment of silence together.