

Thoreau Woods UU Church – Worship Service
The Sunday Morning Good News with John Pepper
August 22, 2010

Prelude

Chalice Lighting

We light this candle

For the light of truth and reason

For the warmth of love and friendship

For the flame of strength and action

And for the vision of tolerance and justice.

Opening Hymn

John Pepper

Please join me standing as you are able singing our opening hymn No. 400 “Shalom Havayreem.”

Announcements

John Pepper

Visitors, Welcome! We are happy to have you here.

(Pause)

If you would like, please sign our guest book on the table in the entryway and give your address or email if you want to receive our newsletter. If you would like to become a member, we have an application form also on the table you can fill out and turn in when you are ready.

In the next couple of weeks, our own Marcus Gillespie and Sandra Stackhouse will be speaking. Marcus’ topic is “Last Child in the Woods: The Problem of Nature-Deficit Disorder” and Sandra will give a talk on “The Legacy of Abraham A. Low: Recovery International.” If you are unfamiliar with either of these topics, please join us. I’m sure they will be fascinating.

Our special collection this morning is for the victims of the recent Missouri tornados. Please make your checks out to the Missouri Interfaith Disaster Organization.

Please plan to join us for lunch today at Don Rafa’s, at I-45 and 11th street.

Are there any other announcements from the floor?

Opening Words

John Pepper

Please join with me now in a spirit of worship.

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Let there be joy in our coming together.

Let there be truth heard in the words we speak and the songs we sing.

Let there be help and healing for our disharmony and despair.

Let there be silence for the voice within us and beyond us.

Let there be joy in our coming together.

Carl Seaburg, *Rejoice Together*, 5.

Hymn

Please join me singing Hymn No. 354 “We Laugh, We Cry” verses 1 and 2.

Joys and Concerns

John Pepper

As an expression of our connectedness and community, you are invited to come forward and share a joy, sorrow or concern as you light a candle. Or you may choose to light a candle without comment. Visitors, you are also encouraged to participate.

Please form a line to my left.

(Pause)

I will light one final candle for all those joys and concerns left unsaid.

Story for All Ages – *Incredible You!* by Dr. Wayne Dyer

Offertory Statement

Offertory Music

Responsive Reading

In honor of our Independence Day, please join me in our Responsive Reading, No. 592 “The Free Mind” by William Ellery Channing.

I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness:

*Which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering,
thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.*

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith:

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Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse:

Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit, and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion:

Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world.

I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on its old virtues:

But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering:

Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

I call that mind free which has cast off all fear but that of wrongdoing, and which no menace or peril can enthrall:

Which is calm in the midst of tumults, and possesses itself, though all else be lost.

Prayer

John Pepper

Please close your eyes, look out the window, simply relax in whatever way you center yourself for a time of prayer and meditation. (Pause)

Our society is often inundated with news and information that leaves us feeling anxious or unsure about the world we live in. But I have a choice as to where I focus my attention. Do I see only trouble, fear and strife? Or do I see harmony, progress and cooperation? The way I view the world has a powerful effect on my life.

Today I choose to see the world through the eyes of love. I choose to see peace instead of conflict, love instead of fear. I choose to see beyond any situation to the underlying truth of the love available to us all. I trust in that love to soften the hearts and minds of all involved. As I project a positive outlook and expectation of peace to those around me, I become a catalyst for peace in the world.

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(Pause)

Amen!

The *Daily Word*, June 22, 2011

Sermon – *The Sunday Morning Good News with John Pepper*

Good Morning and Good News!

We may be free from rain here in Huntsville, but there is one silver lining to a very dark cloud in Gainesville, Florida. If you recall, Pastor Terry Jones' plan to burn the Qur'an last fall sparked outrage around the world. But Jones's stunt ended up deepening interfaith ties in Gainesville.

Dennis Schuman, a leader at a local Jewish congregation, says Jones "probably did more to cement interfaith cooperation in Gainesville than any of the rest of us have accomplished in our entire ministerial careers."

Larry Reimer, A United Church of Christ pastor in Gainesville, notes that an interfaith coalition was formed to plead with Jones not to burn the Qur'an, and as a result 25 religious communities agreed to share common readings at their worship services on September 11-12. A monthly lunch continues to be held, and interfaith study groups have sprung up.

Ties have been forged between Muslim and Christian congregations, and plans are being made for Jews, Christians and Muslims to jointly sponsor a House of Hope built with the help of Habitat for Humanity.¹

Moving on to our U.S. schools, sometimes you have to understand the problem in order to tackle the problem. A mantra of public school critics is that U.S. schools are failing and falling behind standards attained by countries like China.

But some recent studies have shown that the problem is not public schools but poverty. American students rank first in reading and science and third in math when the sample is from schools where the poverty rate is less than 10 percent. Even in schools where poverty levels are between 10 and 25 percent, students still rank first in reading and science. The problem is that in 20 percent of schools in the U.S., poverty rates exceed 75 percent.²

One could conclude that our problem is not the schools, it is poverty.

Another statistic you might use comes from a writer in the *Washington Post* on January 28. Edward Schumacher-Matos claims that, "While some are busy arguing that foreigners are taking high-tech jobs from Americans ... researchers ... found last year that the large presence of immigrants in high-tech fields stimulated business and actually

¹ Christian Century, March 8, 2011, 8.

² Ibid.

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created more jobs than they took away.” He goes on to point out that the U.S. issues far more patents than other countries, and about a fourth of them in recent years have been granted to immigrants.³

Several stories this morning celebrate justice long overdue. In our first story, last December President Barack Obama signed the Claims Resolution Act of 2010, which was meant to resolve two long-running justice issues, a demonstration that justice too long deferred might be justice denied.

The first of the two issues centers around the plight of African-American farmers, who have historically faced the bitter sting of racism in a culture of entrenched institutional discrimination at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which denied them their fair share of crop and disaster payments, timely loans, and debt restructuring.

Last December’s law set up a \$1.15 billion dollar fund for settlements between African-American farmers and the Agriculture Department.

The law also offers a response to a second, separate injustice: the longstanding Department of Interior mishandling of trust funds for more than 300,000 American Indians. For more than 100 years, the U.S. government has collected – but often failed to pay or keep track of – fees due to American Indian owners of land and mineral rights.

By some estimates more than 100 billion was owed to First Nation members. The new law, which sets up a \$3.4 billion dollar fund in response to the problem, is not without controversy. Some American Indian leaders questioned whether awards would be administered fairly; some tribal members will receive less than \$2000 each. And \$1.9 billion dollars of the settlement will go to a new Interior Department fund to buy back land in Indian country and return it to tribal ownership.⁴

These reparations may not be perfect, but they are an attempt to address acknowledged wrongs committed on some of the most discriminated against populations in our society.

On another justice topic, on Ash Wednesday, Illinois Governor Pat Quinn signed a law abolishing the death penalty in his state, making the Land of Lincoln the 16th state where capital punishment is no longer an option. Quinn said, “It is impossible to create a perfect system, free of all mistakes. I think it’s the right and just thing to abolish the death penalty...”

Quinn, who is Catholic, revealed that he turned to his faith – to the Bible and to Catholic leaders and tradition – in contemplating the bill that lawmakers delivered to him in January. The governor even quoted Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the beloved archbishop of Chicago who died in 1996, saying, “In a complex, sophisticated democracy like ours, means other than the death penalty are available and can be used to protect society.”

³ Christian Century, Feb. 22, 2011, 9.

⁴ Sojourners, March 2011, 10-11.

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But why has this happened? Racial disparities and too many wrongful convictions are often cited as compelling reasons to abolish the death penalty. In Illinois, for instance, the state executed 12 prisoners after the death penalty was reinstated in 1977. During that time, Illinois also exonerated 20 death row inmates.⁵ The facts were just too compelling to ignore.

Under the category of “one person can make a difference” our next helping of Good News also comes from Illinois. When it comes to changing the world, where do you begin? Can one “ordinary” person (or one small church) possibly make a lasting difference? Shayne Moore has an answer: Yes you can.

In her debut book, *Global Soccer Mom: Changing the World is Easier than You Think*, Moore, who is 40, recounts her journey from stay-at-home mom in Wheaton, Illinois, to tireless activist on the world stage. In October of 2002, singer Bono and his band of merry activists stopped at Moore’s alma mater on their Heart of America tour of Midwestern churches and colleges where they hoped to mobilize evangelical Christians to intervene in the AIDS emergency in sub-Saharan Africa in a big way.

Moore writes, “Taking the risk to show up yielded fruit. I couldn’t deny God’s clear call to me to be involved in helping the poorest of the poor around the world, and if god wanted this soccer mom to show up every Saturday morning at the local Franciscan convent, then so be it.” In the years since Bono’s appearance at Wheaton, Moore has lobbied politicians in Washington, D.C., and traveled to Africa several times to see for herself the stark reality of AIDS-ravaged communities.

She joined the board of directors of an AIDS village in Kenya and even attended G8 summits in Europe as a witness for the ONE Campaign, juggling her vocation as a suburban housewife with her newfound role as global AIDS activist.

Bono says, “Politicians watch out – Shayne Moore is an unstoppable force.” Moore goes on to say, “I am convinced more than ever that real change happens right where we are. It starts with the obedience of a compassionate heart. There is no limit to what our one compassionate voice can do when it is shared with others in making the world a better place.”⁶

And speaking of change, change can happen, even in some of the most unlikely places.

A belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person is manifesting in other denominations. With turnaround votes in several Bible Belt states, the nation’s largest Presbyterian denomination at 2.1 million members will join – officially on July 10 – the ranks of the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in opening doors to qualified clergy and lay leaders without regard to sexual orientation.

⁵ Christian Century, April 5, 2011, 16.

⁶ Sojourners, March 2011, 29.

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Pam Byers, a voting elder in San Francisco says, “I think the larger reason for the shift is that people genuinely changed their minds.”⁷

In a similar story, trustees at Belmont University, a private Christian university, have voted to add sexual orientation to the historically Baptist school’s antidiscrimination policy. Unfortunately, in December Belmont parted ways with a successful women’s soccer coach after she told her team that she and her same-sex partner were expecting a baby.

The controversy captured national attention in sporting news and prompted discussions among campus groups about whether the private, Christian university discriminates against gays. Belmont president Bob Fisher said January 26 that the trustees’ formally added sexual orientation to the school’s policy against discrimination.⁸

Meanwhile, on a national level, the Obama Administration has announced that it will no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act, a nearly 15-year-old law that defines marriages as heterosexual unions.

In a letter to Congress, Attorney General Eric Holder said President Obama has determined that the law, widely known as DOMA, is unconstitutional when applied to same-sex couples married legally under state law. Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, called the administration’s decision “a tremendous step toward recognizing our common humanity.”⁹

And on another topic related to the Obama administration there is some good news where mostly only criticism has been leveled. In contrast to those who oppose the Affordable Care Act, there are a growing number of people who are already starting to reap its benefits: Several of its provisions are already taking effect, expanding health-care access for millions of people in the United States.

While many of the gains so far have been modest, they have meant life-saving treatments are now affordable for families who otherwise would find it difficult or impossible to pay for the care they need. For instance, Michal Cram, 72, from Dublin, Ohio, has an income of about \$1,500 each month.

For most of the year he can’t afford the insulin to treat the type 2 diabetes he has been living with since 1991. As of Jan. 1, the Affordable Care Act provides a 50 percent discount on brand-name drugs covered by Medicare Part D. That would reduce the cost of the insulin Cram needs to \$376 a month. Cram says, “It’s a good start. Hopefully I will be able to afford my medications now.”

⁷ Christian Century, May 31, 2011, 12.

⁸ Christian Century, February 22, 2011

⁹ Christian Century, March 22, 2011

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In a similar story, a couple of years ago Jan Chapman and her husband bought their 22 year old son a high deductible private insurance policy because they could not afford a catastrophic medical event. In January of 2010, their son headed to the hospital for kidney stones. The total bill was nearly \$7,000. In September, Chapman and her husband were able to put their son, now 24, back on her husband's insurance because the Affordable Care Act allows 18- to 25 year olds to be covered by their parents' insurance plans. An estimated 1.2 million young adults could benefit, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

And in one final example, Tim Fraas, 53, of Elgin, Illinois had a heart transplant in October 2008. Unfortunately, then the bills came and he nearly ran out of his lifetime limit for coverage. He takes two medications daily so that his body's immune system does not reject the donor heart.

The pills cost about \$100 each. Tim says, "If I don't take them, I die. You don't think about how much it costs to stay alive." After the Affordable Care Act provisions went into effect Sept. 23, Fraas and his wife could stop worrying about the lifetime limits for his essential benefits. He hopes health-care reform will stay in place and says, "It's really not that radical of a change. I'm afraid it's going to get lost to someone trying to make a point politically."¹⁰

The fact is the Affordable Care Act is helping large numbers of American citizens.

Sometimes, being a part of a large group of people provides some measure of safety and a rather unlikely coalition has come together to fight budget cuts.

Catholic, evangelical, mainline Protestant, black and Latino Christian leaders have formed a "Circle of Protection" against U.S. cuts to poverty-fighting programs, gearing up for a high-stakes budget battle as Congress meets.

While recognizing the need for "fiscal responsibility and shared sacrifice," the 50 leaders argue that Christian values require them "to resist budget cuts that undermine the lives, dignity, and rights of poor and vulnerable people."

"Every budget decision has to be assessed on whether it protects or threatens human life or dignity," said Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, California, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' domestic policy committee. He goes on to say, "The central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects the least of our brothers and sisters, the needs of those who are hungry or homeless, those who are without work, those who live in poverty."

The Circle of Protection campaign will range from lobbying elected officials to mobilizing grassroots efforts in the pews. It includes representatives from the National

¹⁰ Sojourners, March 2011, 25-28.

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Association of Evangelicals, National Council of Churches, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and Catholic Charities USA.

More than 36,000 activists and two dozen members of Congress protested the current budget cuts by participating in a hunger fast that ended on Easter, led by Circle of Protection members, Ambassador Tony Hall, executive director of Alliance to End Hunger, and *Sojourner* founder Jim Wallis.

Circle of Protection leaders believe that Christian economic principles go beyond political affiliation and partisan conflict.

Jim Wallis says, “This is about faith, and what God requires of us. Our duty before God is to defend the people that Jesus called the ‘least of these.’”¹¹

And since we are in a college city, you might be particularly interested in this new development on some of our college campuses. The Secular Student Alliance, a growing network of agnostics and atheists on college campuses, now has chapters on some religious campuses, including California Lutheran University.

The members of the Cal Lutheran chapter have deliberately avoided being confrontational with the religious ethos of the campus. They’ve studied other religions and visited worship services. On the whole, the secular group has been well received. The chapter president is also the student body president.¹²

But building alliances with others who over time have been adversaries is not just happening in our country. Unlike the other Middle Eastern countries experiencing popular uprisings, Egypt has a significant indigenous historic Christian presence, and Christians make up about 10 percent of the population.

Perhaps one of the chief ramifications of the protests that overthrew Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak was the way religious divisions were set aside in the process.

The groundwork for the interfaith element of the protests was laid after a bomb exploded on New Year’s Eve outside a prominent Coptic church in Alexandria. Twenty-three people were killed instantly and more than 90 were seriously wounded. While this act of terrorism was meant to spark increased sectarian tension, it instead led to a movement throughout Egypt in which Muslims expressed their sorrow to Christians.

Six days later, when Coptic Christians across the country celebrated Christmas, thousands of Muslims attended the services with them to show their solidarity. At church after church, Muslims formed human chains of protection around the buildings so their Christian brothers and sisters could observe their Christmas Eve mass in safety.

¹¹ Christian Century, May 31, 2011, 16.

¹² Christian Century, April 5, 2011, 8.

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As a direct result of the bombing, millions of Egyptians replaced their Face-book profile photos with the image of a cross within a crescent.

In the streets, posters and bumper stickers were passed out all over Cairo and Alexandria showing the cross and crescent next to each other – often with the crescent embracing the cross – along with the phrase, “We are all Egyptians.”¹³

This alliance has simply demonstrated that ‘Peace is the way.’ This fact has not gone unnoticed. Gene Sharp, an intellectual little known outside peace activist circles, served as an inspiration to the nonviolent protests that brought down the Mubarak regime in Egypt. Arguing from an empirical analysis of history, Sharp has long maintained that non-violent strategies provide the best means of bringing down tyrannical regimes and that nonviolent resistance has played a bigger role than most historians have acknowledged.

If the protesters had used violence, they would have likely been crushed by the Mubarak regime. Sharp’s book *From Dictatorship to Democracy* can now be downloaded from the website of the Albert Einstein Institution.¹⁴

And another authority on government has come to some very similar conclusions to those of Sharp.

Erica Chenoweth, assistant professor of government at Wesleyan University, whose research on major nonviolent resistance campaigns from 1900 to 2006 found that over 50 percent of the nonviolent movements succeeded, while about 25 percent of the violent ones did.

She very pointedly says, “The good guys don’t always win, but their chances increase greatly when they play their cards well. Nonviolent resistance is about finding and exploiting points of leverage in one’s own society. Every dictatorship has vulnerabilities, and every society can find them.”¹⁵

And in a case where the good guys finally won, but only after extraordinary efforts of peace on the activist’s side and violence on the oppressor’s side, we have just recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders.

From May until November 1961, more than 400 black and white Americans risked their lives—and many endured savage beatings and imprisonment—for simply traveling together on buses and trains as they journeyed through the Deep South.

Deliberately violating Jim Crow laws, the Freedom Riders met with bitter racism and mob violence along the way, sorely testing their belief in nonviolent activism.

¹³ Christian Century, March 22, 2011, 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Christian Century, April 5, 2011, 9.

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FREEDOM RIDERS, the PBS documentary features testimony from a fascinating cast of central characters: the Riders themselves, state and federal government officials, and journalists who witnessed the Rides firsthand. The two-hour documentary is based on Raymond Arsenault's book *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice*.

Each time the Freedom Rides met violence and the campaign seemed doomed, new ways were found to sustain and even expand the movement. After Klansmen in Alabama set fire to the original Freedom Ride bus, student activists from Nashville organized a ride of their own. "We were past fear. If we were going to die, we were gonna die, but we can't stop," recalls Rider Joan Trumpauer-Mulholland. "If one person falls, others take their place."

Later, Mississippi officials locked up more than 300 Riders in the notorious Parchman State Penitentiary. Rather than weaken the Riders' resolve, the move only strengthened their determination. None of the obstacles placed in their path would weaken their commitment.

The Riders' journey was front-page news and the world was watching. After nearly five months of fighting, the federal government capitulated. On September 22, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued its order to end the segregation in bus and rail stations that had been in place for generations. "This was the first unambiguous victory in the long history of the Civil Rights Movement. It finally said, 'We can do this.' And it raised expectations across the board for greater victories in the future," says Arsenault.¹⁶

If you didn't have an opportunity to see this documentary on TV, you can go online to see it at PBS or just Google "Freedom Riders."

In conclusion today, you may not be aware but something is going on in Mainline Christianity that is rocking it to its core. Some very prominent Evangelical ministers are coming to the radical conclusion that God saves everyone. Among their ranks is Bishop Carlton Pearson who calls his theology the Gospel of Inclusion. He lost his Tulsa based church over the issue and many of its members who continued to support him ended up at the local UU Church.

But lately, another minister who has made very similar claims is Rob Bell, pastor and founder of the 11,000 member Mars Hill Church in Michigan. His most recent book *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every person Who Ever Lived* has stirred up quite a controversy in the evangelical ranks.

Plenty of readers, however, feel a strong resonance with Bell's principal claim that love wins in the end and that all people will be reconciled to God. These many sympathetic readers cannot find biblical justification for the idea that God would, in Bell's words, "inflict unrelenting punishment on people because they didn't do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life."

¹⁶ <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/>

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Ironically, the author of a review of Bell's book in Christian Century magazine, Peter Marty says, "Charging Bell with being a Universalist doesn't work. Not only does the idea never appear in the book, nothing could be less applicable to somebody with Bell's own passionate faith in Jesus Christ. He simply refuses to limit how far Christ's redemptive love can reach."¹⁷

For me Mr. Marty is dealing in semantics. Bell's arguments and conclusions are some of the very same arguments and conclusions our Universalist forefathers came to hundreds of years ago.

So, in my opinion the Universalist beliefs of our denomination are alive and well in the 21st century and growing despite the theological contortions of many within the Christian Community.

That's all for today, Good News and Good Day! Namaste!

Sermon Response

Closing Hymn

Please join me standing as you are able singing our final Hymn, No. 354 "We Laugh, We Cry" verses 3 and 4 and remain standing for the Benediction.

Benediction

John Pepper

Reminded that we are part and participants of the universe, let us go forth from the quiet of this hour, encouraged to strive toward faithfulness to the best in ourselves, in others, and in all of creation.

From *Rejoice Together*, Norman V. Naylor, 119

Extinguish the Chalice

Beth Williamson

Postlude

¹⁷ Christian Century, May 17, 2011, 22-25.