

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 26, 2012

PRAY AT ALL TIMES: ON CHALLENGING
POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES

~Pray in the spirit at all times; keep alert and always persevere....
~Ephesians 6:18

Continuing a sermon series this morning called Faithful Citizenship as Spiritual Practice, we paused last Sunday with the profound story of Sojourner Truth, a woman who combined a deep religious commitment with a political acumen. An American slave, she walked away from bondage and into prominence in the 19th century abolition movement. Sojourner Truth's rhetoric was engaging, not merely oppositional when in her most famous speech she asked a simple question: Ain't I A Woman? Instead of demanding agreement on issues, she stood in front of her audience and told them about her life and asked them to judge.

No matter where we may fall on the religious or political spectrum, stories like these ask us to remember that behind every face there is a story, there is a human being with an experience and perspective that is worthy of our attention. There is often so much more at stake than meets the eye.

Writing in a piece called *Engagement* published in Orion magazine, author Terry Tempest Williams suggests: "The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?"¹

Parker J. Palmer, writer, speaker, and activist, focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. In his most recent book *Healing the Heart of Democracy, The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, Parker admits that these words of Terry Tempest Williams for him sparked a resolve to reclaim his active citizenship. He importantly clarifies that she is no romantic and does not make the false claim that the human heart is irresistibly drawn toward democracy. The heart is as responsible for fascism and genocide as it is for generosity and justice. This is of no surprise to us. What Williams does claim is that it is in the heart that we wrestle with questions on which democracy hinges and on these questions our hearts are conflicted.

Writes Palmer: "We want to be equitable and generous. But we also want to cling jealously to our share, even when it is more than we need. We want to

¹ Terry Tempest Williams, "Engagement," Orion, July-Aug. 2004,
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/143/>.

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listen to others. But afraid of what we might hear, we also look for ways to avoid dialogue with anyone who might disagree with us. We want to trust our fellow citizens. But having been hurt by others, including those close to us, we find it hard to trust strangers. If the human heart is not democracy's first home, it is surely democracy's first forum, where a silent dispute with fateful consequences rumbles on endlessly."²

Palmer, myself and others certainly understand that in making the case for the role of the heart in politics sounds incredibly naïve when it comes down to getting elected and governing. But dismissing this heart talk is not only irrelevant, it is wrong. The argument may be that reality is viewed through a distorted lens of culture that treats our invisible inner dynamics and our visible behavior as if they belong to different worlds. I disagree. Inner and outer realities constantly interact, re-creating us and co-creating the world in which we live.

To illustrate, Palmer asks, "What drives the kind of consumerism and greed that helped create our economic crisis except the fear that we do not have enough, even when we do? Or the arrogance that tells us we deserve even more? Or a spiritual emptiness that we try to fill with material goods? And what drives our generosity except an altruistic impulse toward human need? Despite our well-documented material possessiveness, charity is still a hallmark of American life. The human heart is a force field at least as complex as those known to physicists."³

On these questions of being equitable and generous, on how inner and outer realities constantly interact to re-create and co-create, do our religious traditions, practices or narratives have anything to say?

What could it mean, as the letter to the Ephesians reads this morning, to pray in the Spirit at all times? To that end keep alert and persevere? Take up the whole armor of God; fasten the belt of truth around your waist.

At first glance, it may seem like such outmoded thought. In its original context, this community of Christian believers called Ephesians lived during the first two centuries of the Common Era, most likely in Ephesus, a thriving commercial city and the cultic center of the goddess Artemis. At that time, they were religious minorities in the Roman Empire who faced daily harassment and discrimination. Christianity was illegal and to live such a Christian life in a pagan world certainly posed challenges, one which relates to power. Roman civilization was built on militarism after all. And yet, in their hearts, these early Christians understood that they were meant to live differently, to not bear arms against any human

² Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (Jossey Bass: San Francisco, 2011) 50-51.

³ Palmer, 52.

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agents. They believed, to the contrary, there were forces that waged war in their inner spirit and that they worked to become morally exemplary, living in love, forgiveness, equanimity, generosity and thankfulness. Many died as martyrs. Their battles

were spiritual ones. While there were numerous powers and principalities working against them, and if we fully understand this message theologically today, than all of us who identify as Christians would be peacemakers. However, many of us know that the history of Christianity reveals quite the contrary through a bewildering array of Christian violence in which the rhetoric of spiritual warfare against the dark forces became literal warfare. The medieval Crusades come to mind where Christian soldiers slaughtered Jews, Muslims and heretics as forces of evil. We might also point to the early 4th and 5th century councils of Early Christianity, in which the male hierarchy confronted each other bitterly because of different understandings of the person and nature of Christ. Needless to say, it is a hierarchy that still ultimately controls, manipulates and influences most of modern day Christendom.

When returning to these earlier questions of Terry Tempest Williams: Can we be equitable, can we be generous, I can't help but think of such a current manifestation of challenging powers and principalities that has both political and religious ramifications. What might happen when people with political or religious influence ignore or deny the heart's power to shape the world?

In an article called *The Presumption of Equality*, Rose Marie Berger wrote: Ever since the disciples positioned Mary Magdalene as an "unreliable narrator" telling an idle tale in the story of Jesus' resurrection, some men in the church have claimed maleness as normative and femaleness, as well, not."⁴

Berger is referring to the recent case of the Vatican vs. the Leadership Conference of Women Religious where she suggests that the integrity of women's witness is once again called into question by male hierarchs. She contends that these 57,000 strong Catholic sisters represent an unbroken,

cohesive expression of faith in the history of American Catholic Christianity and in women's presumption of equality, completeness, and active moral agency both under law and under God. In the nearly 30 years of unfolding pedophilia and blatant cover-up, the Catholic laity has learned to look to these sisters time and again for examples of life giving gospel witness and Christian maturity, strength, and plain grit. We might say they are the contemporary version of exemplifying what many call the "weapons of the Spirit" conveyed in the Ephesians text we heard today. To paraphrase: "Pick up the full armor of God so that you can stand your ground. Stand with the belt of truth and justice so that you are ready to

⁴ Sojourners Magazine, September-October, 2012.

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spread the good news of peace. Offer prayers in the spirit at all times. Stay alert by hanging in there.”

Two weeks ago, hours before the U.S. Catholic sisters meeting in St. Louis – where the US Catholics Bishops were also meeting – were expected to decide how to respond to the Vatican’s rebuke of their leadership organization, the president, Sr. Pat Farrell told them to be “truthful, but gentle and fearless.” She asked: “What would a prophetic response to the doctrinal assessment look like? I think it would be humble but not submissive, rooted in a solid sense of ourselves, but not self-righteous. It would ask probing questions. Is this doctrinal process an expression of concern or an attempt to control? Concern is based in love and invites unity. Control through fear and intimidation would be an abuse of power.”⁵

As a result, the leaders of the nation’s largest group of nuns have demonstrated with both integrity and with what they have referred to as listening to the Holy Spirit, an example of a willingness to engage, and courageously challenge powers and principalities. Sidestepping a confrontation with the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, they announced on August 10 they would dialogue (engage) with the archbishop appointed by the Vatican to overhaul their group. In my mind, these beloved

sisters are and remain exemplars of the heart’s power to shape the world. They remain grounded in their convictions while open to critical evaluation.

In her closing address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, Sister Pat Farrell said this on the last night of the assembly in St. Louis:

“Many institutions, traditions, and structures seem to be withering. Why? I believe the philosophical underpinnings of the way we’ve organized reality no longer hold. The human family is not served by individualism, patriarchy, a scarcity mentality, or competition. The world is outgrowing the dualistic constructs of superior/inferior, win/lose, good/bad and domination/submission. Breaking through in their place are equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing, and love.”⁶

These are spiritual practices worth fighting for. They may just illuminate what is desperately needed in pursuit of a living democracy at this very moment.

⁵ National Catholic Reporter, published online at <http://ncronline.org>, August 10, 2012.

⁶ National Catholic Reporter. LCWR response offers new vision for being church, August 11, 2012.

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These beloved sisters are faithful and they are citizens. They practice what they preach.

I vote for the nuns.

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