

The Rev. Joanne Sanders  
Stanford Memorial Church  
October 31, 2004

## “ONE DAY AT A TIME”

*“For there is still a vision for the appointed time...  
If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come..”*

~ Habakkuk 2:3

I read an editorial this week in *The New York Times* titled “A Hole in the Heart.” In it, Thomas Friedman suggested that: “When you read polls showing a significant number of Americans feel our country is on the wrong track, what do you think is bothering people? I think it’s a deep worry that there is a hole in the heart of the world – the moderate center seems to be getting torn asunder. That has many people worried. And they are right to be worried.”

I’m fully aware that people are disturbed, angry, worried, anxious, even admitting a sense of panic for a host of reasons this morning. Reasons for which we are clearly aware on the near eve of our General Election. Reasons that are not necessary now for me to enumerate. I’ve done that, as well as my thoughtful colleagues Dean Scotty McLennan and Rabbi Patricia Karlin Neumann, at other times during this heated political season. Consequently, accustomed as I have become to reading the scriptural texts designated for today and mulling over the theme and content of my sermon, I realized nothing particular was forthcoming. Getting prepared to come to campus on Wednesday, what became the title for my sermon planted itself in my head and wouldn’t let go. **“One Day At A Time.”** It sounds so naïve, simple, lacking profundity. Try saying that to children, women and men in Iraq, Afghanistan or the Middle East, or cancer patients, or the poor, or the unemployed or Stanford students or voting citizens.

Maybe the title came from a dormant place, recovered from my days as a competitive tennis athlete and coach. I was reminded about a college coach who’s astute advice to play one point at a time, one game at a time, one match at a time always came at just the right moment and decreased my anxiety and elevated my performance numerous times. And who knows, maybe it’s what someone said to the Boston Red Sox. One inning, one

hit, one run, one game at a time. Remember our reading from Habakkuk: *“For there is still a vision for the appointed time..if it seems to tarry, wait for it, it will surely come.”* 86 years may not seem that long in the grand scheme. Yet, **one day at a time**, reminds me, us, though we literally may feel like we are holding our breath – to step back and take a deep, collective breath.

On the other hand, perhaps the sermon title was germinating while I’ve been reading a book by Sylvia Boorstein, both a Buddhist teacher and observant Jew. It’s called Pay Attention for Goodness Sake: Practicing the perfections of the heart; the Buddhist path of kindness. As one endorsement put it: “Whatever your spiritual foundations (or lack thereof), this is a book so wise and so fun to read that it may give you a moment of hope

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at a difficult time in history, not to mention some useful directions for inner growth.” Boorstein’s book enumerates and expounds on what are known as the Paramitas (the perfections of the heart) or ways of behaving, being responsible for how one acts. The list of these 10 perfections: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

These kinds of qualities are a reminder that when it comes right down to it, they are the natural, built in inclinations of the human heart. All well and good, this is easier said than done. As a contemporary prayer puts it: “I am thankful that thus far today I have not had any unkind thoughts or said any harsh words or done anything that I regret. However, now I need to get out of bed and so things may become more difficult.”

Nevertheless, human beings are by nature, relational. When we aren’t frightened into self-absorption or arrogance, we can and do look out for one another. Perhaps it’s another way of seeing what Thomas Friedman articulates as to what may be bothering people – that there is indeed a hole in the collective, human heart of this world when we lay aside all the political, moral and religious rhetoric so feverishly present these days.

Though all equally deserving of our attention, time does not permit me to reflect on all ten of Sylvia Boorstein’s paramitas or perfections of the heart. But with the aid of the examples in our scriptural readings today, I wish to reflect on two briefly: ***generosity and wisdom.***

*“Zaccheus, hurry up and come down. I must be your guest today,”* said Jesus in the gospel of Luke.

Jesus critics, the self-assured religious folk, clearly may not understand the full extent of the liberation offered to Zaccheus. They could only imagine a complete denunciation of Zaccheus, a cheating tax collector - and the system he embodied. By ***generosity*** and a meal from Zaccheus, Jesus begins to transcend and transform the system that was creating so much misery in Luke’s world. Like Zaccheus, we find that the wealth that we hope will provide us with security and contentment has only brought us a growing insecurity and alienation from the rest of the world. But Zaccheus takes a step out of greed into a life of generosity. It was more than an inner cleansing or salvation. It was a mutual and communal act of liberation for the oppressor and oppressed, for rich and poor. It was an offering of more than forgiveness. It was an offering of a life of effective love.

Furthermore, generosity, according to Sylvia Boorstein, evokes the idea of giving something to someone else and the giver’s and the receiver’s benefit. Acts of generosity are preceded by the awareness that I have this and I can give it away. I don’t need to keep it. She provides an interesting example:

Louise M. Davies was the principal donor of the beautiful symphony hall in San Francisco. It’s named for her. A newspaper story, just after the building was inaugurated, quoted her response to an interviewer’s question: Why did you give this gift

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of six million dollars? She was said to have replied: “ Because I had it.” Of course she had it, otherwise she wouldn’t have given it. And while you might argue or disagree with six million dollars toward a symphony hall, that’s missing the point. She could have not given it. But not feeling needy is what allows generosity to happen, though does not obligate it. The impulse to do something has to be present. Recognizing the possibility of creating delight or of alleviating suffering are both sources of that impulse. Both are responses to people other than ourselves. That someone else’s need has won out over my need. Would our country, if not the world, be a very different place if we practiced this kind of generosity? Would the web of human relationships be characterized by more goodwill and less suspicion? Is not the judge of a nation’s health reflected in the ways it treats the least of its members? What shall we say of the one in eleven children who live in poverty in this rich nation?

*“Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith,”* declared the prophet Habakkuk that John read for us moments ago.

Perhaps the *wisdom* of Habakkuk is reminding us of God’s general unhappiness about the gap between nice religious words and good deeds, between the trappings of symbols of goodness and the actual enacting of them. Habakkuk speaks out against the proud with boldness and clarity. “Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.” For Habakkuk, as with all the prophets, God’s concern is with truth-telling, social justice, and the plight of the most vulnerable. Perhaps God is as concerned with love and care for others as expressed in a collective will to provide equal education or access to healthcare as to what gender of person an individual chooses to love.

Maybe the first word we should hear is a word of encouragement, a word of courage as we undertake the pursuit of wisdom. Please note the pronoun “we” as in the collective for prophets in addition to Habakkuk have spoken of the notion that the wisdom of the multitude is the welfare of the world. Wisdom is not a private possession; it is not an individual goal or quality. It is not a little dose of self-improvement. Wisdom is both purposeful and public. Wisdom is corporate. The multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world.

One might ask, what good does it all do? We have been seeking truth, justice, mercy and wisdom for oh so long and are we yet better off? We live and work among the best and the brightest here at this university, but the problems their bright promises are designed to resolve continue and increase. The search for wisdom requires in the first instance not brains but courage and the willingness to carry on despite the evidence on one hand and the absence of evidence on the other. That is unconventional wisdom. It has been said that those who form the multitude of the wise and add to the welfare of the world are those people who love truth even more than their own possession of it. They are unwilling to give it all up as a lost cause when there is no gratification of their highest desires. I pray for peace and there is still war. I pray for the hungry and the poor and there are still so many without. I pray for this and that and the problem is not resolved. I

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give up. The welfare of the world does not depend on such people. The welfare of the world is managed not by those who impose an impossible standard and an improbable timetable, but by those whose impossible standards, hopes and prayers are maintained against all of the conventional wisdom to the contrary. We continue to do what we do, not discouraged by the lack of immediate result but living as a learning community, as a collective human community, a faithful community - looking ahead, not resting, not reminiscing – looking ahead to what has yet been achieved. **One day at a time.** *“For there is still a vision for the appointed time...if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.”*

The word we need to hear as we apply once again this business of wisdom and the welfare of the world is courage. **One day at a time.** Don't give up, it isn't over yet, and your turn, our turn, has just arrived.

Imminently, this multitude and the multitude of our nation have one thing the prophets of Habakkuk's day and the world in which Jesus lived did not have. We have the opportunity to speak truth and wisdom to power, go to the polls on Election Day and judge the powers that be on their performance as leaders of the collective. Have they told us the truth, made good on the promises they offered to us? Have they exemplified generosity in their policies so that the least are duly cared for? Have they demonstrated corporate wisdom?

Sylvia Boorstein recalls how voting in her family, felt like a religious act. She would walk with her parents and grandmother to the polling place that was several blocks from where she lived in the same way and on the same streets as they walked together to *shul* on Yom Kippur. She would stand in the voting booth with her mother, curtain drawn, and looking up, watch her pull levers. That moment, in her memory, felt sacramental. She counted it as her initiation into her role as a grown-up, independent, socially responsible Jewish woman.

In her own teaching now of meditation and the paramitas, the perfections of the heart, Boorstein writes about emphasizing the need to keep one's mind free of anger and other confusing emotions by responding to whatever is happening with deliberate care. When she teaches she often hears herself say: “It's painful for me, as it is for all of you, to see how much suffering there is in the world these days. It is hard to keep a peaceful heart, but I am determined to do it. I need a peaceful heart so that I'll see clearly what can be done and have the courage and the energy to do it.” Especially in these last several years, I find myself saying, “If I sound more intense, more eager to talk about political activism than you've known me to be in the past, it's because these are intense times. And I have the blood of the prophets in my veins, and their voices in my ears.”

While voting is not a sacrament, it is a sacred act. It can be considered arguably to be the best way we have of enacting a prophetic act in this time and place. It is a way that a hole in the heart might become smaller. It is indeed a way that we may be added to that nameless, faceless multitude of people who contribute to the welfare of the world by the

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grace of God, and by the courage, wisdom and generosity of our own spirits. May it be so that the multitude of the wise is the welfare of the world.

*“For there is still a vision for the appointed time...if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.”*

Amen.