“The Courage to Change the Things We Can”

(Inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer of 1943)

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tippecanoe County

West Lafayette, Indiana

November 3, 2024 - 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Settled Minister

The Rev. Emily Manvel Leite, Minister of Religious Education

Beth Haughn, Pianist; Worship Associate: Don Gresham

Producer: Noemi Ybarra; Sound Technician: Mary Finley

**Opening Words** “Election Promises,” by the Rev. Marco Belletini

“I hear the polls

are going to be open on Tuesday.

All day.

Good. I certainly intend to go to them.

I certainly invite you to go to them and vote too.

But today I say the polls

are not just open on Tuesday.

I say they are open every day.

Every hour. Even here. Even now.

Right now I am going to vote

for the robin's egg sky,

the vanilla clouds,

the purple shadow spreading

under the ginkgo tree,

I am going to vote for tulips and redbuds.

I am going to vote for love

that does not have

to run in someone else's circles

in order to be love.

I'm going to vote the homeless into homes.

I'm going to vote the uneducated into classrooms

that teach them in the way they learn best,

not the way that would be most convenient

I'm going to vote the sick into healing.

I'm going to vote the lost into belonging.

I'm going to vote, right now,

for the right to dream of a world

where the word politics

doesn't stop me in my tracks,

and where the word honor

still has a few good meanings left.

I'm going to vote right now

for the power of free people

to actually be free,

no matter who they are,

no matter who has abandoned them,

no matter who hates them.

I actually am going to vote for love,

I am going to vote for truthfulness as the norm,

not the exception.

I'm going to vote for a world

that doesn't vote for killing, control, and swagger,

I'm going to vote for you.

I'm going to vote for me.

Right now. Right here. Silently. But for real.”

**Chalice Lighting Words** “On Tikkun Olan,” by Rachel Naomi Remen

“We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make [that hidden light] visible once again, and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world… This task is called, ‘tikkun olam’ in Hebrew. It’s the restoration of the world.”

**Our Covenant** [Rev. Jennie]

Love is the Spirit of this Church,

And Service is its Law. This is our Covenant:

To Dwell Together in Peace,

To Seek the Truth in Love,

And to Help One Another.

**Opening Hymn** #348 Guide My Feet

**Prayer or Medication** “Leaves,” by Derek Mahon

The prisoners of infinite choice

Have built their house

In a field below the wood

And are at peace.

It is autumn, and dead leaves

On their way to the river

Scratch like birds at the windows

Or tick on the road.

Somewhere there is an afterlife

Of dead leaves,

A stadium filled with an infinite

Rustling and sighing.

Somewhere in the heaven

Of lost futures

The lives we might have lived

Have found their own fulfillment.

**Offering**

**First Reading** from, *The Serenity Prayer – Faith and Politics* *in Times of Peace and War*, by Elisabeth Sifton

“It’s not easy for any of us, in fact, to believe that our lives have any transcendent meaning or worth when so much that happens seems to negate this. It requires a huge commitment of hope and trust if you are going to claim, against all the ugly evidence to the contrary, that the loving human effort is worth making. It is all but impossible to know what one should try to strive for, and what one must settle for. Patient vigilance and constant, daily work so as to believe in and hope for the triumph of life over death–  these are the ingredients in the necessary (though not sufficient) spiritual exercise. Every great faith knows this, and every great faith recommends practices and prayerful habit to encourage people’s commitments to the enterprise.”

**Second Reading** from, *The Serenity Prayer - Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War,* by Elisabeth Sifton

“The actual author [of The Serenity Prayer, my father], was an American of German descent who wrote the prayer in the United States in 1943, at the height of the war against Germany… He was a teacher and writer who had been strenuously opposing much of Germany’s religious and political life for decades, all the more so when National Socialism poisoned both… A deeply devout man, he wrestled daily with the problem of how to relate his innermost religious commitments to the public life of the community.

So the historical meaning of this quite modern American prayer is bound up in the war against one of the greatest evils posed during a violently evil century. Yet like all ageless prayers it speaks to many generations and of course to good and peaceful people in tranquil times. It reminds us of the virtues we must call on in our private lives, and it also concerns the qualities needed to act in the intricate social networks that connect us to others. In our new century, with its new evils, when we should surely pay attention in new and better ways to our conduct as citizens of the world, the Serenity Prayer can mean even more to us than it has in the past. The circumstances under which it was composed and the reasons that it took on such a life of its own are in themselves inspiring, and knowing them might help us to appreciate its consoling, challenging power. The Serenity Prayer is not just a familiar, agreeable cliche. After all, its instructions are tremendously difficult and puzzling to follow.

**Sermon** “The Courage to Change the Things We Can” (Inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr’s, “Serenity Prayer”) [Rev. Jennie]

As I have been listening to you, I hear you that these are anxious times. You don’t need me to list the many concerns, in our state, nation, and globally, that make up that reality. But chief among them is that Election Day will finally be here, this Tuesday and Tuesday night. As I write, there is no way to know which candidate will win. And there is also much that we do not know about what the time after the election will be like. Contemplating the upcoming presidential election, I have felt a real sadness, and also a solemnity–  sadness that our nation is so divided, and solemnity about how much more is at stake in this election season. The reason we feel so anxious is easy to understand: the outcome of this election season is, for anyone individually, out of our control. We are going to have to trust that “We the People” will vote in favor of things essential to all of us such as safety, fairness, attention to the needs of the most vulnerable, as well as truth and beauty, prosperity and joy. A few weeks ago, I began thinking about this morning’s sermon, and our collective anxiety about all that is out of our control. And my eye caught a book from early in my ministry career, about 20 years ago. It’s called, “The Serenity Prayer - Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War,” by Elisabeth Sifton. What we now call, “The Serenity Prayer” was written, in 1943, by the American pastor, teacher, activist, and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, at a time when anxiety in our nation and around the globe were equal to ours, now, and for many of the same reasons. He wrote it for a Sunday morning service for a congregation not that different than ours. Since then, the number of people whom it has comforted and reassured is incalculable. Serenity means the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled; serenity is a calm center in the midst of chaos. In this time when the calendar year is coming to a close, I urge you to connect with that which nurtures and strengthens your sense of comfort and reassurance, your sense of calm in the center of the storm. Connect with what you love, and with that which makes you know that you are loved. My favorite source of that mutual comfort and reassurance is our church. I can feel that gracious love flow between the people who are gathered, and those on Zoom, and from the generations that came before us, and on behalf of those who will carry on after us. I know that this is an anxious month for us all. But through it all, and after it, we can keep coming together, in our beautiful building, and in other places made sacred by our bringing our values, hopes, and dreams there. And we will keep coming together. Whatever results await after this Election Season, there will still be timeless virtues that we can connect with, virtues such as grace, serenity, courage, and wisdom. And so as we continue to weather these anxious times of ours, remember that you always have the opportunity to pray. After this election season is over, there will still be, present to us, that which is good and helpful and abides. Prayer can restore our faith in those timeless things. Let us continue to help each other trust in that.

In her lovely book, Ms. Sifton writes:

“For me, the Serenity Prayer distills the essence of hope and effort that animated my father and some of his closest friends in their lifework. These people were far-flung allies in many different struggles against economic and social injustice, against bigotries of all kinds, against the evils of unrestrained capitalism, against fascism, against wars; they lived and worked in Missouri, in Germany, in Mississippi, in Detroit, in England, in Washington… Some of them were agnostics or atheists, some of them were Jews, and quite a few of them were Protestant ministers. I think of them as people who understood how to relate their faith to their lives, the world of spirit to the world of the here and now… Now… our lives are darkened again by grim foreboding about new threats, and civil society seems ever more fractured and frantic. Trust, hope, and courtesy in the public sphere have radically diminished, and this naturally affects our inner lives, too: how can it not? Yet we are not facing a new spiritual crisis: this is the same old crisis in a new form. Living in history, living in full, always offers as much despair as hope, as much danger as possibility. So [she concludes] it is no wonder that so many millions find daily strength and resolve in praying for grace to accept with serenity that which we cannot change, courage to change what we should change, and the wisdom to discern the one from the other.”

In our own time of political uncertainty, conflict, and violence, I am heartened to think of Reinhold Niebuhr and his colleagues and friends who kept speaking out and acting courageously warning people about the dangers of fascism in our nation and abroad that they believed threatened true freedom everywhere. And I learned about more “ordinary people” who were brave and bold in Neibuhr’s era leading up to and during World War II, in Rachel Maddow’s book, *Prequel.* In her interview with Chris Hayes on his podcast called, “Why is This Happening?” last November, Ms. Maddow said: “The book is called, “Prequel,” not because of the bad guys, but because of the good guys… The prequel, the people to learn from, the story that went before, that feels like the antecedent to what we are in now, were the Americans who were fighting against the ultra right in that previous time, both in the government, but also mostly outside of the government–  people who were trying to outflank and expose them and hold them to account.” She writes about an “Ad Man,” a direct-mail advertising consultant, named Henry Hoke, who had a nationally distributed trade magazine called, “The Reporter of Direct Mail Advertising.” Ms. Maddow said, “when his son came home from his first semester at college [which was Penn State], he said, ‘Dad, I’m getting all this propaganda, this anti-Semitic, pro-German, pro-fascism propaganda at school. It’s really freaking me out. I don’t know what to do with it.’ And Henry Hoke said, ‘Well, I do happen to have an area of expertise that relates to stuff being sent in the mail.’ And he applied his random area of expertise to becoming a one-man expository journalist and investigator to find out and to literally document for the good of the country a multi-million dollar covert propaganda campaign that the Germans were running through twenty-four congressional offices and multiple front organizations all over the country. And he exposed it, and he was an Ad Man. He was a random civilian who did this.” [end of quote] Henry Hoke did this on his own time, and with his own money. And he reported his findings and documentation to the Dies Committee, the U.S. Postal Service, the FBI, and the White House. He received threatening mail, including death threats, yet he didn’t back down. Rachel Maddow said, “I am so energized by stories like that because, Who is going to be that Ad Man? Who are the heroes among us today who did not sign up to be heroes, but heroism is coming to their door?”

On Friday afternoon, at the Tippecanoe County Fairgrounds, I voted early. It took those of us who were there in that line about two hours. But I did not see anyone leave that long line. Nor did I see anyone walk in, look at the line, and turn around and leave. I said to the people behind me, “This election really matters to this many people. That has to be a good thing.” And they agreed. I looked around that vast room and thought, These are my neighbors–  the people waiting in those long lines, and the people working that whole long day. I kept looking around at them all and realizing that I had no idea who they would vote for as president of the United States. There was no way to tell from their outward appearances. There was a wide range of ages, as well as manner of dress. There were people with physical disabilities. But each person has some ability to improve our communities and our Hoosier State. They were from a wide range of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. After the election is over, there will be great need of repair and reconciliation, as well as the ever-present possibility of renewed hope, comfort, and joy. For that healing to begin, Americans must not dismiss nor scapegoat their fellow citizens based on their background, but, rather, we must see one another as all having the potential to enhance our lives and enrich our country, regardless of their cultural or economic background. All of the people in that room are my neighbors. And after the election, we will still have the opportunity, and the duty, to be neighborly to each other.

I’ll close this morning with the true story of the “Good Neighbor” who has been the most inspiring to me these past few weeks–  a woman who, in her own words grew up “dirt poor,” and the child of immigrants, in the South, in a two-room cabin with no toilet, shower, or electricity, but with a lilting soprano voice like an angel and a heart so big she felt called to love and care for all the people of the world–  and who has become a successful business woman and superstar, and whose philanthropy has provided food for the hungry, disaster relief, and raised the standard of living for her hometown, county, and state of Tennessee, and whose literacy efforts, called, The Imagination Library, provide young children with free books, as well as encouragement and empowerment to stretch their imaginations and dream of following their hearts and building a better world. Yes, this week I’ve been inspired by the one and only Dolly Parton, especially by Lauren Marino’s extensively researched book, “What Would Dolly Do? How to be a Diamond in a Rhinestone World.” Dolly Parton’s parents were immigrants from the British Isles. She says that her father is the smartest person she has ever known, though he never learned to read or write, and that she got her business sense from him. She credits her musical ability to her mother’s side of the family. Musically, she was a child prodigy, having taught herself to play many instruments, and is a prolific song-writer. She wrote the songs, “Jolene,” “Coat of Many Colors,” “I Will Always Love You,” [as made famous by Whitney Houston], and “9 to 5.” Personally, she has continually worked to understand herself and improve herself; professionally, she has reinvented herself and expanded her business endeavors; and spiritually, she regularly makes time for retreats and meditation and she prays every day. She is an advocate for LGBTQ rights and gay marriage. She created The Imagination Library because her father could not read or write. It now provides more than one million books to children each month. Her father said he is more proud of her for that than for any of her other wealth or fame. Her charitable efforts include support of children, adoption, fostering and orphans, families and parenting, education, literacy, health, animals, cancer research, the arts, disaster relief, and veterans and military families. She founded the Robert F. Thomas [Medical] Foundation in honor of the doctor who traveled door to door in her county when she was growing up, caring for people’s medical needs, often being compensated by a bag of cornmeal or firewood. And you’ve probably heard of her theme park, “Dollywood,” in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, where she grew up. It is a hub of entertainment, friendliness, and fun, yes. But it also focuses on the history and heritage of the people of the Smoky Mountains, honoring the region’s music, food, and way of life, including the local crafts people and the lost arts of blacksmithing, candlemaking, pottery, glass blowing, and woodworking. Dolly Parton has said that she hoped “her ability to overcome her circumstances would become something that would not only inspire people, but also serve as an example that people could learn from. She wanted ‘to make life worth somethin’ I can leave behind for somebody else to study and analyze when I’m gone.’” Indeed, the University of Tennessee in Knoxville is now offering a class called, “Dolly’s America: From Sevierville to the World,” “using the life and legacy of Dolly Parton to teach students about the history and culture of Appalachia… The head of the history department said that Dolly ‘raises so many fundamental questions worth asking in any humanities course–  about how places shape values, and our ideas about success, and the relationship between art and celebrity.’” The author, Lauren Marino concludes, “We could all use a little more tolerance, encouragement, and joy right now… from a whip-smart and talented woman who does things her way.”

In these challenging and chaotic times, Dolly Parton’s leadership is a generous and loving example of the best the American Dream can result in. In our search for serenity in this election season, let us look to lives and listen to voices like hers. And let us put our faith in that.

**Closing Song “Light of a Clear Blue Morning,” by Dolly Parton [from the soundtrack of her movie called, “Straight Talk”]**

**Chorus:**

“I can see the light of a clear blue morning

I can see the light of a brand new day

I can see the light of a clear blue morning

Everything is gonna be alright, It’s gonna be okay.”

**Chalice Extinguishing** “The Serenity Prayer,” by Reinhold Niebuhr, 1943

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity

the things that cannot be changed,

the courage to change the things that should be changed,

and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

**Benediction** attributed to the Rev. Fred Lipp  [Rev. Jennie]

“Fix, Oh, Lord, our steps– that we may stagger not in the uneven motions of the world, but go steadily on our way–  neither censoring our journey by the weather we meet, nor turning aside from anything that might befall us.” [Go in peace.]