

“In Our Hands”

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, September 26, 2010

Khalid Kamau, a former financial analyst and essayist tells this story. “Once, when I was young, I came home after school and baked a cake for my mom for dinner. I wanted to surprise her. She’s a nurse, and had been at work all day, you know, before starting her second shift as our mom. So I pulled down a box of cake mix. And after I emptied the cake mix in the bowl, I saw that the recipe called for eggs, and we were out.” He said, “I remembered the stories my family would tell about growing up in the rural, segregated South. Though Jim Crow blacks suffered severe institutional oppression, their communities were strong and neighbors were always helping one another out. People would come over and ask for a cup of sugar or a loaf of bread, and ‘if you had it, you gave it’, my mom would say.” It sounds so simple. It’s what we strive to teach our children: to share what they have.

However as we grow older, life gets a bit more complicated. We have debt and retirement, savings and insurance, responsibilities and dependents. The value of our time also changes as we age. How will we spend what precious time we have, with so many demands on us? The value of the dollar and the value of the hour are constantly in flux. Our choice in answering this question reflects our values into the world. How we spend our time and our money impacts how we feel about ourselves. So it is important that we find our center, and make decisions about how we will use our most valuable commodities based on what is most important to us. We must make our decisions on how we will spend our time and money as though the children of the next generation are watching and asking questions.

I want to tell you another story, about two men from a small town in Texas, that I think illuminates how confused we can be about our own value and how that confusion can keep us from reaching out to someone else. These two men came to know one another, not in the space of a beautifully-lit sanctuary; these men were drawn together in a dark, damp basement of a community center, in the sacred space of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was in those meetings that they shared their stories – stories of their struggles with addiction, that great and unfortunate normalizer. Over several years, these men shared stories about their lowest moments, their incredible successes, and the recurring miracle of a single day.

It came to pass that one of these men was offered a job in another city. He had been the philosophy professor of the only university within 200 miles. The other man was a local rancher. At the professor’s last meeting, he grew more and more aware of just how much he had learned

from the rancher, and just how much he would miss him: his story, his vulnerability, his resilience. The professor's upcoming change in job and location made this meeting particularly important to him. He wanted to be certain to say his thank-yous and goodbyes. At the conclusion of the meeting, the professor was surprised when the rancher immediately got up and approached him. The rancher said, "Sir, I just wanted to wish you well and let you know that I am pulling for you. I'll miss having you here. I have learned a lot from you."

The professor was genuinely touched. This rancher had much more sobriety and the professor was keenly aware that within those walls, he was the student and not the teacher. In that moment the rancher stuck out his hand and said, "I apologize that I haven't offered to shake your hand before today." He looked down at the floor, then at his hands and then back to the professor. The rancher said, "I've just got so many calluses on these old hands." This man was ashamed to shake hands with the professor because he had rancher's hands, callused and worn. That professor took in a long deep breath, smiled and said, "That's funny. I have been too embarrassed to shake your hand all these years as well because I *don't* have *any* calluses on mine."

Sometimes the reason we don't offer our hands to one another is not because of what we have or do not have - but because we have a devalued sense of who we are - or what we do. Sometimes we keep our helping hands to ourselves because we have become bogged down in a value system that is not our own; that does not reflect the importance of love and the appreciation of diversity. There is value in this world for callused and non-callused hands and plenty of work for both!

That story I began earlier by Khalid Kamau didn't actually end there: when we left off he was making a cake and had no eggs. He continues, "So that day, I went across the street to Miss Jessie, our retired neighbor. I got my two eggs and finished baking the cake. When my mother arrived, I presented her with the cake and proudly recounted all my efforts and resourcefulness. But the glow from her face quickly faded when I got to the part about borrowing the eggs. She called my father into the kitchen and together they scolded me about going around the neighborhood *begging for food*."

What has happened in our culture? What has happened, when the measure of the strength of a community is no longer the people leaning on one another in times of need? What has happened is that the strength of a community, as it is valued in today's culture, appears instead to be measured by the height of our privacy fence. Oh it's a really great neighborhood - you barely see your neighbors. I beg you to take a stand against that insanity: to tear down those fences that separate us one from the other and risk reaching out, risk serving this

community. A friend of mine who lives in another state recently lost her mother and was surprised at the response...it seemed everyone wanted to give her space to grieve, when all she really wanted was to be held close by those who cared for her, without having to beg for it. She is Unitarian and has seen the work of some churches in times of grief. The casserole patrol swoops in and surrounds the grieving, making certain that they are physically fed in their difficult time. I have seen that in this church: cards, comments and casseroles supporting those in need. But I know, too, that it can be difficult being a Unitarian and knowing how to respond to another in need when we value the individual and an individual's privacy so much and at the same time are not mandated to respond. We really aren't mandated to do anything.

So let me make a suggestion. No, let me offer a charge. I work with our Newcomers Board here at the church and I recently charged them to do the same. I charge you to err on the side of care. Err on the side of casserole, cake or pie; a phone call, a visit or a card. Err on the side of doing something when you know someone else is in need - even if you think it will barely make a dent in someone's need – err in this direction and you will not regret it. It is true that we do not have elaborate prayer circles set up through out the congregation or a tower with an eternal flame – but we do have hands. And in this tradition, we believe that we are, in fact, the hands of God, so without us the work will not be done. Being the hands of God is a huge responsibility! Because if you take your hands, callused or not, and cram them in your pockets and do nothing, the work will go unfinished.

I have often said that the reason why I became a minister was to hold myself publically accountable to a higher standard. And that is also why you might have joined this church: to hold yourself accountable, to live out the values which you profess - to walk the talk. There are plenty of people here who can serve as role models for you. People who, as the poet said,

*go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.*

Be proud that you are here to be held accountable. Be proud that you are part of a tradition who believes that God's work cannot be done without us. Be proud to be counted among those who come to church to be held accountable by this community and made a bit uncomfortable by the minister. That is how we will change the world as we know it to become the world as we know it could be.

In his own analysis of his story of the making a cake, Kamau continued, “In October 2008, when the market began to collapse,” he said, “I secretly hoped the crash would be so complete that our middle-class pretenses would fall. Instead, it seems we're still willing to do anything to keep from knocking on our neighbor's door to ask for eggs.”

You might be thinking why does Tamara keep talking about asking for help on a Sunday that is about offering it; that is about service? Why? Because we are called to do both. And both require a certain amount of vulnerability. Both require us to stick out our hands, callused or not. Palms facing up, palms facing down, or palm facing out, we model for the next generation what the strength of *our* community will look like. Will it be leaning on one another or barring down the hatches?

The strength of this community and this community's legacy lies in our hands. Service is about being in relationship as much as it is about the task. Who we will be for one another *matters*. Who we will be for one another *matters to us*. It shapes our identity of how we see ourselves and how we view the world around us. How we respond will answer the question: is this a community, a world that we can trust? Is this a world where hope resides?

I am talking about asking for help on the day that I am talking about service because the person who lends the eggs will have the opportunity to see those eggs be “of use” for far more than that one cake. Those eggs will become one story in what I hope will be a tipping point of support, of relationship, of abundance, even in a time of scarcity. A story that will foster a resilience that can withstand not only Jim Crow and economic downturns, a story of being given what we need when we are lacking builds resilience to withstand grief, and illness, and even our own mortality.

Love is the spirit of this church and service is its law. Service is its law; not its suggestion, its law. We covenant together to make love the spirit of this church - and service its law. At the very core of who we are, of who we claim to be, is our commitment to service. Here's the good news: you are already among those who “submerge in the task”. It is visible in who we already are as a community and it is visible in who we claim we want to become. As many of you know, we have been in a visioning process. In the pew backs you will find, or as you came in you were handed, the vision statement and a detailed explanation of our process up to this point. Next week this Centennial Vision 2021 process culminates with Declaration Sunday.

During the service, you will be invited onto the chancel so bring your entire family. You will be invited during the service to come up onto this chancel where we sign the membership book, covenant in marriage, where we dedicate our children and pronounce those no longer with us. We will invite you to sign your name, declaring your support of our VISION for 2021; our

combined vision for our church in its 100th year. The very first line of that vision asks us to be an embodiment and celebration of the world as we hope it will one day become. We are being charged, charged by one another to do all we can do today. So it is that, also, on Declaration Sunday, we are being asked to look at our commitment for the upcoming year. We will not arrive at our vision of 2021 without taking that first step to 2011. So on Declaration Sunday, next Sunday, we are also being asked to declare this year how we will commit to deepen our faith, financially commit to sustain this community, and in what way we will serve in 2011. We have mailed commitment cards that should be arriving in your home this week, so that you may, if you choose, talk about your commitment with your family, and consider what you will declare in addition to signing onto our Centennial Vision. We will also have plenty of those cards available next Sunday but we hope that you will give it some thought between now and then and come prepared to declare!

Now it just so happens, and it is no accident that today is also a Service Activities Fair in our Emerson Hall, our fellowship hall right across the foyer. There you will find many of the groups in our church who need volunteers to serve the church as well as the wider community. You might volunteer to drive the church bus, greet on Sunday morning, or mentor a child at one of our adopted schools. Maybe you can usher one Sunday a month, help out at memorial services or serve as a Friendly Soul visiting those who cannot make it to church. Maybe you can volunteer in our Children's Religious Education program, knit a prayer shawl or help fix up houses. If you have 30 minutes a week, one Saturday a month, or any amount of time to give - someone will help you find a place to serve. If you have been waiting for the perfect opportunity, it just might be in the next room. And if you don't find the perfect opportunity, then I suggest that you go ahead and sign up anyway for something that you think you *can* do, and let the depth of meaning come from the action itself. Err on the side of service because this church holds so much value to you. And if you think that you aren't helped by serving someone else, then you may have missed my point this morning. So go ahead. You have a cake to make. And you are missing some eggs.