

Celebrating Freedom
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"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..." many of us know these words well. These words are part of a poem, "The New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus are inscribed on a plaque placed on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Hear the rest:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land; here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand a mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command the air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. "Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Beginnings are auspicious – whether we realize it or not. A friend of mine, in deciding what her doctoral thesis might be, she wanted to study how people's birth and death stories; she wondered if how a person started their life might inform how a person's life ended. Though she chose another topic that idea has stayed with me. Ancient Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of a man who caused all kinds of havoc in his family, including stealing his brother's birthright – his inheritance. You may know the story of Jacob and Esau. Jacob ran away from home and eventually grew up, married and had children. Now it was time to go home and make amends with his brother. Jacob was sacred – nervous about how the meeting might go. The story says he sent gifts ahead of him and his family – to appease his brother Esau and the night before they meet up, Jacob sends his family across the river and decides to spend the night in prayer and preparation. The story says that during the night Jacob has a dream and in the dream he sees a ladder suspended

between heaven and earth with angles traveling up and down it. Jacob grabs an angel and asks for a blessing (again, thinking of meeting his brother) and they wrestle throughout the night. Finally, as the sun begins to break on the horizon, the angel insists they stop because of the light. Jacob refuses to let go until he is blessed. The angel does bless him, touching his thigh causing a limp. He also changes Jacob's name – to Israel – because he wrestled with God and survived. The word Israel means in fact to wrestle with. And I have wondered how does a country, whose very name means to wrestle with, ever finds peace.

It makes me think too of our country's beginning – with a war; a fight for independence. The Declaration spelled out the reasons for our resistance; and there are some important lines in that document – for instance, that we, the governed have the power, when the government is creating harm, we have the power to change it. And is war, is fighting the only way we can have change in this country? Does freedom always require bloodshed? Freedom does come at a cost – and I will be exploring that subject next Sunday.

In this country we are days away from celebrating the fourth of July – celebrating our independence, celebrating our freedom as a nation. I have never like the sounds of fireworks, (they scared my dog – who actually broke through the screen door to get into the house and she spent the night shaking with every firecracker that went off) but I do love this country and its ideals. I love the idea of democracy. In Gore Vidal's book, *Inventing a Nation* – he writes that "For the founders, democracy meant Athens, where all the citizens would meet to discuss and pass on the laws. The voice of the people was indeed god. This was possible in a small city-state like Athens but impractical in a large

nation of three million people ever expanding over a large area of North America." Our republic is based on democracy and democracy can be one of most powerful forces on earth. I recently saw the film "Sicko" – (I think it is an important film that asks good questions about universal healthcare). While watching the film it was interesting to listen to a man from England talking about democracy...he said it's one of the best things that ever happened to Britain – that democracy takes power from the wallet to the ballot box. I do love our country and our freedoms even though they are being chipped away in the name of security. Lest you think this is not a sermon, but a history lecture or lesson on civics, let me ground it in our theology – in our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition because I am becoming more and more convinced that this is our best chance for real freedom, for a real celebration and I hope doing so will spur us into more action to maintain and regain our freedom and our rights in this land of the free.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith rests in the tradition of the Free Church. During the Reformation, our ancestors were the extremists – the ones who went beyond Luther and the others to say that revelation is not sealed, that as rational human beings, we must use all our faculties, including our minds to question and reason together for the greater good. We were the ones who proclaimed freedom, reason and tolerance when others were preaching hellfire and brimstone to those who didn't believe like they did. It is our faith that says that personal experience and personal study are as important as any other person's, regardless of title or position held within a church or community. We believe people are created equal. The majority of our ancestors were on the right side of history when they fought for the end of slavery, when they supported women's rights as human rights, when they marched and died for the end of institutional and nationally sanctioned

discrimination against people of color (and oh, the work we still are called to do); our faith was and continues to be one of the firsts in this country to honor and proclaim that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people should be counted as full citizens under the law. It is our UU faith, along with a few others, that insist we confront fear and stereotypes and see people as whole human beings - not as deviants because they love someone of the same gender or identify as transgender. Some of you may have read in Wednesday's Union-Tribune about Petco Park and the Padres baseball team (that all-American sport) are hosting a Pride night on the same night they're giving to kids 14 and under floppy hats. A Christian ministry group that sells concessions will not be there on July 8th to protest the two groups coming together on the same night. Even though it remains unspoken, their actions reinforce the misconception and fear that people who are LGBT recruit and/or molest children. It is our UU faith with some others that witness the truth: that people who are LGBT are not recruiting or molesting – but are loving people who have healthy relationships. Molestation is a crime not based on sexual orientation or gender identity but abuse. Earlier this week I received a call from a man I do not know who brought this concession stand issue to my attention and in his message he was asking for other churches to step in and show that there are people of faith who support people who are LGBT. Somehow he knew that within our UU faith freedom and people are protected from bigotry and hate. And I was heartened to learn that there is a Methodist church also from East County that is interested in filling in – to show support to the Padres and not give in to the generators of fear. Just a week ago at the General Assembly in an action of immediate witness, delegates took the stance that no one should be subject to termination of employment based on gender (be it male, female or transgender). These

actions of immediate witness empower our Washington office and local congregations to act on behalf of social issues that urgently need attention and address. All of this we do in the name of our faith – because we are more than just another civic organization like the ACLU or Planned Parenthood or even the Democratic Party. We are a church – a congregation, a people of faith who affirm and promote certain principles that we think will bring about a better world – a world that is more peaceful, more justice-filled, a world that promotes a life-style that is sustaining for us and the planet.

One of our major theologians of the twentieth century was a man by the name of James Luther Adams, also known as JLA. The son of a traveling Baptist minister and farmer, Adams became a Unitarian minister, a theologian, a student and a teacher, among other work. He studied a good deal in Germany and taught at one of our seminaries, Meadville Lombard in Chicago. A great thinker and student of life, he preached on the importance of congregations as voluntary associations. You may have heard the familiar verse in the Christian scriptures, from a man named Matthew, who wrote, By their fruits shall you know them. (Mt. 7:16). JLA changed that phrase to say, By their groups, you shall know them. He held that we are social beings and that our voluntary association with groups, like our Free Church, “stand between the individual and the state, and also between the [authoritarian] church and the state (The Essential JLA, page 167). One of our most basic rights, found in the Bill of Rights is to peacefully assemble; JLA understood, through experience the importance of the voluntary association and the ability of such associations to affect governments and the governed. He was in Nuremburg in 1927 watching a parade and learning how the Nazi party was rising to power. As he watched the four-hour parade he asked the folks around him about the

meaning of the swastika and soon found himself in a heated argument. Suddenly he felt a hand on his collar and he was pulled out of the crowd and shoved into a nearby ally. Fear seized him and his heart pounded. In the ally a young man shouted to him in German, "You fool. Don't you know? In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut or you get your head bashed in." Then the man broke into a smile and explained that in the argument, JLA was close to getting beat up. "Why did you decide to help me?" he asked the stranger. The man replied, "I am an anti-Nazi. As I saw you there, getting into trouble, I remembered the times when in New York City as a sailor of the German merchant marine, I received wonderful hospitality. I decided today I would repay that hospitality. Now come to dinner with me." (The Essential JLA, page 180 -181). This experience along with knowing the history of our free faith impressed upon him this truth: "the voluntary association is a means for the institutionalizing of gradual revolution." Let me say that again, the voluntary association is a means for the institutionalizing of gradual revolution. – that's powerful! Any time freedom is denied, like the right to free speech or the right to peaceful assembly, it is not long before we are imprisoned within our own country.

To truly celebrate freedom and honor the historic and liberating facts of July 4th make sure you belong to an institution like this one, - for here at First Church are the sea-washed, sunset gates that stand mighty with our chalice flaming like the lightening and thunder that brings the rain of freedom; be a part of this voluntary association - like this community of free faith that stresses the importance of paying attention, of being involved, of knowing your rights and working for others' and be vigilant about them. The chalice lamp is lifted beside our open doors every Sunday. Reflecting upon his own life

and actions, JLA was embarrassed to ask, “What in my typical behavior as an American citizen have I done that would help to prevent the rise of authoritarian government in my own country? What disciplines of democracy (except voting) have I habitually undertaken with other people which could serve in any way directly to affect public policy?” How would we answer if we were to ask ourselves, beyond voting, what I am doing to affect public policy? Have any of my actions along with others helped prevent the rise of an authoritarian government? I ask of us, if someone were to examine our lives, would there be any evidence to say that we were a force to reckon with against an authoritarian government? These questions raise issues that are not partisan or political. These questions, like JLA’s are questions for the common good. By what groups will you be known by?

I remind us of an earlier reading – the declaration of independence was written by people who had lived under another’s rule; who lived under the yoke of despair and experienced little relief. They chose to proclaim their independence – most of the writers and signers of that declaration we like to claim as Unitarians and Universalists ancestors – and theologically and philosophically there were. In celebrating this holiday – may we choose to truly celebrate it by insisting that we live in a republic based on real democracy and that the will of the people must prevail – that those who govern, do so as we allow them – not because big business has bought them out or their only concern is re-election. Remember how the Preamble to the Constitution reads, We, the interdependent web of which we are a part, we the people, not me or not corporations, not I – but we – for the common good of us all. Let our actions show the Supreme Court we will not stand by while they misuse and abuse the intent of Brown v. the Board of Education, 1954 ruling.

We will not be silent while our rights are denied and removed. We will celebrate our freedom and return again to the principles and the faith that helped found this nation – we esp. as inheritors of those who wrote the declaration and the constitution will not be passive but active participants in our government. We do need to celebrate freedom – and honor those who have sacrificed for it. Let us be in the business of sacrificing our time, our energy toward democracy, to ensuring freedom's continuance in this land. May freedom ever live and may we ever serve its cause. Blessed Be and Amen.