

July 23, 2017 Readings: James 2; Clara Barton
“Sophisticated Resignation: From Cynicism to Blessing”

Rev. Randall Spaulding

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison, CT

If you Google the word cynic you might find a picture of The American writer Mark Twain.

Devastated by the deaths of loved ones and the failure of his publishing ventures, Twain grew intensely bitter throughout life, but never lost his sense of humor. He once commented, “If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.” On being asked if he likes children, the great crusty curmudgeon W.C. Fields replied, “I do if they're properly cooked.” And after seeing a stage performance by the young actor Katharine Hepburn, the perpetually pessimistic poet Dorothy Parker said of Hepburn, “She ran the whole gamut of emotions from A to B.”

F. Forrester Church was minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in NYC for over 30 years. He understood that people and faith communities are not immune to pessimism and the temptation to fall into cynicism. In his book, “Lifecraft: The Art of Meaning in the Everyday,” he writes that “by failing to believe in our ability to create and discover meaning, we succumb to two seductive sins... the sin of sophisticated resignation and the sin of cynical chic.” He says that “the principal sin besetting many of us today is the sin of sophisticated resignation and that it is particularly insidious because it comes with its own veil. That is, it appears respectable. Sophisticated resignation allows us to feel strongly about injustices without prompting us to do anything about them.” It’s a tailor-made temptation for progressive, liberal faith communities— because it is fed by our thirst for knowledge. We **know** so much about the world’s problems, and we understand their enormity. We say, what can we **really** do to affect hunger or homelessness, the disappearing rainforest or the threat of nuclear annihilation? What can we really do to affect the tone of our nation’s civil discourse? Feeling impotent, isn’t it easier to use our educated minds and our urbane words to simply denounce all these awful problems, and then having smartly done so, toast ourselves with organic wine and goat’s cheese appetizers? And, “not wanting to be perceived as naïve, we dismiss dreamers and idealists as innocents; this is cynical chic.”

We’ve seen it all, and we know that change isn’t going to happen. Rather than hope, we sometimes choose cynicism. The Rev. Justin Martin of Fairfax, VA preached an excellent sermon on sophisticated resignation and is the inspiration for my words today. He says, “It’s like hedging your bets: if whatever you respond to cynically fails, “I told you so!” You’re right! If whatever you respond to cynically succeeds, that’s nice, too. It’s a win-win.

We can feel this way about the health care system, our educational system, the foster care system, changes to our UU worship structures, our relationships with our fundamentalist kin and neighbors, and on and on. But sophisticated resignation deadens our response to

activism, to helping—to actually doing something about a situation— when we look at the possibility of change with a cynical defeatism. Martin says we can even defeat ourselves personally by failing to apply for that job, by thinking, “They won’t hire me” or not trying that new recipe with the mindset of, “It’ll just turn out awful. I might as well not even try.” This way we don’t get our hopes up. Such a way of being keeps us from experiencing broken hearts and the sting of failure. Sophisticated resignation allows us to say all the right things with an educated perspective that may even see clearly how to put things right, but allows us to not follow through with appropriate action and behavior. At best, it takes some of the joy out of living, and at worst sets us up to fail and fully support and act for causes we truly believe in.

And yet, our Unitarian and Universalist heritage reminds us that we are not a people of words without substance. Ours is a faith not of creeds, but of deeds. From the Radical Reformation in the 1500s to now, our faith journey—at its best, in my humble opinion—has not relied on words, creeds, or doctrines to ultimately define who we are, but instead, our helping actions and service to others defines the integrity of our witness in the world.

For a very long time the Unitarians and Universalists looked to the Bible to help narrate their way of living and doing. The New Testament author James was, as the British say, spot on, when he declared: “...what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save.” And it seems the gospel writers did not believe that simply *hearing* the words of Jesus and mentally assenting to their truth was enough. The person who builds a solid foundation is the person who both hears *and becomes a blessing* by putting into practice their values and principles. If good deeds don’t go with it, faith—whatever you have faith in—is dead.

Universalist Clara Barton herself struggled with hurt, disappointment and illness. She was terribly shy as a child and had a difficult childhood with an emotionally unbalanced mother. She struggled to be recognized for her contributions in the workplace, harassed by the men around her. She contracted malaria. And yet, she did not succumb to sophisticated resignation. Her passion for helping others compelled her to reject the cynicism of “this is the way it’s always been done” attitudes and to seek new ways of helping others. “It irritates me,” Barton says, “to be told how things always have been done...I defy the tyranny of precedent.” Wow! She knew that in order for change to be effective, she could not “afford the luxury of a closed mind.”

So how do we live as a people who move beyond sophisticated resignation and chic cynicism? Martin in his sermon says that we can view the world with cynicism or consider its opposite: blessing. In John O’Donohue’s book, “Blessing the Space Between Us” he says, “Regardless of how we can figure the eternal, the human heart continues to dream of a state of wholeness; a place where everything comes together. Where loss will be made good, where blindness will transform into vision, where damage will be made whole. To invoke a blessing,” he says, “is to call some of that wholeness upon a person or a group, right now.”

When we hear about a new initiative to extend rights to undocumented immigrants or to offer help to those living in poverty, we might think, “Okay, sounds good, but I’ll tell you right now why that’s never going to succeed. I’ll be surprised if it even gets out of some committee.” But what if we thought instead, “Wow! They are blessed in this work. They may not succeed, but my heart is with them.” Do you hear the difference? If you try something you’ve never tried before, you may think, “I’m never going to figure this out.” Or you may think “the sacred inside of me is blessed in this attempt.” Martin says, “In any situation we encounter, the possibility of blessing is always with us. It’s a possibility just as much as reacting with cynical defeatism. Blessing may sound mystical or something outside of our control. Some of us have a push-pull relationship with the word, because “blessing” may be connected to a deity or is someone magical, at which we may furrow our brow and find it difficult to give intellectual assent. But I’ll bet that all of us have experienced a blessing at one time or another. And probably given one as well, perhaps by another name. For me, a blessing is simply the practice of sharing that which is good, of offering loving, kind, compassionate intention toward someone, something, or someplace. Anyone can do it. It doesn’t take a deity or supernatural agency. And the act of blessing leads us, far more often than sophisticated resignation, to roll up our sleeves and match our words of blessing with deeds that bless.

My hope, intention, prayer is for us a UU faith community is to remain free from the chic cynicism of liberal religion, to break free from any defeatism that may overtake us because of what we know about how the real world and relationships work. Instead, my hope is that we will nurture the practice of blessing, giving something of ourselves to it, creating meaningful connections. It may make us vulnerable to having our hopes dashed; but I have a hunch that the connections we will make will far outweigh the risks.

When you offer blessings from the heart, when you offer intentions to share that which is good— you are far more likely to offer blessings with your hands. When you offer a prayer of blessing for those who feed the hungry in your neighborhood, or those struggling to rebuild after a hurricane or wildfire, you are far more likely to find yourselves standing side by side, hands ready to help, with those to whom you have offered a blessing in their work, than if you protect yourselves from their struggle with a cynical distance.

Editor and publisher Paul Fanlund suggests that another way to move from sophisticated resignation to blessing is to identify the issue with which you feel the greatest connection or sense of outrage — be that social justice for non-whites, the environment, reproductive freedoms, economic justice for working people, whatever. And then apply yourself — with time and money — to activism within that area with a vengeance. This is the very practice of sharing that which is good with/for/alongside others. The very definition of a blessing!

In offering a blessing, you acknowledge what you care about. You admit things you want to succeed, things you open your hearts to, people you wish to be soothed, and ways you wish to grow. May you not keep these blessings in your heads, but pronounce them, own them and act on them. And they will stay with you and rise above your other concerns. To offer

a blessing is to keep you in contact with that which connects you to the deepest part of your spirit. And when you do so, your faith, lived in deeds that bless others, will come alive!

20th century writer H.L. Mencken described a cynic as a person who, upon smelling fresh flowers, looks around for a coffin. I know that doesn't describe anyone here this morning!

In closing, I offer each of you this mixed prayer and blessing from F. Forrest Church and John O'Donohue:

May we awaken from the soul-crushing allures of sophisticated resignation
and cynical chic,
to savor instead the world of abundance and possibility
that awaits just beyond the self-imposed limits of our imagination.

Let us awaken to the blessing of acceptance, expressed in a single mantra:
Want what we have; do what we can; be who we are.

Let us want what we have—praying for health, if we are blessed with health,
for friendship, if we are blessed with friends,
for work, if we are blessed with work.

And if our lives are in shadow, may we remember to want nothing more than the loving
affection of those whose hearts are broken by our pain.

Let us do what we can—not dream impossible dreams or climb every mountain,
but dream one possible dream and climb one splendid mountain
that our life may be blessed with attainable meaning.

And let us be who we are—embrace our very nature and talents.
answer the call that is ours, not another's,
thereby enhancing our little world and the greater world we share.

May you have the courage this day to live the life you would love,
to postpone your dream no longer,
But do at last what you came here for
and waste your hearts on fear no more. Amen.

RESOURCES:

~John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*, 2008 Doubleday

~F. Forrester Church and John A. Buehrens, *Our Chosen Faith*, 1989 Beacon Press, Chapter 3

~ From a homily by Rev. Justin Martin, UU Congregation of Fairfax, VA March 7, 2011, <http://www.uucf.org/>

~Lifecraft: The Art of Meaning in the Everyday, F. Forrest Church, 2001 Beacon Press

~ Love & Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow, F. Forrest Church (prayer excerpt), 2008 Beacon Press

~Paul Fanlund, *Sophisticated Resignation is a bad option*,

http://host.madison.com/ct/opinion/column/paul_fanlund/paul-fanlund-sophisticated-resignation-is-a-bad-option/article_baccb6c4-5ea2-5978-b9b6-e04a2e529f6c.html

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Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

James 2 (from the Christian New Testament)

Though the famous Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, called the book of James an “epistle of straw,” he later changed his mind and confirmed that James was a good book because it sets up no doctrine but promotes a way to live instead. That way is made very clear in our reading this morning:

My sisters and brothers, your faith... must not allow favoritism. Suppose there should come into your assembly a person wearing gold rings and fine clothes and, at the same time, a poor person dressed in shabby clothes. Suppose further you were to take notice of the well-dressed one and say, “Sit right here, in the seat of honor”; and say to the poor one, “You can stand!” or “Sit over there by my footrest.” Haven’t you in such a case discriminated in your hearts? Haven’t you set yourselves up like judges who hand down corrupt decisions?

[Y]ou’ve treated the poor shamefully! Aren’t rich people exploiting you? Aren’t they the ones who haul you into the courts, and who blaspheme that noble Name by which you’ve been called? You’re acting rightly if you fulfill the venerable law of the scriptures: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

My sisters and brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save. If any are in need of clothes and have no food to live on, and one of you says to them, “Goodbye and good luck. Stay warm and well-fed,” without giving them the bare necessities of life, then what good is this? So it is with faith. If good deeds don’t go with it, faith is dead.

Clara Barton

Founder of the American Red Cross, Universalist Clara Barton was ahead of her time as an accomplished educator and hard-working professional woman, earning a salary equal to a man's in the 19th century. However, when the American Civil War broke out, she sacrificed her personal life for the hardships of the battlefield, where she served the sick and wounded.

I have an almost complete disregard of precedent
and a faith in the possibility of something better.
It irritates me to be told how things always have been done...
I defy the tyranny of precedent.
I cannot afford the luxury of a closed mind.
I go for anything new
that might improve the past.