

Ubuntu—I am because of you

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This is the day the Lord has made—let us rejoice and be glad in it.

I will say that I'm happy to be here with you this morning in the sanctuary. I have loved having the summer worship services in Ripley and in the Reno garden, but I'm happy that we are all here together and yet know that people who are not as familiar with first Congregational will also be able to find us, together, eager to welcome them, no insider knowledge required.

Let us rejoice and be glad in it. As a congregation we haven't felt much to rejoice, having experienced so much loss. John Sawyer. The perfect storm of hate/fear/terror as 49 people were gunned down with an automatic weapon. 50 families and a nation grieving. Our loss of Jena. This is going to take awhile, this feeling, trying to get beyond it. Trying to feel right again.

I will admit that I have been very distracted trying to wrap my brain around all of this. Trying to focus on the beautiful baptisms all Aaliyah and Henry. Thinking about what to say this morning I have not wanted to dwell, mainly because I have simply been at a loss for words.

Two weeks ago we woke to the horrible news out of Orlando. And that morning Jena clearly wasn't doing well, unable to join us to share in Allia's baptism. It was an awful day. For me, there was a wonderful offering from Penny during a meeting right after church when she shared the verse of Christ's words: "Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

I was leaving for a trip the next morning and was so so grateful to get to see Jena briefly on Sunday. I was trying to feel the unforced rhythms of grace. But mostly I was just feeling despair.

Early that Monday, I took a taxi to the airport when it was still quite dark out. A billboard on 93 read #Orlandstrong. My cab driver had AM talk radio turned down low but had already observed the talking points for his view and said "they spend all of their time trying to keep guns out of everyone's hands but you know that if they had been allowed to have them in that club it would have at least lowered the body count." I'm still in shock about the comment. Still wanting to shake it off, but feeling like I need to hold it in some way. I could feel my face get hot. I decided that I was being tested in some way. It took me a while but I finally said "I agree we should find a way to lower the body count."

A few hours later in New York, Christine let me know that Jena had passed. For me I know it is one of those moments where I will always remember where I was when I heard the news. And I mention this simply because, while only in New York, I felt so very far away from the community which was feeling that same shock, grief and pain. Going back and forth thinking about Jena and Orlando, I would feel numb, then angry, then numb again. I tell you this because I imagine it is very similar to how everyone here felt. And I very much missed being here with everyone.

"I yell out to my God, I yell with all my might. I yell at the top of my lungs."
Sounds about right.
"He listens."
I really, really hope so.

Now I was going to New York for work as a technology sales director. Because of what I do, for the last decade or so, the word "Ubuntu" has meant a variation of a Linux operating system. But on the trip I came upon the actual meaning of the word. There are many ways to describe it, but the simplest and most elegant that I have seen is "I am because of you." Expanding a bit on Ubuntu, and I'd like to share a short video of Nelson Mandela explaining what the word means. I hope you can hear it well enough, and you'll have to excuse the subtitles which are not exact:

<http://transcriptvids.com/v3/oKZDic19yls.html>

I was grateful to stumble upon the meaning of the word at this time. I was feeling disconnected both from home and from the faith community we have here. This notion of fundamental human kindness as the foundation of an open society is especially poignant when there is so much clammer to actively retreat from the very notion. Considering Ubuntu, I immediately thought of the effect that this church has had on me and my family. For this, I can not thank you enough.

But I also came back to the thoughts of the cab driver—"you" is inclusive. Must be inclusive. We should not and indeed, can not, cherry pick the larger YOU of society.
So what do we do about that?

I'm encouraged by Paul's words in Galatians, in part because it calls out that there have always been struggles, and they will continue in various forms: I choose to believe that we do not need to be *overly* pessimistic about the current state of our society, and surely not hopeless. Paul cautions about extremes of the law and extremes of freedom, and offers a balance: "Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit."

Let's consider this within our own faith community, particularly as we continue to welcome all with love as we do so well. What about taking the next step and moving our community out...reaching out to other communities. We have charged Rev. Will to do this himself, but for there to be true value, we can not depend on him to go out and bring people back. We must go with him and explore together. As we examine what it would mean to become more active in our outward facing approach to our faith, Rev. Will has asked what if we reach out to Jewish and Muslim faith communities, talk with them, learn from them?

Have I mentioned that I went to 24 Bar and Bat Mitzvah's when I was growing up? And, don't mean to brag, but I've been to more since then next door at Temple Shir Tikvah. I'd think of myself as a person who knows a fair amount of about different religions...but do I?
Other than study in school, my exposure has been pretty limited. Is there a coming of age ceremony for Muslims?

A data point that I have always embraced is that I have had two close friends over the years who are Muslim, one fairly devout, and both have expressed great pain at the bastardization of a beautiful religion that has love and compassion at its center. Thinking of them when I hear Muslims and Islamic

extremists jammed into the same category is gut wrenching. Donald Trump has repeatedly suggested that Muslims are responsible for policing each other. When they don't, they are responsible events such as San Bernardino and Orlando.

People have done, and continue to do, horrible things in the name of Jesus. Do I even recognize them, let alone feel that they represent anything about my own faith?

Now in a piece of the lectionary that I didn't make Hale explore today, as Jesus and the disciples are heading into Jerusalem, a man asks to join them. Jesus warns him it won't be easy. The man agrees but says he needs a couple of days to arrange for his father's funeral. Jesus says don't bother: "First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God's kingdom!" Wow...really, Jesus? Not even to bury my father? Ok, we know all too well that Jesus asks very simple but often extremely difficult things of us, and doesn't want us to hedge. But it doesn't require a leap of faith like this for us to join together and venture out into other communities. We are lucky because we don't have to do this alone. We have each other in our own faith community, and can support each other in an effort to meet with communities around us.

Ubuntu: I am because of you. I am, because of you, here in FCCW.

Taking it a step further, I/FCCW, am because of You/the larger world. The point is not Us vs. Them, but the I collapsing into the One.

Having each other, and being a part of this community, we are blessed with security in a way that many others are not. We have the chance to support each other as we bring love to other communities around us. And as we do so, we take, I/FCCW out into the world and potentially bring openness and love to those who may *themselves* need a home in a faith community like ours.

We don't need to do this as individuals, but together, collectively, like we do so many other wonderful things.

Clearly, I'm enamored with Will's idea.

But at the same time, it is not even the end of June. Our church has been wonderful, remarkable, as it has come together all too many times this month for special services and vigils, each marked with deep, profound sorrow.

"Learn the unforced rhythms of grace...Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

We need this, too. At this point, I think it is fair to say that we are collectively exhausted. I see the summer ahead of us, and believe the unforced rhythm of the day calls for rest. God, please grant us this time. After, we'll be all the sharper for the work that lies ahead.

Amen.