

## *Waking Up/Waking Down to Beloved Community*

Sermon by Rev. Leslie Fraser

August 30, 2020, First Congregational Church of Ashfield, 13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Scripture readings: Romans 12: 9-21    Matthew 16: 21-28

Jacob Blake. George Floyd. Breanna Taylor. Rayshad Brooks. Ahmaud Arbery. Trayvon Martin. Eric Garner. And this week, killed by a teenager hoping to become a police officer, Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber.

How many more Sundays will preachers at Sunday worship read the names of those whose light was extinguished for our right to bear assault weapons and our violent disregard of human lives? How many more Sundays will we try to believe that our hope for justice is worth more than the millennia-old ploy to divide, conquer, subjugate, and enslave people for the enrichment of power? How many more Sundays will we fight the growing numbness as each name that matters becomes etched in a litany that goes on and on and on? How many more Sundays will broken hearts be broken again, lost in lamentation? How many more? Yet we must bear witness if only to remind us of the world we live in, and the world we came to shine our light and love on. And so this Sunday, we bear witness again.

The scriptures in today's lectionary glow as candles in this week's vigils, as do the thousands of brave souls who commemorated the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech on Friday. "We are like the nameless grandmothers who got in the streets and said, 'We will make you live up to what America says she is.' We are here. We're not going anywhere," said Jumaane Williams, New York's public advocate, to this week's marchers. "We've come to bear witness, to remain awake, to remember from where we've come and to carefully consider where we're going," said MLK's son, Martin Luther King III. And like all of us here today, we will bear witness, again and always. We're not going anywhere.

Today's lectionary readings, framed in this week's news, offer a bridge into a dimension made for these times. They help us move past waking up—and help us to wake down. Waking up is just part of what we're called to, as witnesses of love and justice in dark and violent times. Waking up is becoming aware, and it's a change in consciousness that we're accustomed to. Like the transition from sleep, we can wake into the light of day without doing the work of engaging and changing our consciousness to live in the realities of that new day. We can just bring our existing world views and assumptions into another day. If we try to spiritually bypass truth and enlightenment by avoiding our own original "sins"—which are the many ways we have missed the mark of unity and love, as a society as well as individually—then we won't be able to initiate and integrate a new communal call to love.

Waking down differs from waking up out of life. When we wake down, we simultaneously fall into our bodily self and the body of God, the transpersonal self that is the divinity in all of us. Waking down, we can't "other" anymore. Rev. Kate Stevens used to call that a commandment:

Thou shalt not other. But when we wake down, the other isn't there anymore. We are one body inhabiting individual bodies at the same time. And there is no other.

How do you know when you're waking down? You'll find a new energy, hope, or aliveness stirring in you. You'll feel a tingle awakening down inside of you. You may notice something indefinable shifting in you. You can sense it. You can feel its aliveness. Along with awakening your senses, waking down pulls the threads of your life and your values—values like peace, truth, creativity, and compassion, which are the many names of God—into a garment that you wear as your daily, ordinary, human reality.

In the gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus speaks in waking down terms: For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Saving one's life is giving up, losing, letting go of whatever disconnects us from God, from love, from Jesus. And losing one's life for God's sake is finding one's life. Jesus is helping us to wake down into unity with love, with God—where there is no othering—losing the life of otherness we used to inhabit.

What Jesus does expect of the disciples is a metaphorical giving of their lives, their all, to God's mission of love and justice. And this means that they must take upon themselves the task of doing what he did—making a proclamation to the world that will land them in trouble with "the powers that be." And so we come full circle to MLK and this Friday's March on Washington—we, today's disciples, proclaim God's kingdom of love and justice, waking down, with the knowledge that those in power who haven't woken up may shoot our bodies, but they can't touch our living truth.

And in Paul's letter to the Romans, there's a lot of waking down as well. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.... No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The "burning coals upon their heads" are the powers of waking down—the God consciousness that totally discombobulates and disorients the death-affirming values of evil.

Paul asks his Roman readers to undergo a transformation of their minds in order to discern the will of God, telling them that God offers us a universal revelation of truth and love that is available to all persons in all times and circumstances. All are invited to this awakening. Nobody is left out—there are no enemies. There are no others.

I'm going to end with a waking down insight that was offered to me on Friday by Maryellen Abbatiello, while she was cutting my hair. I was telling her that I was a little bit on the fence about going to my niece's wedding in mid-September. My niece, in her mid-thirties, is a social worker, serving people on the fringes of society. After helping many friends and family with their weddings, and experiencing a few big life changes in the past three years that had postponed her own wedding, she decided a couple of months ago to have a hopefully outdoor or under a tent wedding at Manomet Point, near our family cottage. In my mind, but not out loud, I had been

thinking, “Really? Is this safe? Why now? Can’t you wait another year?” Things like that. I had been judging and othering, and not copping to that.

Maryellen prompted, “I think people in your niece’s generation don’t expect that things will get better.” And I opened up to that awareness. I know Maryellen is right. But I was still holding onto a judging framework.

Maryellen got excited about my niece’s wedding, and we each talked about the magic at our own weddings. My heart bubbled over. I felt all the tingling sensations of waking down into the joy of my niece’s wedding, joining the place where her heart and consciousness lives, and I left Maryellen’s Hair by the Lake with overflowing love about the wedding to be. I woke up and woke down to the beloved community in my own family that I had built barriers around. So my question to you is: what’s a situation with some barrier to wakefulness that you could wake down into? What could revolutionary love shine a light on for you?

May the God of wakefulness awaken in each of us. May we bear witness to the divinity emerging in every heart. When we say their names—every name that matters—let us wake them into beloved community. Jacob Blake, George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, all of your names—beloved.