

“Showing Up at the Table”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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A sermon is meant to be heard rather than read. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

Readings

"Perhaps the World Ends Here" from *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky* by Joy Harjo¹

and

selection from “Choose to Bless the World” by Rebecca Parker

Sermon

The kitchen table in my parents’ home, the home I grew up in, could barely fit all five of us at one time. Most of our meals were eaten there rather than at the formal dining table which usually remained cluttered with mail and kids’ homework. I could always count on there to be on the table a rice cooker full of fragrant jasmine rice - sometimes freshly steamed, sometimes cold. We were lucky enough to always have food on the table. It was at this table that my parents would recount to one another their day of work. As we grew older, the table conversation would often get around to contentious topics - city politics and world affairs. Always the conversation would engage strong opinions. I have many memories of this table, including from when I was five years old and was jumping up and down too close to the table, and tears flowed as my chin went bang on the table’s edge. (I still have a scar where my chin hit the table.)

Life happens at the table.

¹ Not printed because of copyright restrictions

As Joy Harjo expresses in her poem, the gifts of earth are brought and prepared and set at the table. We gossip at the table. We day dream over cups of coffee. We teach children at the table. The world begins and perhaps the world ends at the table.

This morning, I invite us to reflect on the tables we are called to set and to show up at in our own lives.

This coming week many of us will gather at the Thanksgiving table. As we gather at the table with family and friends, we will arrive, as we do to this sanctuary, with hearts full, with hearts broken, in need of connection, in need of being seen and understood.

We will bring our offerings of food and of love, and we will receive these gifts as well.

I want to acknowledge that the Thanksgiving holiday may be challenging for some of you here. The holidays are often fraught with the challenges of family as old wounds reemerge or losses are more deeply felt. This year in particular politics may be a sore point as some of you may have family members who do not share your political views. This may be a prospective point of tension.

So, for some of us, the Thanksgiving table will be where the rubber meets the road in terms of working through our political differences.

This can serve as a reminder that sometimes we are called or even required to be at the table even when we might prefer not to be.

These situations call for particular gifts within us.

Patience, if we can muster it.

Compassion.

Non judgment.

Our political life is teaching us many things right now, and one of those lessons may be that disengagement and isolation from those who think differently from us can lead to deeper fissures in our society.

So, your presence at the Thanksgiving table this year might demand of you more spiritual fortitude and practice than usual. Perhaps the Thanksgiving table can be a place to practice with those you love those skills of listening and seeking to understand that are so needed in our public life.

But, I also want to acknowledge that it may not be the right time to have these conversations. I know that the hurt and pain is still raw for many of you.

Since last Wednesday, I have spent a lot of time listening. And, what I've heard from you is that it's hard to be in the world right now.

Some of you have shared the feeling of being unmoored and lost at sea.

Some of you fear what will happen to the social safety nets that have kept you afloat in times of financial hardship.

Some of you worry for children whose livelihoods might be affected in the months to come.

Some of you acknowledge not wanting to be paralyzed by fear but also not being entirely sure of what to do next.

It feels like everything has changed, which, in many ways, it has.

I, like many of you, feel a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety about what is coming next.

For now, what I choose to believe is that we must gather up the gifts that we have, give thanks for those gifts, and use them to bless the world.

For while the world might feel unbelievably broken, there is still yet beauty and grace and mystery. As Rebecca Parker writes, "those who bless the world live their life as a gesture of thanks for this beauty and this rage."

In this moment, we are called anew to show up at the table of community and at the table of life.

We each have something to offer the world in this moment. It may be as simple as being gentle with yourself and one another, or being especially kind to your loved

ones and to strangers, or picking up trash. It may be something of greater proportion, like organizing fundraisers for Standing Rock, or urging your friends to stay civically engaged.

The world has great needs, and we have much to offer.

This time of coming together around the table reminds us that we are ultimately relational beings. At this time, when the stakes feel high and so much feels tenuous is when we need to lean into relationship all the more and bring all of who we are to the fullness of those relationships. We are fed, physically and spiritually, in relationship.

The harvest table that has been set can remind us of the bounty and abundance we have in our lives made available to us through our relationships. It reminds us that we depend on the earth and the earth abides even while we work to protect it. And, it reminds us that the resources we need to build the world we dream of are within us and amongst us. They are here and they are ours to recognize and to embrace. And, for these gifts, we give thanks.

When we show up at the table we both give, and we receive.

And, in order to receive, we must attune ourselves to the world around us with open hearts. Ready to take in the gifts even when they might show up in unexpected places.

Some of you may be familiar with this story. Back in January of 2007, the Washington Post² decided to run an experiment of sorts. What would happen if you took a world class violinist, put him in street clothes, and had him play in a Washington DC Metro Station for 45 minutes during morning rush hour? This is how it came to be that Joshua Bell stood in L'enfant Plaza station, Stradivari in hand, and his violin case open at his feet, playing six difficult and gorgeous pieces of classical music. During those 45 minutes, over 1,000 people passed by. It took

² Gene Weingarten, "Pearls Before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's great musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out." April 8, 2007. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html

six minutes before anyone even glanced at him. At the end of his performance, Bell had earned \$32.17. One interesting observation made by those conducting the experiment was that of all the people passing through the station, it is the children who without fail noticed Bell and tried to get a better look at him before being scooted along by their parents. Otherwise, most people simply didn't take notice as Bell poured out song after song effusively on his violin and filled the station with sounds of sorrow and triumph and beauty.

The world right now might seem like it is simply spinning on with business as usual.

But, we know that deep within us there is a different song that begs to be heard. The world right now calls on us to bring out best gifts to the table. Because amidst the din and distraction, amidst the darkness and destruction, there is still beauty and grace and mystery.

So, let us show up.

Let us be ready to give and to receive.

Bring your gifts.

Let your life be a gesture of thanks.

Choose to bless the world.