

***Be the Light***  
**Sunday, December 11, 2016**

“Make of yourself a light,” the Buddha said. But how do we do that when we are part of that frightened crowd? It’s no wonder that over the centuries, the teachings of the rabbi who proclaimed “You are the light of the world,” have been reconfigured to say that he only was the light of the world. It’s a lot easier and safer to put that burden on someone long dead than to take it on ourselves.

But one of the things I love about our Unitarian Universalist tradition is that we don’t shift the weight or the light to someone else. From our roots in early Christianity we have proclaimed that Jesus was not God but a human being, and that his good news was not that he had made things right with God for all people in all times but that he taught and lived a model of how humankind could make things right with one another in their own times. That’s how we have always understood his teachings. Hear that one again: “You are light for the world.” And then he went on: “A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Likewise, when people light a lamp, they don’t cover it with a bowl but put it on a lampstand, so that it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before people.”

That passage was significant to our Puritan ancestors – Governor John Winthrop used it to highlight the mission of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in a sermon he gave on the Arbella shortly before they disembarked in their new home. Looking to the hills of Boston he told his fellow religious refugees, “We shall be as a City upon a hill” making visible the light of love. And here’s how they were going to do that:

*[F]or this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man, we must entertain each other in brotherly Affection, we must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, ..., we must delight in eache other, make others Conditions our own, rejoyce together, mourn together, labour, and suffer together, always having before our eyes our Commission and Community in the work, our Community as members of the same body, so shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, ...*

The light and the love would come from their relationships with one another, not notice, from their individual piety. This reminds us of another important facet of Jesus’ teaching that has also often been lost in the centuries that followed: Jesus’ mission wasn’t to have individuals get into heaven; it was to create a communal heaven on earth, to reveal the realm of love and justice among us. As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, it’s important for us to remember that it is this message we

are celebrating, that each child brings to the world love and light which contributes to the greater whole. “Each night a child is born is a holy night” wrote Sophia Lyon Fahs, the great Unitarian religious educator in a poem often read in our churches at this time of year.

So Christmas brings to us the question, how do we incarnate love and justice? How do we bring light to one another and to the world? And this isn’t just a question for Christmas time. Another way to ask it is, “what is our vision and mission for First Parish?” Vision is our dream of what we can be and mission is how we live out that vision. Each of them changes with the circumstances of the church and the world. We’ll be working on defining them in the new year, and as we have those conversations, it’s important to remember that our vision and mission will be different in the beginning of a Trump presidency from what we might have come up with during the Obama presidency. For instance, some churches now feel called to envision themselves as safe places for those in danger of deportation and so re-setting their mission to offer sanctuary for illegal immigrants. Others are offering training in how to protect people being harassed in public places. Though this may have been needed in past years, the need for these actions has been thrown into relief in recent weeks.

And that’s the thing about mission – you never know what the world may need from you. As I thought this week about how to be the light, I was reminded of what I knew about the people of Le Chambon-Sur-Lignon who, during World War II, sheltered and saved somewhere around 5,000 Jews and others on the run from the Nazis and the Vichy government. When I began to read about their work I learned two important things about their rescue work. First, it wasn’t just the people of Le Chambon who hid people in their homes and barns, people in all the villages in the region known as Le Plateau risked their lives to offer shelter to those in danger. And second, the center for their work were the churches in the region, especially the Protestant ones. In fact, the monthly meeting of the local pastors became the time when codewords and passwords were set for the coming month.

Four factors made the Plateau into the perfect sanctuary. First, geography. The area is isolated. Like our South Shore, you don’t travel through it on your way to somewhere else. There was no heavy industry, no coal, no factories, nothing for the government to seize. Only farmers making a living on hard land. Second, the majority of people were Protestants, Huguenots, who remembered the centuries of persecution they had endured under Roman Catholic rulers and held onto the Republican vision of France as a country of *liberte, egalite, and fraternite* for all. Third, in the late 19th and 20th century, again like the South Shore, the Plateau

became a summer community. The residents welcomed visitors from the cities to their farmhouses, which became guesthouses; they built campgrounds; they became used to having outsiders come into their community, and they became experts at practicing hospitality. And fourth, the Protestant and Catholic pastors of the villages shared an understanding of their religion as calling them to offer love and assistance to all in need. As Edward Theis, a pastor at the Protestant Temple, as they called it, in Le Chambon, wrote in a local journal in 1941,

*We must put an end to every man for himself. ... We must be concerned for our parents, our neighbors, our brothers in faith, our compatriots, but also for total strangers, all of whom require that we care about them.*

And people did just that. They took in Jews from all over France, Germany, and Austria, sheltered them, forged identity papers, and, for many, guided them over the mountains to safety in Switzerland. They kept the secrets so well, that residents of the villages didn't know who was sheltering refugees or even who among them was Jewish and who was not. They welcomed those in need but asked no questions. One story tells of a woman trying to find shelter for two 14 year old boys. No one wanted to take them in – 14 year old boys eat a lot and may not be easy to control. Finally in desperation she said to a woman at a farmhouse who had turned her down, "The truth is that these children are Jewish. They are being hunted. Their parents were arrested." The woman at the farmhouse right away said, "Why didn't you say that in the first place?" and took them in. They were so careful of their charges that at one time in one of the smaller villages, each of the 100 or so farmhouses was hiding refugees and no one of them knew that their neighbors were offering shelter. Many of the children were sheltered in communal homes with papers making them seem legitimate. They were welcomed into the local schools and remembered fun times with the other children in the village. The Protestant churches often offered a room where the Jewish people could gather for religious observances and at least one year one congregation hosted a big Hanukkah party in their sanctuary. And during these years, not one person in all these villages let the authorities know that Jews were being sheltered there. Instead, people of all ages took on the risk, from teen-aged boy scouts whose tracking skills enabled them to guide people over the mountains to Switzerland, to young girls who ferried money coming in from America and Switzerland to the resistance groups, to the villagers who shared their food and their spaces with those in danger. Through all the years of the War, they made the Plateau a beacon of hope and safety.

The needs of 2017 in Scituate are not the same as the needs of Le Chambon in 1940, but the same questions come to us – how are we called to offer light – the

lights symbolized by our Advent candles – the light of hope, peace, love, and joy, to one another and to the world? How do we encourage one another – literally offer heart to one another – to be light? What light do we need to give and what light do we need to receive?

These are not my questions to answer. Each of us needs to ask, as Parker Palmer wrote, "What kind of light can I provide today?" But we also remember that we are not alone. We are a church, a community of individuals offering their gifts to the common life, for the good of one another and the larger world. As a church, we can offer the full rainbow of light. What light needs to shine in our lives and in our world in the new year? How can we help it shine out? For we are the Light of the World.

- Pamela M. Barz

### **Readings for Be the Light**

*The Light for Another* by Parker J. Palmer

In times of deep darkness, we not only need light — we need to be light for one another. That's a message we must take to heart as we find ourselves lost once again in the all-too-familiar darkness of America's culture of violence....

There are many kinds of light. There's the light that allows people lost in the dark to find their way home. There's the light of compassion that comforts everything it touches. There's the light of truth-telling about ourselves that allows us to see what we are doing — or allowing — that has helped bring this darkness upon us. There's the light that shows us the way forward toward a better world. There's the light of courage to walk that path no matter who says "Stop!"

No one of us can provide all of the light we need. But every one of us can shed some kind of light. Every day we can ask ourselves, "What kind of light can I provide today?"

*The Buddha's Last Instruction* by Mary Oliver

"Make of yourself a light"  
said the Buddha,  
before he died.

I think of this every morning  
as the east begins  
to tear off its many clouds  
of darkness, to send up the first  
signal—a white fan  
streaked with pink and violet,  
even green.  
An old man, he lay down  
between two sala trees,  
and he might have said anything,  
knowing it was his final hour.  
The light burns upward,  
it thickens and settles over the fields.  
Around him, the villagers gathered  
and stretched forward to listen.  
Even before the sun itself  
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,  
I am touched everywhere  
by its ocean of yellow waves.  
No doubt he thought of everything  
that had happened in his difficult life.  
And then I feel the sun itself  
as it blazes over the hills,  
like a million flowers on fire—  
clearly I'm not needed,  
yet I feel myself turning  
into something of inexplicable value.  
Slowly, beneath the branches,  
he raised his head.  
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.