

Made to Order
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Nov. 11, 2018
Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are...we consider bibles and religions divine—I do not say they are not divine; I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still; it is not they who give the life—it is you who give the life.

I've loved the words of Whitman that comprise this morning's responsive reading most of my life, certainly since I first started paying attention to what was said and read in church. I love them for their poetry—because you know me and poetry. More than that I love them for their theology. For their proclamation of a theological truth we hold dear—that religion is not absolute, that people, individuals or groups, shall not be hostages to religion. Though I believe the religious impulse is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, I do not believe that people are called to submit themselves to systems of religion. Religion grows out of communities of persons, and in service of persons, in service of communities of persons, not instead of service to truth or justice or love, but alongside and in equal measure to the service of truth and justice and love.

All architecture...all music, the sun and the stars...the apple-shaped earth and we upon it...the wonder everyone sees in everyone else they see, and the wonders that fill each minute of time forever; it is for you whoever you are...

I love Whitman's joyous and defiant insistence of agency of the individual to make meaning and to claim their place in existence. I love that our faith tradition is steeped in a long albeit imperfect tradition of likewise insisting on the agency of the individual to make meaning and claim their place in existence—often, and for long stretches of years and decades and centuries, against the norms of other religion and of civil societies heavily influenced by those religions.

Of course society has come around to embracing and even celebrating the place and role of the individual. You might remember a television commercial from a few years back—one for cough syrup. “Hey, Eva,” the box of medicine calls from the shelf as the woman walks by hacking away. “Hey, Bill,” calls another box of a slightly different formula as a man follows her down the aisle. The idea was that there is a formula of that particular brand of cough syrup that's just right for Eva's cough, and one that's just right for Bill's cough, and one for Jenny's cough, and one for Fred's, and so on. No need for the slightest compromise when it comes to cough syrup; there is one custom made for you cough—right down to your name.

Around the same time, about ten years ago, Dell computer advertised along the same lines—computers that were built to your specifications when you ordered them, and only then. From the first step on the assembly-line to your desk, your computer was built for you and only you. The ‘have it your way’ of the computer world.

These days Spotify and Ancestry.com have teamed up to offer customers custom-curated playlists of music from the regions of the world their DNA shows traces of. A service that might be seen from one perspective as expanding a person's global connections and awareness, and from another perspective as yet more extreme specialization: from one or two or three shared broadcast stations delivering the same entertainment to millions of people to hundreds of cable or

satellite stations delivering entertainment to smaller segments of the audience to hundreds of thousand or even millions of Spotify playlists each delivering entertainment to just one person. And now the individual consumer doesn't even have to click thumbs up or thumbs down—DNA does it for them. As far as I can tell this service hasn't really caught on (though holiday marketing might change that, I suppose), so perhaps our musical tastes are not dictated by the lands our ancestors dwelt upon hundreds or thousands of years ago—a possibility worth noting. What parallel lessons might played out in other arenas of contemporary human experience?

What happens when we try to situate ourselves in a setting—a community or a country—made to our specific order? Based only on our individual tastes or comforts or ancestry or politics or way of loving and creating family? When *it is for you whoever you are* stops being a guard against tyrannies of religion or government and becomes instead a tyranny of individualism or nationalism, a means of turning our face away the right of others to claim their agency of meaning-making and claiming their place in existence?

The story of *Stone Soup* is a familiar one, told in many different ways. I like the particular version I read this morning because of the rich variety of ingredients the villagers add to the broth—not just carrots and onions or even a little garlic, but dumplings, cloud ear, winter melon, baby corn, ginger root, soy sauce, lily buds, bean curd, mung beans and yam...that was a soup! Layers of flavor, a feast of textures, an abundance of vitamins and minerals and other nutrients.

In elementary school I learned a different story. *Mexicali Soup* is a sort of reverse *Stone Soup*. A large, presumably Mexican American family, the text didn't specify but their dialog was sprinkled with Spanish and there is that name, *Mexicali*, had a favorite soup made with potatoes and peppers, tomatoes and onions, garlic, celery. They all agreed it was best soup in the world and anticipated it with delight whenever they realized Mama planned to make it for their supper—until one day each member of the family asks Mama to leave out one ingredient—just one. The soup will still be the best in the world, each one insists; no one will miss the potato or the peppers, the onion or the tomato, the garlic or the celery. But, of course, every one misses all of those things when Mama serves up steaming bowls of hot water at the dinner table that night.

When I was a kid we learned that the United States of America is a great melting pot—all the languages and cultures and music and food and customs of the world melted into a great country, the best in the world, where everyone is welcome, everyone adds to the greatness. As I grew into a teenager I began to hear that the melting pot should be replaced by a tossed salad, because in the melting pot all the ingredients loss their character and shape but in a salad all that is retained—and the whole is still better, more flavorful, more colorful, and more nutritious than any of the separate parts alone. Both metaphors—melting pot and tossed salad—were limited and overly simplified, and failed perhaps above all else to take into account the harsh and often as not shameful realities of a country wherein all were never really welcome and *e pluribus unum* was always imperfectly understood and even less perfectly embodied. Melting pot and tossed salad were metaphors for elementary school and for junior high, and they were metaphors suited for their time—as the civil rights era was drawing to a close, Sesame Street was debuting on public television, and well-intentioned white people wanted to believe and to teach that America had entered a post-racial age. But they were always flawed.

Now, decades later, I don't know what metaphor, if any, is taught elementary school student or middle school students to capture and celebrate our national character, but I know what metaphor will perfectly capture our national character if certain segments of our society are successful in their efforts at reshaping American society—a steaming hot bowl of water. Vital for life but not life-sustaining on its own.

Through the miracle of Google I found a reprint of *Mexicali Soup* yesterday, and was able to refresh my memory. I discovered something interesting. I thought each family member wanted one ingredient omitted from the soup because they didn't like that particular ingredient but that wasn't it at all. Each family wanted their one ingredient left out of the soup for the same reason: their new friends in the big city where the family had moved from their previous home in the mountainous west, their new friends didn't eat potatoes or tomatoes; their new friends didn't put onions or hot peppers or garlic into each dish. They simplified their favorite soup away to nothing in their effort to fit into their new surroundings and their new social group. I'll get back to that.

It may be that Papa disliked celery. He doesn't give the new friends excuse. He just says, "What is celery? It is a little nothing! Put it in or leave it out, *Mamacita*--it does not matter." But that little nothing that couldn't possibly make a difference in or out ended up being the final difference between soup—admittedly thing and boring celery soup—and hot water. I'll get back to this, too.

This week has brought the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht and the centenary of the Armistice Day. On the night of November 9-10, 1938, on orders from Joseph Goebbels in consultation with Hitler, across Germany and Austria more 100 synagogues were burned or damaged and 7,500 Jewish businesses ransacked and looted. Jewish hospitals, homes, schools and cemeteries were vandalized, and at least 91 Jews were killed. Under orders from the Gestapo chief police and firefighters stood by as the havoc and terror unfolded, arresting only victims, intervening only if neighboring "Aryan" properties were threatened by fire.

One hundred years ago today, on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in a railway carriage in a remote French location, the signing of an armistice agreed to five hours early by France, Great Britain and Germany brought the fighting of World War I to a ceasefire, allowing for the peace negotiations that would lead to the signing of the Treaty of Versailles six months later. Earlier today in Paris, hampered by rain and other logistics, world leaders including President Trump, President Macron and President Putin missed the exact moment of the centenary, arriving at the Arc de Triomphe a few minutes after 11:00. It's folly to place much significance on the late arrival, but it's tempting.

Take up our quarrel with the foe!

To you from failing hands we throw

The torch; be yours to hold it high!

If ye break faith with us who die

We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields

I don't know what foes John McCrae had in mind when he penned the final stanza of *In Flanders Field*. I choose to interpret it is this way: those who have fallen in wars declared and undeclared, who lie buried in Flanders Field and in cemeteries across Europe and on our hill and in graves the world around, both marked and unmarked, don't and won't sleep as long as we allow the root causes of conflict to live and flourish. The foes today are as they have ever been—rampant nationalism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and racism. We break faith with those who have died in the name of peace, in the cause of justice, in pursuit of freedom,

every time we allow those who seek purity, comfort, or an easy and false peace to remove every bit of color and spice and heat and sweetness from soup of society.

Let's not be fooled. The color and spice and heat and sweetness we saw elected to offices across our land this 2018 mid-term election: the gay governor-elect in Colorado, the first two Native American women elected to Congress—one of them gay—the first two Muslim women elected to Congress—one of them a refugee and the first Somali-American to serve in Congress—the first African American woman to represent Massachusetts in Congress, the first African American woman to represent Connecticut in Congress, the youngest woman ever elected to Congress, the first two Latinas to represent Texas in Congress, Tennessee's first female senator, the first female governor of South Dakota, the first female governor of Iowa, the first female governor of Maine, the first female governor of Guam, the first two women elected to the U.S. House from Iowa, the first female senator elected from Arizona—whichever one finally wins. All these and score of other women, minorities, and LGBTQ folks from both parties are the potatoes and the tomatoes, the hot peppers and the garlic, the onion and the celery that some folks are going to try their level best to remove from the Mexicali soup of United States government just as soon as they possibly can.

Whatever reason we give for seeking to omit one ingredient from our body of lawmakers or from our neighborhood or from our school or from our country—it makes our stomach queasy or it's something we think our neighbors think is strange or we've never had that one before or this one little omission can't make a difference either way—whatever reason we give for categorically removing a person or a group from power or participation or presence, the result is the same: at best, clear hot water pure, bland and flavorless, but more likely a broth tainted with lead or petrochemicals. And at worst a boullion flavored with the blood and tears of refugees, Jews, Muslims, GLBTQ teens and adults and elders, people of color, women.

If the sun and stars that float in the open air; the apple-shaped earth and we upon is to be for us, whoever we are, then it must be for all, whoever they are, for as bell hooks wrote so poignantly in today's reading

...our lives are intertwined, so intertwined, that each is accountable to the other. Each particular story/truth calls us to accountability, calls me to accountability for my life, my limits, my individual and our collective transformation...

And the only way for America to be America again (as it never yet has been), the only way for our dead to sleep at peace, is for us to get about the business of making soup—with renewed joy and redoubled effort and unbound trust in the alchemical miracle that creates justice and just government, peace and peaceable communities, freedom, liberty, and salvation out of the mélange of all humankind's shapes and textures, languages, colors, cultures, flaws, wisdom and sacredness. Let us be vigilant against the fate of Mexicali Soup and relentless in the creation and tweaking and simmering and serving of Stone Soup—that our children and our children's children, that the world's children and the world's children's children might be fed. Abundantly and exquisitely.

Amen.