

“The Church of Second Chances”

A Sermon by the Rev. Terry Sims
Unitarian Universalist Church, Surprise, Arizona
April 4, 2010

Responsive Reading: # 628, “Rolling Away the Stone,” by Sara Moores Campbell

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world and its heaviness.

In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.

Sometimes this is a comfort. Sometimes it is an escape.

Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life.

Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.

In this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves.

Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.

Reading: from *The Gathering Storm*, the 12th book of the fantasy series *The Wheel of Time*, written by Robert Jordan and Brian Sanderson.

“And what if I don’t *want* the Pattern to continue?” he bellowed. He stepped forward, right to the edge of the rock . . . ‘We live the same lives!’ he yelled . . . ‘Over and over and over. We make the same mistakes. Kingdoms do the same *stupid* things. Rulers fail their people time and time again. Men continue to hurt and hate and die and kill!’

‘What if I think it’s all meaningless?’ he demanded with the loud voice of a king.
‘What if I don’t *want* it to keep turning? * * * ‘What if it’s better for this all to end? What if the Light was a lie all along, and *this* is all just a punishment? We live again and

again, growing feeble, dying, trapped forever. We are to be tortured for all time! * * *
'NONE OF THIS MATTERS!'

* * *

He would end it. End it all and let men rest, finally, from their suffering.

Stop them from having to live over and over again. Why? Why had the Creator done this to them? *Why?*

Why do we live again? . . . He spoke softly, reverently. Why? . . . Maybe it's so . . . we can have a second chance.

Rand froze. . . . *You may not have a choice about which duties are given you, Tam's voice, just a memory, said in his mind. But you can choose why you fulfill them.*

Why, Rand? Why do you go to battle? What is the point?

Why?

All was still. Even with the tempest, the winds, the crashes of thunder. All was still.

Why? Rand thought with wonder. *Because each time we live, we get to love again.*

. . . It all swept over him, lives lived, mistakes made, love changing everything. . . . He remembered love, and peace, and joy, and hope.

. . . *I fight because last time, I failed. I fight because I want to fix what I did wrong.*

*I want to do it right this time."*¹

¹ from Chapter 50, "Veins of Gold", pp. 757-759.

Sermon: The Easter story. We all probably know at least the outline of perhaps the best known story of all time. Jesus was tried for having claimed to be the Son of God. He was convicted of blasphemy by the chief priests and elders, and sentenced to die by crucifixion. He was crucified, died, and was buried in a tomb. And then, as written in the book of Matthew, came “The Resurrection of Jesus”: “After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’”

Many people believe this story literally. They believe that Jesus was resurrected from corporeal death in this life to eternal life. That he was the first, and that we too can have eternal life after death. These are literal interpretations of a story that has been handed down for centuries. A basic story that has been told in one form or another throughout history, and not just in the Christian tradition. It’s a story about the death that waits for all of us. It’s a story about the near-universal hope that the death of our physical bodies is not the end of us. Well, maybe it’s not. I don’t know.

But even if the story is literally true, I’m not sure how much good it does me. There are many Christians who would tell me that the story of Easter, of resurrection,

does me the only good that matters. That it is the only story we need. That it tells us we can have eternal life. All we have to do is believe the rest of the Christian tradition and become followers of Jesus. I'm all for following Jesus. He was, at the very least, a great example. Again, maybe Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

But since my early teens, I've never been able to stop myself from asking if there might not be another message. A deeper or more universal or more useful message that helps us live now and find meaning in the living. What is the Easter story about beyond its literal interpretation? Could it be a metaphor for this life?

I remember playing with one of my nephews when he was little. We were playing some kind of board game in which you advanced your playing piece toward the goal by rolling dice. The part I remember is that after my nephew had a bad roll of the dice, he said he wanted a "do-over." I think that was the first time I had ever heard the term. A "do-over." Being his uncle, I'm sure I gave him one, and probably more than one. I wondered at the time whether I was teaching him a good lesson or a bad one. Life doesn't always give you do-overs.

I'm not a good golfer. Which is one of the reasons I may be especially fond of the "mulligan." A mulligan is a do-over. When you hit a bad shot off the first tee, you get to hit another one. I don't think it's a recognized rule when golf is played formally. But when I'm playing my once or twice a year, I think it's a great rule! I have made frequent use of the mulligan. I sometimes wonder what games might tell us about real life.

A bad shot in golf doesn't concern me much or for long. But the truth is that I've always been afraid of anything really important that looked like I only had one chance to

get it right. I'm always looking for a way out, an escape clause. A chance to do it again if I mess up, some way to avoid making my mistakes permanent. A do-over; a second chance.

People sometimes ask me why I became a lawyer. Honestly, I'm not sure. It certainly wasn't because I had some lofty vision or had always wanted to be a lawyer. I didn't really know what lawyers did. So I kind of fell into it. Fortunately, the law suits me in many ways. But as I neared graduation from law school and starting looking for jobs, I had serious doubts about whether I'd chosen the right profession. But by then, at age 25, with 3 years of law school behind me and the bar exam passed, I felt trapped.

That feeling of being trapped continued into my first few years in practice. I was working long hours in situations rife with conflict, which I did not enjoy. In my 7th year in practice, I thought seriously about quitting law and trying something else. The problem was, I wasn't sure I'd like anything better. So for the next 9 years, I continued to work as a lawyer.

After 16 years practicing law, I was burned out. I worked too many hours at something I did not like very much. And I tried to make up for that by cherishing the few hours I had each week with family, or exercising, or entertaining myself. I decided the only thing I could really do at that point was to stick it out that way for another 9 years and try to retire very early. Until then, I'd just have to be one of the "mass of men [who] lead lives of quiet desperation," as Henry David Thoreau said in *Walden*. Thoreau continued: "What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. . . . A[n] unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of

mankind.” In his poem, “The Voiceless,” Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: “Alas for those that never sing, but die with all their music in them.”

And then In 1994 I found Unitarian Universalism. I discovered I might yet have some music in me to sing. Two years later, I told my law firm that I would resign in 2001 to go to seminary full-time. I had decided to become a UU minister. I had enough money saved that I could be unemployed for 3 years and pay for seminary. At 48, a new career and preparing for it would disrupt my life, of course. But I had a new purpose, a new excitement, a new life. I felt freer than I'd felt since my days as an undergraduate. A second chance for a more meaningful career had come to me.

But not everyone gets a second chance. And for those who do, it doesn't always come as easily as it did for me. I have a younger friend who, when he was in high school, became addicted to methamphetamine. He was fully recovered by the time I met him. But he has told me he believes there is an evil force, a literal “devil” at work in the world. He is referring to drugs, especially methamphetamine, to its power to take over one's life and reduce it to nothing more than the drug. When his parents couldn't stand his addiction or control his dangerous behavior, they kicked him out of their home. He was soon convicted of a crime and went to prison for 5 years, getting out just before his 25th birthday. His addiction cost him his family, his youth, a chance for an education, and his freedom.

But he got clean in prison. He finished his G.E.D. and some college work there. His parents were there to pick him up when he was released from prison. They have supported him emotionally ever since. And he has become a responsible adult. He won't regain his youth, but he's discovered it's not too late to start over.

I have other young friends who have gotten sidetracked. Their lives have not taken a wrong turn by addiction to drugs or alcohol or anything else. But they are . . . aimless. They have lost direction or purpose. Some have never recovered it. The lucky ones have. They have found something or someone to live for beyond themselves. The lucky ones have gone on to happy, worthwhile lives.

At the recent memorial service of our dear friend Betty Hammond, I learned things I did not know about her; the many things she did with her life before I knew her. One of those things was that she applied and was accepted to a graduate program, when not many women pursued graduate degrees. While in the program, she was told by a male professor that he did not believe women had any place in advanced education. That she was taking the place of a more qualified man who had a family to support. But Betty did not let that stop her. She persevered and received her graduate degree. She made a new life for herself; a life that was different than the world she was born into, the life others thought she should have. And then she taught; taught a generation of women, in her own quiet way, that they could overcome injustice and ignorance. That they could achieve their goals despite the prejudice they faced. They learned, and they loved her for her example and for teaching them that lesson.

I will never forget one day at my law firm. A good friend came into my office and asked, "Have you ever had all your lymph nodes swell at the same time?" I hadn't. And when our eyes met, we both knew we suspected a serious problem. Sure enough, a few weeks later, my friend was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia. The treatments he took were difficult and enervating. But after about a year, my friend's doctors told him his tests were normal. And for about five years, my friend has been in

remission. He and his doctors expect the cancer to come back. But they hope it can be managed when it does, just as it was the first time. In the meantime, my friend has had years of life that he might not have had. And I might not have had him.

These are stories of a literally new life within this mortal one. These are the real stories of our lives that make me believe in the Easter story, in its universal, useful message. It's a message of the possibility and the hope of resurrection, even in this life. It's a message we should pay attention to in church; a message we can use to live anew in the here and now.

Sometimes our second chances come from how we respond individually to life. And sometimes they come from how we respond to the people in our lives.

Nancy was a popular girl in my high school. She was pretty, vivacious, and a cheerleader. Paula was none of those things. Paula was poor, very overweight, withdrawn, and mostly tried not to be noticed. But she was noticed. It was easy to be Nancy's friend; it wasn't easy to be Paula's. I remember watching kids pick on Paula day after day. Not in the "we tease you because we like you" way. Kids made personal comments to other kids in Paula's hearing about her weight, her clothes, her personal appearance. The kinds of mean things that can devastate someone's sense of self-worth. I'm sure those kinds of comments had destroyed Paula's ego long since. The most vivid recollection I have is hearing someone yelling in the middle of the wide main corridor, "Hit the lockers – Paula's coming through!" – an obvious reference to her weight. Nancy didn't make the comment, nor did her friends. But they didn't say anything against it, either. I suspect they snickered. Lots of kids did. I can only imagine what Paula felt; embarrassment, anger, self-loathing.

But Nancy must have been ashamed of herself. Not long after that, I noticed that sometimes at lunch, or in the library, or in the hall, Nancy would leave the friends who always surrounded her. She sought Paula out. It seemed Paula was always by herself. Sometimes their conversation was short, sometimes longer. I don't know what they said to each other. They didn't become fast friends, as far as I could tell. But Paula didn't seem quite so withdrawn or so desperately unhappy. And I felt a whole lot better about the kind of person Nancy was. She had treated Paula badly and she knew it. But then she gave herself and Paula a second chance by doing better.

I knew a man, we'll call him Frank, who was fast approaching 50. I knew a little about his family background, too; enough to know that he didn't feel close to his parents or his brother or sister, and apparently never had. Frank told me he had never found anybody he really cared for strongly. I suspected the other truth was that he had never found anyone he thought cared very much for him. He also told me he was feeling desperate; that he'd never been in love. Now, he said, he had to assume he never would be.

About a year and a half later, I saw Frank again. He was a new man, excited about living in a way that I had not thought he was capable of. He told me he had found someone he loved, and who loved him; that they were planning to move in together. When they were together, or even when his partner called on the telephone, Frank said he felt joy he never thought he would have. He told me that finding his partner saved his life. I believed it.

Not long ago, I hurt someone's feelings pretty badly. I didn't mean to, but I misjudged a situation. I made a comment that I thought would be taken in the

humorous vein I'd intended. And then I realized it had been taken seriously. This person was clearly hurt and I felt awful. I tried to explain that I hadn't been serious, but that didn't seem to change how she felt, and thus how I felt.

A week or so later, I again saw the woman I'd hurt. I again tried to apologize. And she seemed just as unconvinced and cool toward me. But we started talking about other things, uncomfortably at first. As the conversation went on, though, we shared a laugh or two. We didn't talk again about what I'd said. But somehow I just sensed, without her saying it, that she'd forgiven me. It felt like I'd been released. Like our friendship could begin fresh again. Like she'd given me a second chance.

What hope is there for going on living without forgiveness? We can't change the past, no matter how desperately we want to. But we either live there, stuck, or we move on. Either we choose to forgive or we die spiritually, all at once or quickly.

Mary Pickford said: "If you have made mistakes, even serious ones, there is always another chance for you. What we call failure is not the falling down but the staying down." Our mistakes, our hurts, our remorse, do not have to be permanent. They do not have to become the tomb of the soul. We have a second chance to roll away the stones of our lives. The mistakes, the hurts, the guilt all live in the tomb of the past. But our new lives lie beyond them. Outside that tomb is a second chance to love, to do better. Another chance to forgive, and to be forgiven. Always another chance.

Do you believe in resurrection? If you, or anyone you know, has missed one life-changing opportunity and found another, I think you believe in resurrection. If you, or anyone you know, has been addicted to a destructive or aimless way of life and has found his or her way to a more meaningful life, you believe in the possibility of

resurrection. If you, or anyone you know, has suffered an injustice and has overcome it, you believe in the hope of resurrection. If you, or anyone you know, has suffered a serious illness or physical condition from which she or he has recovered, you believe in the new life of resurrection.

If you, or anyone you know, has ever treated someone badly and done better the next time, you believe in the power of resurrection. If you, or anyone you know, has ever felt unloved and then found someone to love, you believe in the salvation of resurrection. If you, or anyone you know, has made a mistake and been forgiven for it, you believe in the second chance of resurrection.

I close with what Easter is about for me. The deep, useful Easter message. I want us really to believe that we are a church that believes in do-overs, mulligans, second chances. Everybody deserves one, and one after that, and one after that. Everybody gets one, at least here from us, and then another, and then another. Maybe that's something really important that people can find here even if they don't find it somewhere else – a second chance. There is always the possibility of a richer life. There is always hope that we can do better. That we can love again, that we can get it right. I want our church to proclaim that truth. I want our church to live that truth. When people ask me why our church celebrates Easter, I tell them it's because we really believe in resurrection to a new life. Amen.

BENEDICTION: Today, we proclaim to ourselves and others that we are a church of second chances. On Easter we remember that every new day of life gives us second chances to love again, to get it right. Blessed be.