

## “A New Repertoire”

Rev. David Gregory

July 3, 2022

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost



*The First Step*  
Natalya Grypas

### Readings

Micah 6:6-8  
from the New Revised Standard Version

With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"  
He has told you, O mortal, what is good,  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God?

“Practicing the Complex Yes”  
a poem by Kim Stafford  
in *We Begin a Better Nation: Poems to Keep On*

When you disagree with a friend,  
a stranger, or a foe, how do you  
reply but not say simply No?  
For *No* can stop the conversation  
or turn it into argument or worse —  
the conversation that must go on, as a river  
must, a friendship, a troubled nation.  
So may we practice the repertoire  
of complex yes:

*Yes, and in what you say I see ...*  
*Yes, and at the same time ...*  
*Yes, and what if ... ?*  
*Yes, I hear you, and how ... ?*  
*Yes, and there's an old story ...*  
*Yes, and as the old song goes ...*  
*Yes, and as a child told me once ...*  
*Yes. Yes, tell me more, I want to understand ...*  
*and then I want to tell you how it is for me ....*

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Independence Day. I've always considered American independence from Great Britain a really good thing to celebrate, and I still do. The right of self-determination and the freedom of self-governance is at the core of who we are as a nation, who we are as American people, and has everything to do with the opportunities you and I have in the world to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. However, there is an elephant in the room (no pun intended), and it has become impossible to ignore. We've been formed in a culture that taught us to pledge allegiance to a flag that stands as an emblem of liberty and justice for all, but the undeniable truth is that not everyone is free and not everyone can find justice.

Within the last few days, a rape victim who is ten years old was denied what one week earlier was a constitutional right to an abortion. Some of the laws banning the procedure date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and now in some places there are already no exceptions, not even for a child who has been the victim of violence. She is doubly victimized, both by the perpetrator and also by the self-righteous moralistic system that she becomes trapped in. How can a decision like this purport itself to be pro-life?

This is just one example of what I'm talking about. Liberty and justice for all. Where was George Floyd's liberty? Where is the justice for school children? Where has the struggle for civil rights gotten us in the last sixty years? I could stand here all day and whip up the crowd, so to speak, around the grave injustices of our society. I could recount a list of things that would cause us all to nod in agreement, shout "amen," or perhaps applaud in agreement together about what we see as an erosion of humanity, of how truth and the rule of law is collapsing from within. We might even wring our hands, feeling powerlessness to affect the changes that people fought and died for, and that new generations are now fighting and dying for as well.

Some years ago, we saw news footage of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a former minister in our own denomination who was pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, then the home church of Barack and Michelle Obama. They were married there. Their girls were baptized there. And in the midst of a presidential campaign, they were forced to sever ties with that church and with that pastor, because his emotional outburst carried him away into some things that we all might have felt in a similar situation. He challenged the notion of "liberty and justice for all." I agreed with his sentiment, but his delivery didn't do his cause any good. It didn't convince anyone, except the people who already agreed with him. We all listen for the voices we agree with. It helps us to feel that we are not alone. It gives us a sense of hope. It gets our blood flowing and our feet marching, and one might argue that this energy produces some results. But in the case of Rev. Wright, it simply gave his detractors more fodder to vilify him. It destroyed his relationship with a family that symbolized the very thing he was trying to create, and placed him squarely in a footnote of history.

We're just not going to get anywhere we want to go by ranting at the latest outrage. If we give ourselves over to fear and hopelessness, we're inviting more of the same. We simply have to find another way to be in our bodies, in our culture, in our nation, and on the earth. I think that's why I find myself drawn once again this week to the work of Kim Stafford and his little book entitled, *We Begin a Better Nation*. Let's take a moment and just let the title sink in a bit. We included a piece from the book in last week's readings, and on this Independence Day weekend I am compelled to bring along another one. Both poems have been about creating dialogue with those who reside toward different cultural polarities. It is

reminiscent of Arlie Hochschild's book *Strangers In Their Own Land*, where the author recounts her five-year experiment of traveling from her self-described blue bubble of UC Berkeley to live for spaces of time in Louisiana for the purpose of creating relationships and trying to understand people with whom she fundamentally disagreed. She did form relationships. She did find ways of understanding. She was able to humanize those on the other end of the cultural divide. But that did not mean she was able to create agreement or consensus. What she demonstrated was what can happen if we break out of the shell of our own circles of agreement. It probably didn't change the world, but it seemed to change her.

This is a very long game, you see. It may seem that we keep coming back to the same battles again and again, but we need to remember that we're not just going in circles, but are in an evolutionary spiral. As Martin Luther King reminded us before his death, "I may not get there with you," but his message of non-violent social change remained the best hope he could find for a world torn apart by racial violence.

Last week our thoughts were overlaid with a simple message of love. When we love others as we love ourselves, we listen for their stories, their pain, and their disappointments. This "listening love" helps us enter conversations we might prefer to avoid. And without these conversations, there's little possibility for healing our divides. This week's emphasis is overlaid with a message of justice. We return to the classic sentence from Micah, the Hebrew prophet. In Hebrew fashion, Micah states this core value regarding our relationship with God: "What does God require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly?"

Our cries for justice are not merely political. They are rooted in the evolution of major religious traditions, within which Moses and Jesus were deeply moved by the inhumanity of Empire. Their followers were among those who longed for liberation from the bondage of cruel patriarchy. The struggle for liberation always changes the course of human history in some way. We are living in such a time. This Independence Day, as a nation we find ourselves polarized between the love of power and the power of love. As Kim Stafford's work suggests, the answer as to how to resolve our polarities is not an instantaneous one. It is a simple call to "begin" a better nation.

We have to create some dialogue. We have to build some bridges. We have to listen and hear others if we ourselves are going to be heard. It sounds counter-intuitive. *They don't fight fair, so why should we?* we might say. *If we don't stand up for ourselves we'll be run over.* I understand these feelings, but still, we can begin.



*Listening*  
Sue Davis