

To Serve This Present Age – Dr. Maureen Walker, August 12, 2108

Good morning, I am honored by your kind invitation to be here with you. Reverend Macklin, I am grateful for your generosity in sharing this place of community and sanctuary with me. To all of you gathered here, I say thank you for this opportunity to share reflections on how we are called to serve this present age. Let me start by saying, in my family we grew up steeped in a Biblical tradition. It was “coming of age” rite of passage to memorize particular Bible verses, and I learned a few things about the Beatitudes.

- Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
- Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.

There is another one that I haven’t seen in any Biblical text, but I know it to be true:

“Blessed are the brief, for they shall be invited again.”

A few months ago, I was challenged to deliver a breakfast keynote in five minutes, and when it was done my husband told me that it was the best talk I had ever given. (That’s after listening to my talks for over 25 years.)

I mentioned this 5 minute talk to Amy and said I had to do just a little bit better.... But please know that I will still do keep that Beatitude in mind.

In my mother’s church, there was a Charles Wesley hymn they would sing almost every Sunday. It was called “A Charge to Keep, I Have.”

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And second stanza goes...

To serve this present age,
 My calling to fulfill,
 O may it all my powers engage
 To do my Master's will.

I like to think that in *his* time, in the 18th century, the hymnist was talking about the charge to do justice, to proclaim hope, and to walk in right relationship with each other. This is not a calling for the faint of heart, whether we are talking about the 18th century or this present age, right here – right now.

When we read the headlines or the newsfeeds on our screens, we see cynicism, arrogance, politicized hatred – the erosion of any sense of the common good. We see evidence of what some people have called “America’s march of destruction”. In fact, in his lecture celebrating the birth of Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama described this present age as one of “exponential destruction”.

What else do you call systemic and systematic efforts to curtail equitable access to education?

What else do you call unrelenting efforts to deny the voices of the marginalized in the voting booths?

What other way would we describe laws that make it easier to kill endangered animals?

Of course, in this era of post-truth, gaslighting, and alternative facts, there are those who would eviscerate environmental laws, and call it economic progress. They would compromise the dignity and imperil the lives of transgender people and call it family values. They would denounce the right to kneel for justice and call that patriotism. The British historian Sir John Glubb wrote a passage describing what he calls the Age of Decadence.

He describes it as a culture in which “frivolity, hedonism, cynicism, anti-intellectualism, narcissism, consumerism, and fanaticism (just to name a few ism’s) infuse the population. He goes on to say: Politics is increasingly corrupt and life increasingly unjust. A cabal of insiders accrues wealth and power at the expense of the citizenry...the majority lives for bread and circuses, worshipping celebrities instead of divinities.

I read this passage, and it led me to ask: *Why do* we need to keep up with the Kardashians? Where are they going? More important, where would we end up if we follow them around?

Just think of the proliferation of reality shows that serve no purpose other than to titillate the masses with displays of flashy consumerism.

Chrissley Knows Best. About what? What is the source of this deep wisdom?

Interestingly, when Sir John Glubb was describing the Age of decadence, he was talking about epochs such as the Roman empire. But he could easily have been talking about this present age of the American Empire.

We cannot serve this present age, if we cannot say what is real. We cannot say what is real if we are distracted by bread and circuses, alternative facts, and submission to our own frets and fears. If we dare to notice – to say what is real in this 21st century Empire, systemic forces operate to distract us, or to discredit us, and if that doesn't work, they may try to destroy us.

There is a story in the Gospel of Mark about a Syrophenician woman who dared to defy the politics of exclusion of her day. She dared to say what was real to Master teacher of the time. She was an outsider by ethnicity and by gender – and yet she dared to invade a privileged space. Of course, she met resistance. In one version of the story, Jesus first ignored her. Yet she persisted. He then responded by admonishing her – *insulting* her: “It was not right to take the food meant for the house of Israel and cast it to the dogs”. Yet she persisted.

This is not an unfamiliar story, because in our own time, people meet resistance when they dare to invade privileged spaces.

- Sometimes it's a young woman who dares to eat her yogurt while black in a dormitory common room.
- Sometimes it's a couple who dares to celebrate their love while gay; only to learn that a “gay cake” cannot be baked in a space reserved for straight Christians.
- One poor fellow dared to invade the White House and tried to practice governance while black. He met resistance too; yet he persisted.

The Syrophoenician woman had invaded a space reserved for men, and as Jesus defined it, a space for members of *his* tribe, not for outsiders or dogs. Yet she persisted. Because she persisted, the Master Teacher learned his life was larger – the power of his ministry more inclusive than he might have imagined.

We must persist in naming what is real if we choose to be of service in this present age. We must give up the privilege of not knowing what's real. A few months ago the Boston Globe columnist wrote about the family separations on the southern border, describing it as “the new trail of tears”. About two paragraphs in, I folded the paper and told myself it was too hard to read. I *hope* it didn't take more than a few seconds for me to re-open the paper. I was suddenly hit with my own arrogance – feeling entitled to *not know* the reality of the lives of these families. By folding a newspaper, I could escape being present to the pain of this world...their world...our shared world. They could not escape the heartbreak of separation and the humiliation of internment. A term that has become increasingly in vogue is compassion fatigue, but we need to be careful not to use that as a backdoor out of caring. I'm not always sure what it means. What do you do when your compassion gets tired? Sometimes, “compassion fatigue” is a fatalism dressed up in Sunday clothes. Sometimes we say “compassion fatigue” because we don't want to be called to sacrifice.

Being present to the pain of the world – knowing and naming what is real - may call us to sacrifice. Sometimes we might sacrifice a little bit of ego or a little bit

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of comfort or convenience, but sometimes much more. I am reminded of a conversation I had with a white South African expat about 30 years ago. He was explaining to me how he came to be in the United States. He had heard that his friend had a copy of an underground manuscript (written by Nelson Mandela) entitled “The Struggle is My Life”. He begged to read it; she begged him not to. She said, “If you read it, your life will be changed.” He read it, the authorities discovered that the manuscript had been in his possession, and he was forced to flee the country to avoid imprisonment. As he said to me: I had to decide whether to leave my country, my family, and friends before or after they tore off my toes nails.

To serve the present age – to know what’s real may mean we can no longer cling to the familiar comforts and conveniences – or the rights to which we feel entitled.

It also means that we collectively must give up the illusion of exceptionalism. On the bright September Tuesday morning of 9/11, I was with my clinical colleagues, faculty, and distraught students at Harvard Business School. At one point, a white, middle-aged, tenured professor apparently felt the obligation to say something wise. So he said: “I’m afraid our beautiful country has now lost its innocence.” And I thought “What is he talking about?” (Actually I thought something else, but not something I would actually say in a church.) By world standards, the United States is a young country, vigorous, and in some respects, idealistic. But innocence has never been in our cultural DNA. Theft, international human trafficking, and extermination by the names of discovering, pioneering, and settling are still theft, international human trafficking, and

extermination. It is the illusion of exceptionality that leaves standing dumbfounded in the face of horrors like Charlottesville and saying things like “how can that happen here”.

It is the illusion of exceptionality makes us oblivious to the racialized anxieties that exploit *every* justice issue - from hiring to housing to healthcare.

It is the illusion of exceptionality that left many people stunned and amazed on Wednesday morning November 9, 2016. Not all of the so-called deplorables were in one basket- some of them were sitting beside us in board rooms, class rooms and the dinner table. And not everyone in that so-called basket was deplorable. It is illusion of exceptionality blinds us to the real complexity of our times and renders us unable or unfit to serve our world – as it is – right now.

As author Clarissa Pinkola Estes says: “Ours is not the task of fixing the whole world at once, but of stretching to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. (The Syrophoenician woman didn’t ask Jesus to end Roman oppression; she simply asked him to use the power available to him in *that time and space* to heal her daughter. Now it’s our time to stretch and mend the part of the world that is within our reach.

To mend the part of the world that is within our reach, Daniel Berrigan has some wisdom to offer. **He says that first you must take a stand; then you have to stand there.** Of course, any time advice sounds so simple, you can be sure that it’s incredibly difficult to follow.

We have to take a stand *and stand there* because *people who do evil* – people who take pleasure in abuses of power – in diminishing the lives of others to enhance their own – these people just don't magically disappear. We can't sit around and wait for someone else to take care of it in the sweet by and by. When someone asked Rev. Fred Shuttleworth why he participated in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he said "Because rattlesnakes don't commit suicide". People who are filled with destructive intent – and who take pleasure in that destruction – don't just go away. We can ignore them; we can call them unstable and laugh at their tweets, but their drive toward dominion moves forward with remarkable and inexorable efficiency. We must take a stand.

Let me share an example that beautifully illustrates the power of this wisdom. Some few years ago, the guys in the Vatican decided to persecute the American nuns. The timing of this persecution was not at all accidental. It started when the long hidden scandal of pedophile priests was becoming publicly exposed. One of the most culpable enablers of this scandal was the archbishop of Boston. He not only failed to protect the children, he aided and abetted these crimes by moving the guilty priests around like chess pieces and silencing anyone who dared to speak out. For his sins of omission and commission, he was run out of Boston - which was not actually a punishment: he was assigned to Vatican where he could wield even more power. It was there that he began to blame and accuse the American nuns – a group of "nasty women" who were "not leading sacred religious lives". The Vatican, under the leadership of Joseph Ratzinger, then cited

“grave concerns about serious doctrinal issues” – for example, the nuns were “ministering to homosexuals”.

When the officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious made their annual pilgrimage to the Vatican, they were basically ambushed with spurious accusations, informed about the coming inquisition, and the likely punishment. When the women received this information, one the cardinals (perhaps one who also wore red Prada shoes) leered at the president of the leadership group and said: “You’re not afraid, are you”. She paused, then said: “We are faithful; therefore, we are not afraid”. Being faithful meant they would minister to people everywhere who were suffering, who were being discriminated against; they didn’t ask to see a baptismal certificate. Sister Simone Campbell explained:

“We serve everyone we find, in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus. That's what we're doing”. She went on to say: “It's a challenge. It makes us mad. It makes us upset; may make us wonder about where in God's green earth all this is going and why might this be necessary. But we're faithful”.

The nuns would have baked that cake!

They did not know where the inquisition would lead, but they stood faithful until 2015, when under the leadership of Pope Francis, they coauthored the report that ended that phase of persecution. They were faithful because they knew that the work they were doing was worth doing – no matter what. They had much to fear; but they chose not to

live in the house of fear. As the 14th century Sufi poet said: “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I would like to see you living in better conditions”.

We should be clear that their faith was not foolhardy optimism. The nuns did not depend on hope of results. Rather, they were grounded in a hope I think best expressed by Czech leader Vaclav Havel: Hope is not the *conviction* that something will turn out well, but the **certainty** that something is worth doing, no matter how it turns out. They were grounded in what the theologian Beatrice Bruteau calls creative-freedom: the freedom to be brave, yet non-combative; persistent, yet gentle; they were aware of the forces of evil pressed against them, yet they were free to be expansive and generous in their service to the world.

Finally, if we are to serve this present age, we must be willing to rejoice – greatly. There is a short little anecdote about a woman – a busy corporate executive who had had a terrible, horrible, no good day. As she was telling her six-year old niece about all of the things that had gone wrong, her niece said: “But did you try hard?” To which she responded: “Of course, I tried hard.” “But did you try *really, really* hard?” And she responded: “Yes, I tried really, really hard.” To which her niece responded: “So now it’s time to go out and play.”

I have been thinking recently about how often the word joy is proclaimed in songs that rise out of conditions of oppression. There was another song that was often sung in my mother’s church: “There is joy in my Father’s house”. I didn’t like the song very much –

probably because I heard it so often and because the tune wasn't very "appealing". It was boring – but I think back now over the words, they take on new meaning.

There will be no more dying – in my Father's house.

There will be no weeping – in my Father's house.

Every day will be Sunday – in my Father's house. (*I really didn't get that one because I thought one Sunday in a week was plenty.*) However, in the time of slavery, of Jim Crow oppression – if there was ever a day of respite, of gathering together, of real, uninhibited celebration, it was probably on Sunday.

We will sit at the Welcome Table – in my Father's house. Nobody there can put us out. Nobody there can tell us that we matter only to the extent that we make them comfortable. Nobody there can rip us from our children, our loved ones.

In my Father's house, we all belong; we all matter. And what a cause for celebration! Ossie Davis wrote a play, *Purlie Victorious*, about a community of Southern sharecroppers in Jim Crow Georgia. At one point, the character Lutiebelle exclaims: "Being colored is fun when white folks ain't watching."

There is joy when we claim the power of our love for each other.

There is joy when we refuse to be defined by the brutal degradations of the day;
there is joy when we choose to affirm the grace and dignity that arises through our connection;

There is joy when we are not afraid of fears.

The women in my mother's and grandmother's generation would sit in church and weep; and at those times, they would say that they were "feeling full". I came to understand that "feeling full" was experiencing the energies of joy, sadness, and gratitude for their communion with each other. It was through that communion that they the defied massive lies designed to strip them of their birthright to freedom, dignity, and grace. Joy arises through authentic connection – in that tangle of belongingness.

Perhaps it was joy that led the prophet Miriam to dance and sing by the sea. Let me share how our colleague, the author Marsha Mirkin, described that scene.

In a moment of greatest fear, in a moment of being confronted with a power not in her control, in a moment of seeing the concurrent realities of life and death, Miriam took her timbral in hand and sang and danced. And the women followed her, choosing to celebrate the blessing of the moment.

It was as if they were heeding the words of the Hopi elders: In the midst of mighty suffering, gather yourselves; see who is there to celebrate with you.

To serve this present age with kindness, decency, bravery, and joy is to do work that is apostolic, prophetic, and rebellious. And it work that is formed and reformed in the energy of communion.

I will close with some words from the poem *Passover Remembered* by *Alla Renee Bozarth*

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Pack Nothing.
 Bring only your determination to serve
 and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise.
 Take nourishment for the journey,
 but eat standing, be ready
 to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave
 your old ways behind—
 fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need
 of the time— to love
 justice and walk humbly
 with your God.

Set out in the dark.
 I will send fire to warm and encourage you.
 I will be with you in the fire
 and I will be with you in the cloud.

You will learn to eat new food
 and find refuge in new places.
 I will give you dreams in the desert
 to guide you safely home to that place
 you have not yet seen.

The stories you tell one another around your fires
 in the dark will make you strong and wise.

Outsiders will attack you,
 and some who follow you,
 and at times you will weary
 and turn on each other
 from fear and fatigue and
 blind forgetfulness.

Those who fight you will teach you.
 Those who fear you will strengthen you.
 Those who follow you may forget you.
 Only be faithful. This alone matters.

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Some of you will die in the desert,
for the way is longer than anyone imagined.
Some of you will give birth.

Some will join other tribes along the way,
and some will simply stop and create
new families in a welcoming oasis.

Some will be abandoned
by your dearest loves
and misunderstood by those
who have known you since birth
and feel abandoned by you.

Some will find new friendship
in unlikely faces, and old friends
as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame.

Sing songs as you go,
and hold close together.
You may at times grow
confused and lose your way.

Continue to call each other
by the names I've given you,
to help remember who you are.
You will get where you are going
by remembering who you are.

Touch each other
and keep telling the stories
of old bondage and of how
I delivered you.

Make maps as you go,
remembering the way back
from before you were born.

So long ago you fell
into slavery, slipped
into it unawares,
out of hunger and need.

You left your famished country
for freedom and food in a new land,
but you fell unconscious and passive,
and slavery overtook you as you fell
asleep in the ease of your life.

You no longer told stories of home
to remember who you were.

Do not let your children sleep
through the journey's hardship.
Keep them awake and walking
on their own feet so that you both
remain strong and on course.

Pass on the whole story.
I spared you all
by calling you forth
from your chains.

Do not go back.
I am with you now
and I am waiting for you.