

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
“Beloved: The Search for Compassion”
The Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
January 17, 2010

Reading:

Today's reading is from the book titled "Beloved" by Toni Morrison. In the book, the character Baby Suggs represents the many conductors of the Underground Railroad, but especially those individuals in the black community who welcomed people into their homes, provided food and shelter, and whatever else was needed. Toni Morrison writes....

When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of the path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, “Let the children come! And they ran from the trees toward her.

“Let your mothers hear you laugh,” she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling. . . .

Then “Let the grown men come,” she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

“Let your wives and your children see you dance,” she told them, and ground life shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “For the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart.

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure.

She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. (pp. 87- 88)

Introduction

When I was minister in Cincinnati, I took a sabbatical and worked with the Freedom Center, a museum telling the story of the Underground Railroad. During that sabbatical I researched the conductors who were part of the Underground Railroad in Cincinnati. It was one of the most fruitful sabbaticals I had experienced. After the sabbatical I was able to tell the stories of local people who made a difference—people like Eli Coffin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, both well known, but also some less well known, like John Van Zandt. I promised that I would do something to make John Van Zandt more well know.

My last official act as minister in Cincinnati was a Celebration of the life of John Van Zandt. The state of Ohio put up a historical marker, and the Freedom Center invited the Van Zandt family to take part in honoring their ancestor. Today, if you visit the Freedom Center, you should find a display about John Van Zandt.

The book “Beloved” is the story of that part of American history, the heroes, the villains, and the victims. I would like to tell you the story this morning. It is a novel but based on the life of Margaret Garner, a slave who when captured chose to take the life of her children, rather than send them back to live in slavery.

As I finished this sermon this week, I could not help but think of the people in Haiti, the horrible tragedy that has befallen them—a tragedy caused by nature, but made worse by greed, corruption, an inability to improve the lives of people in poverty. When the more recent San Francisco earthquake occurred, also a 7 on the Richter Scale, only 63 people died. In Haiti the number continues to grow, and is more 50,000 I do not choose, like some religious leaders, to blame this tragedy on the beliefs of the people of Haiti, but rather pray that this event will truly bring the world together to heal the lives of people there, and make their world better than it has been.

Someday, people will tell the story of this tragedy in great detail, and how it was made worse than it had to be. Today I tell the story of another tragedy, the tragedy of slavery in our own country, and the need to face our history, as it being done in Charlottesville this year.

Beloved

In “Beloved” we have the story of a slave who sought freedom. Most of the story takes place in house number 124, just outside of Cincinnati. The story begins in 1873, but the haunt comes from the 1850’s. At one time 124 had been a way station on the Underground Railroad. Morrison describes the memory of 124 with these words: All of the neighbors,

. . . remembered the days when 124 was a way station, the place assembled to catch news, taste oxtail soup, leave their children, cut out a skirt. One remembered the tonic mixed there that cured a relative. One showed her the border of a pillowslip, the stamens of its pale blue flowers French-knotted in Baby Suggs kitchen by the light of an oil lamp while arguing the Settlement Fee. They remembered the party with twelve turkeys and tubs of strawberry smash. (p 249)

There are many memorable characters in “Beloved.” My favorite is Grandma Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law. She is the heroine of the story. You can’t say Baby Suggs without including “holy woman.” In one passage we read these words about a dinner party:

Baby Suggs’ three (maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve)—(a reminder of how another holy person multiplied the loaves and the fishes). . . The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati—over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch—became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and good for ninety, make them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (p. 137)

Baby Suggs, holy woman, making people feel welcome, offering them a place to come and be who they are. This is what a holy woman does. This is what a church is supposed to be. We Unitarian Universalists can learn from Baby Suggs, holy woman.

The life of a holy woman isn’t perfect. It has its problems. “Beloved” is full of problems, caused by slavery, dehumanization and brutalization of black people. Here is a litany of Baby Suggs problems:

After sixty years of loving children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, exchanged it, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not—to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to), to belong to a community of free Negroes-to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy one.

Margaret Garner

“Beloved” we all know is the story of Margaret Garner, known as Sethe in the novel, who was brutalized by her master and his nephews. The tree on her back was the eternal reminder of that history. Her husband, Halle, is not part of the novel, as Robert was forgotten in real life. This is an important part of the story—the story of the black man who loved his wife, regretted her treatment by the white men, but couldn’t do much about it.

The Garners sought freedom in Cincinnati by crossing the frozen Ohio River. After 28 days of freedom, Margaret was captured, and made that fateful decision to take her children’s lives rather than let them go back into slavery. She succeeded in taking the life of one of her children, and the other’s are rescued before she can end their lives. Rather than try her for murder, Margaret and her husband was released back into slavery, and, according to her husband, she died of typhoid fever, after surviving a boat accident.

Morrison changes the story. In the novel, Sethe spends some time in prison, is saved from hanging, and is then released. She returns to 124 and lives with Baby Suggs, and her daughter Denver and two sons. The sons leave as soon as they can, because the house is haunted by the visits of the dead sister.

Sethe is joined by a former slave friend, Paul D, who stays with her until he learns what she did to her child. During this stay we have another visitor. This is Beloved.

Beloved is a story that needs to be remembered. The Underground Railroad is an important part of America’s past that needs to be remembered. Morrison refers to this as “rememory.” Rememory is explained by Sethe talking to her daughter, Denver, about the past, and about the ghost they both experienced. Denver says the ghost looked just like her mother, holding on to her, “Kneeling next to you while your were praying. Had its arm around your waist.

“Well, I’ll be.”

“What were you praying for, Ma’am?”

Not for anything. I don’t pray anymore. I just talk.”

“What were you talking about?”

“You won’t understand, baby.”

“Yes, I will.”

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things jut stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still there. Right in the place where it happened.” (pp. 36-7)

Rememory

There is good rememory and there is haunting rememory. Most of the book is about haunting rememory—those aspects of the past that we would like to forget. As it says in the last chapter, “This is a story not to pass on.” The haunting rememory is too difficult to take.

The most important message of “Beloved” is the fact that a haunting past keeps us from living in the present. The past has to be exorcised, removed, purified, and made right. Morrison says “the past needs to be beat back.” The home where Sethe was a slave, and was brutalized was called “Sweet Home.” It wasn’t. Part of exorcising the past is getting the stories right. This is why the “Dialogue on Race” is important in Charlottesville.

My conclusion is that much of America continues to be haunted by our past. This is why places like the Freedom Center, the museums in Selma, and Memphis, and Atlanta are so important. We need to exorcise our past. Race relations in America has been haunted by the dehumanization and brutalization of slaves by white owners. As Baby Suggs says, “There is no bad luck but whitefolks.” (p. 89)

Paul D describes the treatment of Blacks by whites during slavery, and after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, what Morrison calls the Misery. Here is a part of Paul D’s rememory:

During, before and after the War he had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; who, like him, stole from pigs, who like him, slept in trees in the day and

walked by night; who, like him, had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, patrollers, veteran hill men, posses and merry-makers. Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies.

Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move. Only once had it been possible for him to stay in one spot—with a woman, or a family—for longer than a few months. (p. 66)

So not only did we brutalize the black man before, during and after the war, but then we held on to a stereotype. As Morrison writes,

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons. . . The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. (p. 198)

This is the haunting rememory that many of us refuse to see. It is this jungle view that many of our parents taught us in the 21st century and many continue to hold to, that needs to be beaten down as it says in "Beloved."

When we make such false judgments about a race, we overlook the good that is the many, the Baby Suggs of the world who provided and continue to provide a welcoming place for people, people who have a reckless generosity, who do all they can to hold the community together.

The brutalization, the dehumanization, is a rememory that will not go away. The picture of it is there. For the black man it has to be a painful past that will be difficult to revisit. For the white man, it will be the reminder that our relatives were the criminals, the ones who perpetrated the crime on the innocent black man. We need to face that past as well.

I did a few years ago, when I witnessed the will of one of my 18th century relatives, a Hudgins who could not write his name, a former indentured servant, who owned slaves and passed them on to his children. It was a painful rememory for me. It was an important part of my past that needed to be revisited.

Conclusions

There are haunting questions in "Beloved." What is the ultimate meaning of Beloved, the haunted house, the confrontation with ghosts? What was the rationale for Sethe's taking the life of her child, and the desire to end the life of all of her children. How could a woman do the unthinkable?

The simple answer is the fact that she was being captured, and wanted to free her children from the life of slavery. Sethe could not stand to have her children live the captured life. She was on her way to freedom and nothing less would suffice. Margaret Garner and Sethe represent so many who did not make it to paradise.

The more complicated answer of Sethe's action is found in her religious belief and in her rememory of her past. Morrison doesn't judge Sethe; just tells us her story and lets us make our own judgments. Sethe explains her actions by telling us what happened to her, having her torturers measure her so they could brutalize her, take her milk away, and beat her.

"Beloved" is a story about black people trying to beat back their past.

The symbol for "Beloved" is the tree. Trees appear everywhere. Blacks hide in the trees. Trees are seen on the backs of blacks to remind them always who was in control, who was the owner, and who had to follow their rules, or be beaten and brutalized. As we all know many were hanged on the limb of a tree. Another symbol in the book is the heart. Baby Suggs had the big heart that she could only hear after she crossed the river to freedom. For the escaping slave the heart beat was a symbol of freedom. Life without freedom means death. This is the ultimate meaning of "Beloved."

Who is "Beloved?" On the most simple level she is the ghost of Sethe's dead child. The punishment of prison life and almost being hanged is not enough to punish her. The ghost of her child comes to punish her forever, and drives her insane. Insanity, scientists have told us, is the price many pay for being in slavery.

For black people Beloved is the power of the past to intrude into the present. Yes, Beloved is the ghost of the dead child. We never learn where she came from, but in the end we know who she is. As Morrison writes:

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

It was not a story to pass on.

They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget, until they realized they couldn't remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking she hadn't said anything at all. So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise. . . .

It was not a story to pass on.

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. . . .(pp. 274-5)

Yes, slavery, is an unpleasant part of our past, for some a troubling dream, we would like to forget. But we must not. May the rememory help us break down this past, and welcome people into our lives that have sought for much too long for love, and affirmation, the right to vote, equal education and opportunity, the end of slavery in our time. This is the hope of the future. May we help make it so.

This is my prayer today, in the name of all those who were part of the tragedy, those who tried to change the world, who stood up for freedom for all, some who lost their lives, and others who helped them on the Freedom Trail, who wanted them to find paradise. It says in the book of Romans (9:25):

I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
And her beloved,
Which was not beloved.

May it be so, Blessed Be, and Amen.