

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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## *At Home in Pharaoh's Household*

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### READINGS

*from the gospel of Mark*

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother." And he said to him,

“Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.” And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” At that saying the man’s countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

*from the Prophet Mohammed*

What actions are most excellent?  
 To gladden the heart of a human being.  
 To feed the hungry.  
 To help the afflicted.  
 To lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful.  
 To remove the wrongs of the injured.  
 That person is the most beloved of God

*from William Henry Channing (Unitarian)*

To live content with small means,  
 to seek elegance rather than luxury,  
 and refinement rather than fashion,  
 to be worthy, not respectable,  
 and wealthy, not rich,  
 to study hard, think quietly, talk gently, act frankly,  
 to listen to stars and birds, to babes and sages, with open heart,  
 to bear all cheerfully,  
 do all bravely,  
 await occasions,  
 hurry never,  
 in a word, to let the spiritual, unbidden and unconscious,  
 grow up through the common,  
 this is to be my symphony.

### **At Home in Pharaoh’s Household**

In one of her best known stories, the writer Ursula Le Guin tells a parable. She describes a marvelous city, “Omelas,” where the people are peaceful, healthy, compassionate and deeply joyful. Wise and kind, they have no need of laws because their needs are all met by a prosperous and just economy, and they are easily and gladly good. Their architecture and their music are exquisite; their science and their

art both brilliantly creative; their food is plentiful and wholesome. It is a perfect world except for one detail: in a dark basement on the outskirts of the city, in a tiny and disgusting cell, a single child is kept imprisoned. It lives in abject misery, its body and mind withered by neglect, kept alive on water and gruel that someone may remember to shove through a crack in the wall.

Everyone in the city knows about it. Every citizen, on reaching adolescence, must go and see the child, and understand that whatever health and happiness they know, whatever beauty and security, is dependent on the child's despair. Each person spends hours afterwards, or days, or months, or sometimes years, coming to terms with what they've seen, this truth, and ultimately each one resolves it in his mind, justifies it in her heart, and knows that somehow it's okay, it's even right and fitting, that the price of happiness for thousands be the suffering of just one child. No one may speak to the child, or speak of it, and no one does.

But, says Le Guin, "There is one more thing, and this is quite incredible."

*Sometimes ... a man or woman, [a youth or a girl] ... falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city... through the beautiful gates. ... Each one goes alone... Night falls; the traveler must pass down village streets ... and on out into the darkness of the fields. ... They leave Omelas, they walk ahead into the darkness and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know here they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.*

That's how the story ends, with no clue as to what happens when a person leaves, whether the city is changed or not, whether the person is transformed or not, nor what happens to the child. Her story is a haunting fantasy of classic utilitarianism – the greatest good for the greatest number – but it echoes in our own world, where we do know that the relative wealth and stability of some hinges on the permanent oppression of others. A difference, of course, is that in our world, only the minority will prosper, more than one child lives in squalor, and it's hard to imagine how, in a global economy, you could even start to walk away.

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*A man ran up to Jesus and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ... And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him and said to him, "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow me..." At this the man's countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

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When I was a child, there was a period of time, which I think went on for a couple of years, during which whenever an occasion for wishing arose – the blowing out of birthday candles, or seeing a falling star, finding a four-leaf clover, any authorized, official wishing event – I made the same wish every time. I never spoke the words out loud and it was always the same: I wished that all the things in the world, food, houses, clothes, toys, bikes, books, pencils, cars, everything, including and especially money, could be thrown up to the sky as if in a giant tablecloth, and that they would all come down exactly evenly, so that I would have exactly the same portion as the girl in the big house down the street, and each of us would have the same things as every girl our age in Bangladesh or Biafra or Paris. I was old enough to know that this would entail some personal losses, but not old enough to have any idea how much.

I can't remember now how this utopian dream of distributive justice, this communism, came into my head. How do dreams and disturbances come into the consciousness and conscience of children? There were my parents, not radical people, but ethical; there was the evening news, which through TVs in almost every room brought me face to face with Selma and Saigon, and the War on Poverty; there was my public school, integrated, by race and class, by mandatory bussing the year I entered kindergarten. And there was also Sunday School, where I heard for the first time a number of simple, complicated stories, many of which made no mark on me at all - and others haunt me still, as disturbing now, or strange or provocative, as when I was 9 or 10 years old. Some of those old stories still provoke me to wonder why and how our world is as it is, and how it might be different –but I left off wishing once I realized I would have to have a hand in any change. No god exists who could or would – or should - answer easy prayers. How does it happen that concepts like *complicity* and *agency* are planted in a person, in a child, or the phenomenon of conscience?

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*A man ran up to Jesus and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus looked at him and loved him [he didn't mean to be judgmental]. He said to him, "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and follow me." At this the man went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.*

In other gospels he's a "rich young man," or "a rich young ruler," but in Mark he's just "a man," just a person, just like us, and we never do find out what happens to him. I think most of us knew even in Sunday School that we're here to write the subsequent chapters with our lives, with our living, with our choices, and all my

childhood wishing, and maybe yours as well, was a kind of childish start. But now that we've outgrown wishing, what are we supposed to do?

*What must I do to inherit eternal life?* Or, if that does not interest us particularly, we might ask instead *What must I do to be at peace with myself in this life? What is right, and required, of good people? How much is enough (enough to live on, and enough to give away)? What does it mean that as Unitarian Universalists "we covenant to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person?"* How can we sit here singing, knowing what we know, of Darfur, Palestine, New Orleans, the lives of immigrants in Arizona, or in St. Paul, or that neighbor down the street who never raises his window shades, hardly ever comes out, seems pretty old, may be lonely, but we're all so busy, and we're lonely too, ...? How do you decide to stay in Omelas, knowing what you know? When do you decide to walk? Are we to sell *everything* and give *everything* away? The story doesn't say. Does "the poor" mean really poor, even people who don't really try very hard to find a job, or only those who fall within Federal guidelines for poverty, or is it *everyone* with less than we ourselves have? Is charity enough? What did Jesus mean he said "follow me"? The story doesn't say and so it haunts us, the questions haunt us, as they should.

Someone here said recently that this is the theme - this story - that she would have chosen for the sermon topic offered for sale in our Auction, if she hadn't been out-bid. This story has troubled her, provoked her, kept her wondering and wide awake all her life. Someone else said recently that the topic *she* would have purchased, had she not also been out-bid, came from a phrase she found in a liberal commentary on the Bible, the idea of "Pharaoh's household." Pharaoh, of course, was the great oppressive power against whom the Hebrew prophets raged. Theologian Marcus Borg says "Pharaoh's household" is a modern metaphor for all "those who derive benefits from the domination system without being primarily responsible for it or even in favor of it." Pharaoh's household is the house of privilege – and those who live there may have gained entry due to any number of unearned benefits: race, class, money in the bank (which is a little different from class, but related), gender, sexual orientation, education, age, nationality, religion, physical ability, the status of their health or mental health, and so on. Borg points out, as gently as he can, that it can be very hard to hear and heed a call for social change, or see a need, or speak the truth or take a risk, or take a stand or understand, let alone change your life, even if you think you want to, if you yourself are part of Pharaoh's household. Many of the people at home in Pharaoh's household, many of us, may wish we didn't live there, but wishing rarely leads to social justice. For some of us, even to admit this, even to begin to name the unearned benefits and privileges that sustain our way of life, and thus sustain the systems of injustice, is a terrible and insurmountable first step. We resolve in our minds, and justify in our hearts, the way the order of things is

established. Pharaoh's household is like Omelas, except we can never walk away from it. It's a permanent residence. We can only acknowledge the truth of our circumstance, and name it as precisely as we can, relentlessly, and then with others both within and outside its walls, set about methodically breaking down those walls, essentially dismantling the only house we know as home. This is no easy work. It can't be done except in community, although the decision to begin is one each one of us must make alone, in that lonesome valley where we walk and wonder by ourselves.

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Jane Kenyon, a poet, wrote about what happened to her when she came back to the U.S. after a first visit to India:

*Returned from long travel, I sit  
in the familiar sun-streaked pew, waiting  
for the bread and wine of Holy Communion.  
The old comfort does not rise up in me, only  
apathy and bafflement.*

*... The absurdity of all religious forms  
breaks over me ...*

*The thing is done, as surely  
as if my baggage had been stolen from the train.  
Men and women with faces as calm as lakes at dusk  
have taken away my Lord, and I don't know  
where to find him.*

*I've brought home the smell of the streets  
in the folds of soft, bright cotton garments.  
When I iron them the steam brings back  
the complex odors that rise from the gutters,  
of tuberroses, urine, dust, joss and death.*

*... A man sleeps on the pavement, on a raffia mat-  
the only thing that has not been stolen from him.*

*[Our guide] does not weep. He did not cover  
his face with his hands when we rowed past  
the dead body of a newborn nudging the grassy  
banks at Benares...*

*He explained. When a family are too poor to cremate their dead, they bring the body here, and slip it into the waters of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers...*

*“What shall we do about this,” I asked my God, who even then was leaving me. The reply was scorching wind, lapping of water...*

And so she moves from a faith that once was comforting and comfortable (faith in a loving savior God and all things good, all things bright and beautiful) into a mightily disquieting spiritual maturity. It’s not an easy turn to take, to leave the God of mysterious but trustworthy, over-arching, invisible plans, and decide instead to settle for the kind of god, if you settle for any at all, of whom you have to keep asking, “What are we going to do about this?” Sometimes I wonder about Unitarian Universalists who have left some other faith for this religious way and who like to declare, with a mixture of relief and cocky pride, “We don’t believe in guilt here.” I guess they’re right, if by guilt they mean the shame-soaked, spirit-silencing legalistic judgments on which some traditions and some clergy continue to insist. Lots of you have said you came here to escape that, and barely made it out alive. (I know people who mean that literally, so great was their confusion, their shame and their despair.) And yet, there’s a difference between the whining of guilt (which leads nowhere) and the calling of conscience. I think most of us who came to Unitarian Universalism out of Christianity or Judaism did not mean to leave behind the radical ethics of Jesus or the prophetic imperative of the prophets Amos, Isaiah and Micah. We know that we still need those songs of freedom, and other songs as well; we just need to hear them in a slightly different key. We come here to listen for the calling of conscience, together; to discern together its uneasy implications for our lives, for our households; to encourage each other and inspire each other when that calling sounds too shrill, too loud, too hard, too harsh, too demanding or too difficult; to press each other further and push each other farther when it sounds too easy or convenient or simplistic. At our best we want to be haunted by old stories, if they’re true, and troubled by hard questions; we want our complacency challenged, disrupted, ruptured. We don’t want to live in the happy city of denial.

In his commentary on the Hebrew prophets, Marcus Borg recalls that their judgments were terrible – they forecast ruin for the oppressors and the wicked, the Pharaohs, and destruction of entire civilizations, even Israel, if Israel strayed from righteousness. But they also broadcast hope. Part of their job, as prophets, was to describe a world that we can’t always believe in, can’t quite always bring into clear focus, can’t quite

rightly remember when we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of things. Their job was to help imagine it into being, that time and place in which justice would roll down like waters and peace like an ever-flowing stream; to help imagine into becoming those people who would do justice, love kindness and walk humbly – not a fantasy city, but real one. Prophetic speaking, then as now, could bring to the poor a whisper of real hope, that finally the truth would be spoken, and change might be on the way. That same speaking, then as now, could bring to the privileged a real warning, that finally truth would be spoken, and change might be on the way. Thus everyone within earshot, whatever their condition, whatever their circumstance, was invited to walk together out of one way of being toward another, to follow in the paths of other walkers, like Jesus, who came later, like the Buddha, like people you've all known who in small local ways or large, impressive ways, have decided to live in the tension of truth-telling. It's not always an easy way, but there's freedom in it, and it can be joyful.

Emilie Townes is a professor of African American studies and theology at Yale Divinity School. She writes,

*We human folk are challenge and hope.*

*living with ourselves is often a demanding or difficult task...*

*but... we have dreams that can be more powerful than the nightmares*

*possibilities more radical than the realities*

*and a hope that does more than cling to a wish*

*or wish on a star*

*or sit by the side of the road, picking and sucking its teeth*

*after dining on a meal of disaster and violence*

*for a challenge such as we face today, is also a call to respond...*

*this hope is unequivocal and unambiguous*

*it does not detach the human spirit from the present through mad delusions and*

*flights of fancy*

*no this hope is one that pulls the promise of the future into the present...*

*To combine challenge with hope is powerful. For together they enable us to press onward when we feel like giving up; to draw strength from the future to live in a discouraging present. Challenge and hope make it possible for us to see the world, not only as it is, but also as it can be; to move us to new places and turn us into a new people.*

*There is something about challenge yoked with hope... that is solid enough to sustain our lives and overcome skepticism and doubt. But it is frightening because we know*

*that loving and caring for others and ourselves interrupts the mundane and comfortable in us, and calls us to move beyond ourselves and accept a new agenda for living...*

*...When we truly live in this deep-walking hope, then we must order and shape our lives in ways that are not always predictable, not always safe, rarely conventional... and protest[] with prophetic fury ...theological worldviews that encourage us to separate our bodies from our spirits, our minds from our hearts, our beliefs from our actions...*

*... i am not talking about perfection...  
i'm talking about what we call in Christian ethics, the everydayness of moral acts.*

It is the “everydayness” of love. And so, too, for Unitarian Universalist ethics. We’re not talking about perfection. We’re not talking about changing the world. We’re talking (all the time we’re talking, in this sanctuary, in the classrooms, in the Social Hall, the parking lot) about changing *ourselves*: changing, and challenging, and pushing, and forgiving, and healing, and trusting, emboldening - AND AWAKENING - ourselves.

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Ursula LeGuin’s story is called “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.”

Marcus Borg’s observations can be found in *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*.

Jane Kenyon’s poem, “Woman, Why Are You Weeping?” is from *A Hundred White Daffodils*.

“Everydayness,” a sermon by Emilie Townes, is in the winter, 2006 edition of *Reflections*, published twice yearly by Yale Divinity School.