

“Weathering the Storm”

Rev. Laurel Gray

February 7th, 2021

It takes a storm to make a rainbow.

Last Sunday I remember David Lambert saying that paradoxically, church has been even more important in quarantine, despite our having to be virtual. And I think it is a fairly universal truth that, in times of struggle, feeling connected and cared for becomes even more critical. Loss asks us to reconsider what is actually important to us, and the last year has included immense loss. The storm has been raging, that’s for sure.

I was struck, yesterday, by how important celebrating felt, not in spite of how difficult the last year has been, but because of it. And I could see, scrolling through zoom screen upon zoom screen, that it was not just meaningful for me alone. From all of you to professors and colleagues and family and friends, gathering to celebrate is a transformative and life-giving act. And we do it together - the weathering as well as the celebrating.

Being congregational means that this collective body is governed by those who are gathered. That means funding this great vessel of community is a collective task. It means that only you get to choose who will be given the mantle of ministerial authority. It means that this place is yours and you give to it freely however you are able. As we reflected last year on Celebration Sunday, giving of our gifts and our resources makes us happier and healthier and creates a feeling of abundance.

And last year you gave abundantly, even as we entered what has become nearly a year of quarantine. It’s good to have an anchor when the storm rages. I hope this community, this most beloved congregation has helped to anchor you amidst the extraordinary winds, helped to keep your hope and your joy afloat when the waves of despair threatened to sink your ship.

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In the story that David read, God makes a new covenant with Noah at the end of the storm. Biblically, this is known as the covenant of grant, because it is simply granted. God makes this promise to Noah and his children and all the creatures of the earth without any stipulations. Nothing is expected in return. Noah has weathered the storm and God repents, calling off the flood and promising a new future.

And then God draws a rainbow through the clouds and says “this is the sign of my covenant. Whenever it appears in the clouds I will remember my promise.” I always thought the rainbow was for Noah, so Noah remembered the promise, but really it’s for God just as much as it’s for Noah. Like a wedding ring, the rainbow holds the memory of the promise. The promise that is given freely, that commits to flourishing, that remembers that we belong to each other. This is a covenant that asks for nothing in return. There are no special stipulations or requirements. See, a covenant of grant is a very unusual thing.

And today, on this final Sunday of Celebration Week, we begin our pledge campaign. Our annual effort to keep this ship afloat, to pool our resources, to make our own sign of our covenant with this congregation.

I appreciate the Biblical illustration because it underscores how unusual one-way giving really is. We go through our days making transactions, working so that we can afford our bills, paying money in exchange for goods or services - this is how so much of society works. But this pledging thing is different. It’s not an exchange where you pay a fee and get something in return.

Pledging is a sign of the covenant that you make with this congregation. It is a commitment to collective flourishing, to making sure there is a place for anyone who needs safe harbor. It is a commitment to weathering the storm together, a commitment to making space for celebrating and feeling loved deep in our bones.

My hope is that pledging is something that keeps reminding us how much this community means to us and how much we have to offer. I remember last year in our February podcast Amanda said that supporting her favorite podcasts and artists makes her feel like she’s part of something. So I hope that your giving - monetary

or otherwise and there is a whole lot of giving of so many kinds in this place - I hope that your giving reminds you of your relationship with this community, just as the rainbow serves as a reminder to God.

Your gifts are given freely. This is your covenant of grant. And this collective community making extends far beyond the people you see. God's gift of flourishing isn't just given to Noah, it's given to the wholeness of life. And I can tell you that I was amazed yesterday at how far and wide our connections stretched. And those were just the people I called in. Can you imagine how expansive the gathering would be if each one of us gathered up all the people who have mattered in our lives, then add all the people who have passed through these doors or received some kindness, some warm coat, that you remembered you had to offer because of the welcome you received here. Can you imagine? When we build a congregation, when we commit to its flourishing, it's not a transaction. How could it even be measured?

In the course of planning my ordination I asked my mom if she had any photos of me from my dedications as a child. She reminded me that, the first time I was dedicated, when I was a toddler at first Universalist in Brooklyn, one of her friends had come along expecting a somber and serious occasion, only to find that the whole service was about rainbows. So it seems appropriate in this first service since you all officially ordained me, to talk about them. And to have the honor of wearing this stole that Lisa Shumway made, inspired by rainbow the beauty of our sanctuary windows.

We have been through rough waters and the storm isn't over yet. But I hope this place, this congregation has offered you safe harbor. I hope that this hull of belonging has kept you steady. And I hope most of all that you have known you are not alone. Come hell or high water, you are not alone. We do this together.

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Amen.