

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
25 January, 2009

## Hope and Virtue

I spent four years – eight years, really – looking forward to January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009. I want to begin this morning, “the Sunday after,” by giving thanks. And in celebration of living to see this day, I invite each of us to recommit ourselves to the work of the founding vision of the United States: freedom, and justice. In his inaugural address, President Obama recalled the words of patriot Thomas Paine, spoken just before Christmas in 1776, at a moment, our president said, “when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt.”<sup>1</sup> “Let it be told to the future world,” said Thomas Paine, “that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth ... to meet it.”<sup>2</sup>

My hope, and my prayer, is that, in our spiritual lives – in our personal lives and in our public lives – in every endeavor, we will come forth with hope and virtue, and do our part to realize the vision expressed in the United States Constitution, to make our union “more perfect.”<sup>3</sup>

The four freedoms were first articulated by President Roosevelt in 1941. Can you name them? A group of friends and I easily came up with the first two, well known to all United States citizens, and protected by the First Amendment: freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. The second two, which FDR proposed as “fundamental freedoms humans 'everywhere in the world' ought to enjoy,” are harder to recall, although, I invite you to join me in memorizing them. They are freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from want and fear. I find these last two freedoms implicit in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence – the “inalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” – but President Roosevelt made them explicit, and public policy, albeit with stunning exceptions, has been guided by them ever since. Today, I encourage us to consider deeply our faithful

---

1 President Barack Obama, inaugural address, 1/20/09

2 Thomas Paine (1737-1809), 12/23/1776; please see [nationalserviceact.org/14.html](http://nationalserviceact.org/14.html)

3 from the *Preamble*

commitment to these freedoms.

This past Monday morning, in celebration of Dr. King's birthday, at the invitation of our new president, many of us participated in what I hope will be the first annual National Day of Service. Here at Arlington Street, Susie Nacco had the idea that we might team up with Volunteers of America, and make lunches for our hungry and homeless neighbors. All it took was Rob Cuddi saying *yes* to joining Susie in organizing the event; Arlington Street Church, in your good name, opening to serve as a distribution site, and making a donation to purchase food; and a critical mass of volunteers. I had imagined that a relatively small, dedicated group could make a dent.

Driving into town, my truck loaded with hundreds of dollars of groceries purchased at a food warehouse – which is a lot of food – I reflected that, more often than not, when I find myself at the church on a day off, it's to join in some kind of protest. What a relief, for once, not to be protesting! What a relief to be saying *yes*. But when I got to the church, the parking lot was empty, and the building appeared deserted. Rationally, I knew I was early. But irrationally, the thought came, unbidden: *What if it's too late?* What if we have given in to the bondage of want and fear, and can't find our way back to virtue and hope? What if the damage is irreparable?

Just as I began to unload the groceries, and before my mind went to what it might be like to make and distribute lunches for 500 people all by myself, once again, I was lifted up by one of the most extraordinary energy sources on earth: the resiliency of the human spirit. No less than a small parade rounded the corner from Boylston Street onto Arlington, and marched right into the alley. With one simple suggestion – I said, *Let's make a conveyer belt into the church* – the parade became an army of helping hands, with vats of peanut butter and boxes of chips, loaves of bread and crates of apples passed down into the kitchen.

I wish I could describe what happened next; there were a few hours of a spectacular blur of activity. Laura Yvonne Steinman's classroom had contributed another carload of groceries, even marshmallow Fluff – fluff! – and I don't know how much bread we'd already gone through when Mickey Randazza made two runs for twenty more loaves. And then cartons upon cartons of bagged lunches went out the door, carried by teams of people dispatched to corners of the city where folks might be hungry.

And so it was that dozens of volunteers on a day off from our jobs gathered downstairs in the parish hall, gathered in hope and virtue, and gave ourselves to the call

of freedom from want. If you missed it, my prayer for you is that you don't miss it again. When we give ourselves to something greater than ourselves, so much is possible, starting with sheer joy. Let's not miss it!

My friend Jessica McWade writes a blog dedicated to the blessings and curses of leadership.<sup>4</sup> Recently, she wrote a piece about the infamous Milgram experiments. Stanley Milgram was a Yale psychologist determined to understand why seemingly decent German citizens supported Hitler. In 1963, he found that otherwise ordinary New Haven residents followed the instructions of a man in a lab coat, wearing a badge, who told them to administer increasingly violent electric shocks to people in another room who failed to answer quiz questions correctly. The shocks were not real, but the participants didn't know that; eighty percent of them gave one hundred and fifty volt shocks, and sixty-five percent pushed the punishment right up to four hundred and fifty volts.

Jessica McWade goes on to say that, at the time – now more than forty-five years ago – these experiments left people wondering, again, “how it was possible for good people to lose sight of right and wrong in the presence of authority, however twisted.” I'm sorry to say that, most unfortunately, this experiment was just replicated by Jeffrey Burger of Santa Clara University; this time, seventy percent delivered a hundred and fifty volt shock on command.

The good news is that seventy percent isn't eighty percent. The bad news – the very bad news – is that seventy percent is seventy percent. Jessica McWade writes that whatever it is in human beings that finds us ready and willing to follow terrible orders has been “recklessly exploited by the likes of Mussolini, Mao, and Mugabe,” and prescribes the foil of strengthening our laws, our educational approaches, our social systems, and media coverage.

I would suggest that we also focus on cultivating better leaders. After all, people also followed Moses and Mahatma Gandhi. We need to grow better leaders, and while we're at it, we need better religions! I'm serious. We need better religions, religions that teach the inherent worth and dignity of every being. We need religions that teach that each of us is an inextricable part of a profoundly interconnected web. And we need to practice those religions, dedicate ourselves to lives of faithfulness to love, service, justice, and peace – not love only for those who look like us, but for all; not service

---

4 See [jessicamcwade.blogspot.com](http://jessicamcwade.blogspot.com). What follows is a paraphrase of Jessica McWade's summary.

only for those who think as we think, but for all; not justice only for some, but for all; and peace ... peace for all.

I'm hoping that this is ringing a bell ... that you are the bell, we are the bell, ringing and resonating with our very lives.

\*

There have been countless, wonderful references to President Lincoln in these part months, but, looking ahead to life with this new administration, long before President Obama invoked Concord on inauguration day, my thoughts have turned further back by almost one hundred years, to the opening of the Revolutionary War. You'll remember that King George was crippling the colonies – which were unrepresented in the British government – crippling them with taxation. There ensued a series of small rebellions, including what may well have been the first guerilla street theatre in the New World, the Boston Tea Party. Samuel Adams and company boarded British ships and dumped ten thousand English pounds' worth of tea into the harbor. Today, that would be about nine hundred twenty-three thousand dollars' worth of tea!<sup>5</sup>

These rebellions led up to “the outbreak of open armed conflict”<sup>6</sup> on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1775. The British marched on the colonies, proceeded by an elaborate warning system of “alarm and muster,” including Samuel Prescott ... the only rider to make it to Concord, the mythology of Longfellow's Paul Revere's midnight ride notwithstanding!<sup>7</sup> Farmers from the west, as far away as Lowell, abandoned their plows, took up muskets, and marched to the banks of the river at the North Bridge. The ragtag minutemen drove the British regiment back to Boston and, eventually, back to England in defeat.

We've known for many years that we need a new American Revolution. How extraordinary to have elected a leader who agrees; to have the opportunity, as I said, not to protest, but to work with our elected leadership to give ourselves with “hope and virtue” to the work of building a new heaven and a new earth.<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Alexander's inaugural poem, *Praise Song for the Day*, calls us to that possibility, and to our potential. It concludes,

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,  
others by first do no harm or take no more  
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

---

5 About £636,000 in 2008. Today, one British pound is worth approximately 1.4518 U.S. dollars.

6 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battles\\_of\\_Lexington\\_and\\_Concord](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battles_of_Lexington_and_Concord)

7 see David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride*, Oxford University Press, 1994

8 Revelation 21:1 (“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” ... not to put too fine a point on it!)

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

My spiritual companions, a praise song for this day, for this new time, so long awaited, which we begin together, today. May we do our best to embody hope and virtue. Mindful of the blessings of freedom of speech and freedom of religion, may we give ourselves to the work of freedom from want and freedom from fear. In this extraordinary time – the brink, the brim, the cusp – may we answer the call to our possibility, and to our potential. May ours be a new religion for the new American Revolution, a religion, a revolution, of love, service, justice, and peace.

