

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
13 November, 2016

## **Love the Hell Out of the World**

“This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive, and will prosper.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke these words on March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1933, in his first inaugural address. America was reeling from the Great Depression. President Roosevelt continued, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself – nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

*What do we do now? Love the hell out of the world.*

In 1992, the former Yugoslavia erupted in ethnic strife and Sarajevo was transformed into Europe's “capital of hell.” At 10:00 on the morning of May 27<sup>th</sup>, a long queue waited patiently in front of one of the last open bakeries in the city when a mortar shell exploded, instantly killing twenty-two people. Thirty-seven year old Vedran Smailovic, principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera, looked out on the carnage and knew he had had enough. He felt powerless and outraged and afraid ... and unwilling to stand idly by. The next day, cello in hand, he walked into the middle of the street where the massacre had occurred. Dressed formally, as for a performance, he took a seat on a battered campstool set in the crater made by the shell, and began to play. All around him, bullets flew and more mortar shells exploded. He was undeterred.

For twenty-two days, one for each of the people killed, Vedran Smailovic played in the same spot. He played to ruined homes and businesses, smoldering fires, terrified people hiding in basements. “He played for human dignity ... the first casualty of war.” He played “for life, for peace, and for the possibility of hope.” Through December of 1993, in bombsites and graveyards, he continued to offer his daily “musical prayer for peace.”

In response to a journalist's incredulous questions, Vedran Smailovic responded, "You ask me am I crazy for playing the cello. Why do you not ask if they are not crazy for shelling Sarajevo?"

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Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Rilke wrote *Let This Darkness Be A Bell Tower*. The poem begins,

Quiet friend who has come so far,  
 feel how your breathing makes more space around you.  
 Let this darkness be a bell tower  
 and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.  
 Move back and forth into the change....<sup>1</sup>

Ambassador Swanee Hunt tells this story that bears retelling today.

In the late 1990s, Swanee was visiting war-ravaged villages in the Balkans. In one village, there lived a very old woman. For as long as anyone could remember, she had heralded the beginning of each day by ringing the church bell, and so the day began in beauty. Many people spoke of this woman's devotion and fortitude. But the church had been bombed: its tower lay on the ground, its bell silenced.

Swanee Hunt spent the night in that village. Imagine her surprise to awaken the next morning to the somewhat muffled but nonetheless distinctive sound of a church bell. Stepping into the doorway, Swanee saw an amazing site. The old woman was bent over the fallen church tower. Reaching down into the bell, she lifted the clapper and released it to clang against the side of the bell. Over and over she bent, lifted, and released. And so the villagers were awakened to begin a new day, not in the world they had known, but in a world they were called to make new.

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<sup>1</sup> from "Let This Darkness Be a Bell Tower" from *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows

On June 12th, hours after the Pulse nightclub massacre, Lin-Manuel Miranda accepted a Tony for “best original score” for his blockbuster *Hamilton*. His speech was a sonnet shouting out his wife, Vanessa; Alexander Hamilton’s wife, Eliza;<sup>2</sup> and the power of love. Through tears, he said, in part,

When senseless acts of tragedy remind us  
 That nothing here is promised, not one day  
 This show is proof that history remembers.  
 We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger.  
 We rise and fall, and light from dying embers  
 Remembrances that hope and love last longer.  
 And love is love is love is love is love is love is love;  
 Cannot be killed or swept aside.  
 I sing Vanessa’s symphony; Eliza tells her story.  
 Now fill the world with music, love, and pride.<sup>3</sup>

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In 2008, a young, road-weary, first-term senator named Barack Obama arrived in out-of-the-way Greenwood, South Carolina, to stump for his fledgling presidential campaign. Having driven an hour and a half to get there, discouraged that morning by a critical story in the *New York Times*, and soaking wet from the combination of a driving rain and a broken umbrella, he faced a handful of hardly enthusiastic voters.

And then an older woman, seated in the back of the room, dressed like she’s just come from church – church hat and all – shouts, “Fired up!” The small crowd – maybe 20 people – responds, “Fired up!”

“Ready to go!” calls the woman. “Ready to go!” they call back. The young senator has no idea what’s going on. It turns out the woman is a leader in the local NAACP ... and a private eye, though it’s hard to imagine people wouldn’t see her coming. This is her chant; people know her, and they know to respond. Fired up! Fired up! Ready to go! Ready to go! And

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton (1757-1854) was married to Alexander Hamilton and was the co-founder of the first private orphanage in New York City.

<sup>3</sup> Given on June 12, 2016, the day of the Pulse Nightclub massacre.

she doesn't stop. Fired up! Ready to go!

And somehow, magically, the young senator feels himself ... fired up!  
Ready to go!

Last Monday, recalling this experience, President Obama said, "It just goes to show you how one voice can change a room. And if it can change a room, it can change a city. And if it can change a city, it can change a state. And if it can change a state, it can change a nation. And if it can change a nation, it can change the world."<sup>4</sup>

Sociologist, historian, author, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Dubois, the first African American to earn a doctorate, said, "The prayer of our souls is a petition for persistence; not for the one good deed, or single thought, but deed on deed, and thought on thought, until day calling unto day shall make a life worth living."

*What do we do now? Love the hell out of the world.*

Beloved spiritual companions,  
This great nation will endure as it has endured,  
will revive,  
and will prosper.

May we dedicate ourselves  
to the work of rebuilding this nation,  
one soul at a time.  
The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

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Let this darkness be a bell tower  
and you the bell.  
As you ring,  
what batters you becomes your strength.

Let us play for human dignity,  
for life,  
for peace,

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<sup>4</sup> You can watch it here: [mashable.com/2016/11/08/barack-obama-us-elections/#HpE5aUisWqqB](http://mashable.com/2016/11/08/barack-obama-us-elections/#HpE5aUisWqqB)

and for the possibility of hope.  
May we make of our lives a daily prayer for peace.  
May we choose to live  
lives worth living.

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We live through times when hate and fear seem stronger.  
We rise and fall, and light from dying embers  
Remembrances that hope and love last longer.  
And love is love;

*Now fill the world with love.*

Fired up! Ready to go!  
Amen.