“Forged by Fire”
by the Rev. Karen B. Taliesin

First Reading

The Rev. Theresa Novak is the minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ogden in Utah. The following is a poem she wrote entitled “Saved.”

Saved

Come into this place
There are healing waters here
and hands with soothing balm
to ease your troubled days.
Bring your wounds and aching hearts,
your scars too numb to feel.
Your questions and complaints,
all are welcome here.
Rest awhile.
Let the warmth of this community
surround you,
hold you,
heal you.
When you feel stronger,
just a bit,
otice those that need you too.
They are here.
They are everywhere.
Weep with them,
smile with them,
work with them,
laugh along the way.
Pass the cup,
drink the holy fire.
Take it with you
into the world.
We are saved
and we save each other
again, again, and yet again.

—Theresa Novak
Second Reading

This next reading is from the book, *Gilead*, by Marilynne Robinson. *Gilead* is a novel written as a series of letters that an elderly preacher, John Ames, is writing to his young son. Along with his reflections on forgiveness, jealously, love, grace, faith, fear, and resentment, John Ames also gives instructions for living, including the following:

This is an important thing, which I have told many people, and which my father told me, and which his father told him. When you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights. You are freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent that person. He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it.
Recently at Seattle Children’s Hospital, I was asked to visit a family whose faith tradition required them to literally beat the devil out of their 19-month-old daughter in order to make room for God. In other words, when this child would not sit still in her high chair at the dinner table, her father beat her legs with a wooden rod until they blistered. Child Protection Services was in the process of permanently removing the patient and her sibling from the parents but the medical team thought we as caregivers of these now battered and abused children had a moral obligation to have a conversation with the family in order to discuss the damage they were inflicting upon their children.

With heavy heart, much prayer, and trepidation, I went into the patient’s room and found young parents, both of whom I had been told, were raised in this faith tradition (and, therefore, had been abused as children themselves.) The father was quite talkative and had many questions for me once I told him I was a chaplain. He was very determined to make sure I represented and emphasized the right faith when I visited with folks in the hospital. So his surprise was evident when I told him that the chaplains visit with and support all of the families there, no matter what faith tradition the families follow or beliefs they hold.

The father then asked, “But how do you visit with these people from different faiths without compromising your own faith?” Without compromising your own faith…

Indeed in the face of a vast array of faith traditions, spiritualities, belief systems, family systems, cultures, ethnicities, and even in the face of parents who beat their children in the name of God, how do we stand firm, without compromising, being vigilant in our faith, and committed to our call? How do we as Unitarian Universalists stay rooted and centered and grounded in that which carries us, that which holds us, that which keeps us breathing the very essence of life?

Holy scriptures entreat us to “…humbly welcome the word”—welcome the spirit of life—“that has taken root in you, with its power to save you. Act on this word.”  

Yet therein lies the rub, doesn’t it? For to be vigilant in my faith and committed to my call, to turn into my spirituality and my Unitarian Universalist beliefs (which include believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being), to lean into that God of love or the ultimate ground of being, that numinous spirit of all-encompassing grace and mercy, is to recognize that it’s not only the 19-month-old child who is held in love but that it’s her abused and abusive father who is held in that love as well. To remain firm in this Universalist faith we must have not only compassion but fierce compassion.

Fierce compassion is about transforming anger into loving kindness. It’s about discernment and mindfulness, it’s about being diligent in our spiritual practices, it’s about taking action, it’s about the earth and air, fire and water of Love—deep, passionate, never-ending Love, so that together we might rise up and be able to contribute more fully to the world. So that we might save the world.

As a chaplain, to turn into, to lean into fierce compassion is to stay grounded and vigilant in my call to provide spiritual care, remaining firmly centered in my desire to care for the hearts and souls of my patients, their families, and all whose paths cross my own. To be faithful to my call to spiritual care is to be a companion on the journey and to provide or be present to an awareness of feelings, of true nature, and of the Holy working in the messy middle of all our lives.

As I tend to those who are struggling to accept change, loss, or death, I am grounded in the knowledge that I am not there to fix, solve, advise, or assuage. Holding another’s story in my heart, I am called to give voice to right relation, and to name that which obsesses or hooks us, causing us to forever spin on an
axis of fear, woundedness, or simple unknowing. Attending and listening, mine is a ministry of “hearing people to speech” by offering them safety, honesty, an open heart, and at times a “soft place to fall.” The Sufi master Hafez wrote, “I can lean the flame in my heart into your life and turn all that frightens you into holy incense ash.”

When we turn into our call to fierce compassion whether it’s by providing spiritual care or simply listening to someone in need, we honor and lift up all our connections to the sacred, to ourselves, and to that which supports us and gives us the will to live into another day. When we lean the flame in our hearts into the life of another, we find that every day is a new opportunity to receive the treasure of sacred light. Every day is a new opportunity to rely not only on these earthen vessels we inhabit, but also on a gift that is more than us. Every day is a new opportunity to stop acting like we are the treasure itself, or ought to be the treasure itself. Every day is a new opportunity to be the clay pots we are created to be—fragile, porous, prone to mold, expecting only of ourselves that we bear in some modest way the kind of hope and vision and love and justice that points beyond our limited energies, days, and wisdom to that which is eternal and ultimately reliable.

I am reminded of a story a friend of mine sent me based on a verse from Hebrew scripture in the book of Malachi which says: “[God] will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”

The story goes that this verse puzzled a woman who wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God so much so she decided to look into the process of refining silver.

The woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. As she watched, the silversmith held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest in order to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse, “[God] sits as a refiner and purifier of silver.” She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit holding the silver, but he had to keep his eye on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, “How do you know when the silver is fully refined?” He smiled at her and answered, “Oh, that’s easy—when it reflects my image.”

Now looking around this sanctuary this morning I can say for certain that all of us—every single one of us here—has been and will be held in the hottest part of the refiner’s fire. We all are refined and forged by fire as we all have felt the searing pain of grief, the blistering anguish of injustice, the scalding rage of iniquity—and we will feel it again—in order that perhaps one day, in this life or the next, we may reflect the image of the Beloved, of God, of the Heart of Love.

Rumi said, “Birds make great sky-circles of their freedom. How do they learn it? They fall, and falling, they’re given wings.”

We know we cannot face the world’s pain until we face our own. Yet knowing this is what is required of us does not make it any easier, especially during the darkest of times or when it feels as if the refiner is holding us in the hottest part of the fire. For it is in those dark times, on the day when we feel we cannot bear to see one more child diagnosed with terminal cancer, on the day when we feel we can no longer “be there” as a mother wails her grief draped over the lifeless body of her baby, on the day we feel we cannot stomach speaking to a father who beats his daughter with a rod in the name of God…
It is on these days when the fire is the hottest—when we need to be the most vigilant in our faith and committed to our call—that we must look to our hearts, look deeply into our hearts, to find the spirit of all life, that magnificent current of faith and love, of hope and fierce compassion that never ceases to flow there. We will need to subvert all reason and logical strategies that tell us to run from this impossible call to fierce compassion in order to allow ourselves—force ourselves—to fall back into that surge of spirit, of God, of the ultimate ground. A writer implores us in our grief and pain to “Break the bowl, [shatter these earthen vessels]—instead of regret, fall back into the potter’s hands and be reborn.”

Falling back, we feel the depths of the current flowing swift and strong around us as we are reminded of its sheer and utter power. It is those depths, those strong, constant currents of unbounded fierce compassion that support us, that carry us through this impossible life we are called to live. Our vigilance to our faith and our commitment to our call is fed not only by a mighty Love and a fierce compassion but by our knowledge of the agonizing but certain truth of theologian Richard Rohr’s words, “In our deepest pain, we are led to the edge of our private resources, and that breakdown, which surely feels like dying, leads us into a larger life.” Through that breakdown, through falling back into the potter’s hands, into numinous fierce compassion, we are indeed reborn and, as Theresa Novak wrote in her poem, “we are saved, and we save each other…again, again, and yet again.”

So between stimulus and response is a holy moment—perhaps the most sacred moment—when we can choose to turn into that all-encompassing fierce compassion, into that which saves us. And turning into that which saves us, we are called even more urgently—with all the fierce compassion we can gather—to be the wailing wall for countless sorrows, for insurmountable suffering, for misery upon misery.

Being sustained by a mighty Love and fierce compassion that enables us to companion even those by whom we are most repulsed, compels us to be vigilant not only in turning into that which saves us or the God within us but to be vigilant and to stand firmly grounded in our chosen faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism.

To be firmly grounded in Unitarian Universalism is to be vigilant in our faith that A. Powell Davies tells us affirms each free and precious soul, no longer blinded by credulity and fettered by its own fears, can only grow by truth and love and righteousness. We must be vigilant in our Unitarian Universalist faith that demands we deal justly in all our relationships, that we cast aside prejudice, and all escapes and excuses; we must be vigilant in our Unitarian Universalist faith that draws us from sloth to effort and endurance, and from easy purposes to difficult aims and high endeavors; we must be vigilant in our Unitarian Universalist faith that evolves and ventures forward still—with reason as a lamp to guide us; we must be vigilant in our Unitarian Universalist faith that affirms we are a light that belongs to the mystery within us and beyond us, the mystery whose other name is Love.

As a chaplain, as Unitarian Universalists, being firmly grounded in fierce compassion enables us to be present to and even celebrate the spiritualities of those standing before us. For before us is always standing that which calls us to this impossible life—before us is standing that which already reflects the image of God. Before us always is the Beloved in all the many forms the Beloved takes: the grieving mother, the stoic grandfather, the angry nurse, the homeless woman, the misinformed politician, the dying forest, the starving child, the abusive father… the Beloved who calls and cajoles us into the fierce compassion of Presence and Love.

Sufi mystic Rumi is quoted to have said, “This being human is a guest house… Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”
And John Ames in the novel, *Gilead*, states, “When you encounter another person,…think, as it were, This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me…” 12 What kind of an emissary was the abused and abusive father at the hospital the other day? His children were swiftly removed from him and his wife and hopefully placed with a more safe and loving family. What possible benefit was intended for me? Looking back on my meeting with him, I look back on my horror, my anger, my rage and then I see his face—completely open and curious—when he asked me how I stayed true to my own faith. Maybe not in that moment, maybe not in the next hour, but after reflecting on our encounter, my commitment to my faith and my belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being and to fierce compassion deepened immeasurably. That young man’s very existence in my life—though it was but for an hour—caused me to commit deeper still to a more open and fierce compassion, yes, even for a child abuser. As I move forward in my life, one has to wonder: who will benefit from meeting me and my deepened compassion?

Rumi wrote, “Magnetic fields draw us to Light; they move our limbs and thoughts. But it is still dark; if our hearts do not hold a lantern, we will stumble over each other, huddled beneath the sky as we are.” 13

So let us keep our lanterns lit with the fire of our call and the flame of our faith….

The fierce compassion within us and our faith tradition calls us to companion all who cross our path: the good and the evil, the sacred and the profane. But the fierce compassion that sustains and re-creates us also implores us to dance and sing with all the undefeatable joys and reckless delights this world bestows upon us again, again, and yet again.

Amidst the pain and the anguish, amidst our most difficult encounters, may we always remember: there is a goodness, a Wisdom that arises, sometimes gracefully, sometimes gently, sometimes awkwardly, sometimes fiercely, but like the refiner’s fire, “it will arise to save us if we let it, and it arises from within us, like the force that drives green shoots to break the winter ground, it will arise and drive us into a great blossoming,…into fragrance, fruit, and song, into the wild wind dancing, sun shimmering, into the aliveness of it all, into that part of ourselves that can never be defiled, defeated, or destroyed, but that comes back to life, time and time again, that does not die, that lives—always—into the Divine,” 14 reflecting the image of God.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be.

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1 James 1:21 (New Revised Standard Version).
4 Adapted from Kathleen Greider, closing words from the International Council on Pastoral Care and Counseling 8th World-Congress 2007.
5 Malachi 3:3 (New Revised Standard Version).
6 Author unknown. Many versions of this story exist on the Internet.
9 Richard Rohr, source unknown.
14 Adapted from Galland.