There’s no discouragement shall make me once relent, we just sang. As Clara illustrated in her reflection this morning. To persevere is to continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty or with little or no prospect of success. Locusts know how to do this. Let me explain. I was recently in Florida for the UU Minister’s Association Center for Excellence in Ministry Conference, where I took a preaching class from Rev. Otis Moss III.

For those of you who don’t know, Rev. Moss serves the Trinity UCC church in Chicago which became nationally known when a parishioner ran for president – and won. Their tagline is Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian.

I was moved by the story he told Friday morning, which was actually a story that Howard Thurman liked to tell from Olive Shreiner, a South African author and peace activist, born of European missionary parents. She was a feminist, anti-racist and human rights advocate. Howard Thurman said that her writings spoke to his spirit in a powerful way – as she chronicled the divine workings of Nature. So, this story, that Otis Moss told us a couple of weeks ago, shared by Howard Thurman, comes from this woman who noticed some locusts who were coming to the edge of a brook, trying to cross the water. One would come and be swept away by the water, and then another would try, and it would get swept away, and come these locusts did, again and again, until finally they managed to build a bridge to the other side. Locusts are relentless that way. And Rev. Moss asked us, what happened to the other locusts who came and were washed away? His reply: “There are always those who make a track to the rivers’ edge who will be washed away and never seen again, but you would not be on the other side of the river if it had not been for those who had made a track to the rivers’ edge.”

This, I thought, is a message that we could learn from in this faith tradition. Though Moss claimed minimal knowledge of Unitarian Universalism – having learned to say “UU” that very week with us in Florida, he managed to speak to the heart of our challenge – or perhaps that’s the challenge of humanity. We do tend to celebrate our being on the other side, and forget that we would not be there without all those who came before who did not make it. All those pilgrims who had the courage to continue on the journey.

Just before I went to Florida, I led worship with Gretchen Meyer who spoke of her shocking discovery to be the daughter of the minister of her mother’s childhood church... and her understanding that no matter how willing her 29 year old mother may have been to enter into the affair with her 45 year old minister, that it was the minister with the power, who should have known better. That her mother was the victim of clergy sexual misconduct. I had that story in my mind, as I traveled to Florida and sat in on at least one session with colleagues about sexual misconduct in our movement – not the Catholic Church, the Unitarian Universalist Association. The awareness of such misconduct even in our own movement humbles us all. We are not as far along on the journey as we may have thought at one time.

Our movement is better for the acceptance of women into the ministry, and that it is women who have called out this behavior. We like to celebrate women such as Augusta Jane Chapin – you may not recognize her here, but she was ordained to the Universalist ministry in 1863 by the Universalist Church of Lansing – the early name of the church I served in Michigan before coming here. And of course, by trailblazing, she built that bridge for me and so many others – like the Rev. Mary Gear, who was ordained yesterday in Salem, jointly by the church that employs her, First Unitarian Portland and her home church, the UU Congregation of Salem. I like to think of her home congregation as UU Church of Greater Lansing, which is where I knew her as a member there
when I served them. But she moved to Oregon, and the rest is history. The fact that we can lift up Augusta Jane Chapins from more than a century ago, sometimes makes us feel as if all women have made it across the water, when in fact, the journey has just begun.

I think of our first Black President – well, both of them, the one across the Columbia, who served the UUA, twice I might add. That’s the Rev. Bill Sinkford, senior minister of First Unitarian in Portland. I think of him as well as the one who attended Trinity Church in Chicago before moving to that famous white house built by enslaved peoples. Sometimes the celebration of the achievement of individuals – exceptional individuals – I would say in both cases – provides for us a symbol of our success without the full foundation and superstructure beneath.

And that is where we are. The national election of 2016 reminded us that our bridge was tentative at best and not solid, just as the hiring controversy in the UUA a year ago this spring told us that our structures are weak and need strengthening. We are called in this faith at this time to not only to make tracks to the river’s edge but to build a solid foundation and superstructure, because that bridge to the Promised Land was not there as many of us had thought. We need to be like locusts. Relentless, single purposed, dreaming that vision of the other side. We need to persevere.

We must make tracks, so that others may cross. The racism and sexism and xenophobia that has surfaced over the last years has shocked some us who thought we were making progress, but only confirmed for others of us what we knew all along, that the currents are strong, and that many, many are being swept away each and every day. We need to be like locusts. We need to persevere.

We need to persevere like Clara Willoughby, and try one medicine and another. We need to keep on keeping on, until we find what heals us, or at least stabilizes us. there was a new voice, wrote Mary Oliver,

*which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

I told my colleagues yesterday at the ordination of Reverend Mary Gear, that I had more hope for our faith movement, frankly, than for the country at large. But then, that’s where we start – at home, determined to save the only life we can save. We persevere. We make that track to the rivers’ edge.
I told the preachers in the room that we know how words have power. And yet, how it could be that our belief in the single meaning of words got us into this most recent mess. Our inability to code-switch, to talk to those who don’t talk like us – whatever us we identify with at the moment. Our insistence that words mean one thing and that to demonstrate enlightenment, the correct word must be spoken. I’m not arguing against using the best word possible, but rather the demand that others be shamed into using a particular vocabulary.

Sally Kohn, a lesbian liberal news commentator who contributed to Fox news when she gave a TED Talk about how the political left can be emotionally wrong. “For decades we’ve been focused on political correctness and now we need to focus on emotional correctness...” she said. It feels to me like all that political correctness backfired.

And so many in the country placed a vote for someone who quote “tells it like he sees it,” civility aside. Words are now not to be taken seriously at all, dismissed and ridiculed because, you know, really, we all know what he means.

And though I may be criticizing the man who currently holds the office of the president, it has also been our challenge as Unitarian Universalists. Congregations who don’t wish to work on covenants because we all know what we mean, we all know how we are to be, (and then behave quite the opposite sometimes.) We don’t need to articulate it, the logic goes, because we all share the same assumptions.

Words can be a double edged sword, as this reaction to political correctness demonstrates. For all my faith in words as a useful tool for communication, I know also that they are tools of relationship – and don’t exist outside of the relationship between those who utter them. When the relationship breaks down, heartbreak ensues.

“Heartbreak is how we mature,” writes David Whyte, “heartbreak may be the very essence of being human, of being on the journey from here to there, and of coming to care deeply for what we find along the way....”

The shared assumptions that so many in our congregations are proud to extol - actually prevent us from joining with others who might have different shared assumptions, and that creates another river to cross – the water that flows between our desire to be just as we are and were, and our desire to welcome such diversity of opinion and people; that water flows violently. If we ever to make it to the other side of that river, it will change who it is we are becoming. We are making tracks to the river’s edge, but I dare say, they are just tracks. Many have been washed away.

We may be washed away, but that’s our work. Locusts don’t care if they’re washed downriver. They persevere. We could learn from the locust. We need to learn how to persevere. We’ve got some locust bridge building work to do right now, in this country and in this movement. And frankly, I have more hope for our movement in this moment, than I do for the country. And perhaps that’s a good thing, because I know that change begins at home. Our religious commitments, our commitment to love and fairness, to honesty and justice – our religious commitments make this holy work, and the holy makes this work possible.

For many of us, the state of the world has caused great heartbreak. Heartbreak asks us not to look for an alternative path, because there is no alternative path. It is a deeper introduction to what we love and have loved, an inescapable and often beautiful question, something or someone who has been with us all along, asking us to be ready for the last letting go.” As we’re washed down the river even as we have helped others get to the other side.
Olive Shreiner explored the divine workings of nature, and reminded us that we can learn, even from the locusts who make a track to the river’s edge.

We are called to make a way, Otis Moss told us, the ministers who gathered in Florida. And those of you who are gathered here as well. We are all called to make a way. We are called to persevere. We are called to be like locusts. Determined to make a bridge over waters that are rough and powerful, single purposed and focused, we are determined. In spite of heartbreak – because of heartbreak, “you knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations.” You persevere on the way to the rivers’ edge, so that others may cross to the other side. We are grateful to those who preceded us and for those who will come after. Our job is simply to continue on the journey.

Benediction

Though the journey is long, and troubles await, we will persist. We will make that journey to the river’s edge and begin that locust bridge building work, with courage, with intention, with perseverance, and with our companions.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.