**Sisyphus Gotta Roll**

service presented at First Unitarian Church of South Bend, on June 11, 2017

Rev. Chip Roush

**First Reading**

*Keeping Our Connections Strong*

Sean Parker Dennison was born in Ames, Iowa in 1965.

I feel like I'm on a constant hunt for hope these days.

I have to be:

every time I look at my phone or open my laptop,

I'm overwhelmed by stories of violence,

disrespect for life,

greed, and selfishness.

When I listen to my friends and loved ones

or to conversations in coffee shops,

it feels like everyone is dispirited and disheartened.

And that is dangerous.

The danger of hopelessness is a double danger.

First, hopelessness makes us feel

[that] it's useless to take action.

It fools us into believing there's nothing we can do,

or that our efforts won't make a difference.

Once we abandon hope,

there's no stopping the momentum of the unscrupulous

who are willing to cooperate with evil

in order to get ahead.

The other danger of hopelessness

is that we can lose each other.

In times of hopelessness,

it's easy to get scared of everything and everyone.

It's easy to start believing

that your neighbor is the problem

and that hoarding is a better strategy than generosity.

The problem is

that when community starts to break down,

we lose the most important source of hope we have:

each other.

The message of hope

that still blazes bright for me in these hard times

is that I am not alone.

I don't have to face the world alone

and I don't have to fix the world alone.

When I need hope,

I find it in on the faces of my people.

I find it in their hearts,

when we find each other again

 and stop hiding out,

thinking we are the only one.

 I find it when we come together in community to sing,

to bless one another,

to mourn, to strategize.

All we need is hope... and for that, we have each other.

**Second Reading**

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born in India, in 1869

"Satisfaction lies in the effort,

not in the attainment;

full effort is full victory."

**Homily I – Sisyphus**

And somewhere, Sisyphus is still rolling that rock up the hill

There are other stories, similar to Sisyphus.

Tantalus had to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches,

with the fruit ever eluding his grasp, and the water always receding before he could take a drink

Wu Gang—in Chinese legend, he was required to chop down a self-healing tree on the moon.

these stories speak to an important truth

of the human condition

some days,

it seems like a Sisyphean task

to try to drive through Chicago during rush hour;

or to get to the bottom of my email inbox

(that is real, especially recently;

please forgive & re-send if necessary)

I think if we were re-writing these ancient myths today,

I might say that

Zeus punished Sisyphus

by making him clean all the floors

in a multiplex movie theater

An important part of the Sisyphus story

is that his punishment is not only

the difficult labor;

it is also the meaninglessness of the task.

How many of you have seen the movie *Cool Hand Luke*?

He was forced to dig a grave-sized hole – hard work!—

and then fill it back up again,

over and over.

the meaninglessness of the labor

reinforces the fact

that the guards have the power over the prisoner

When psychologists test

how workers respond

when the meaning of their task is reduced,

the results typically show

that people work harder

when their work seems more meaningful,

and less hard

when the task seems less meaningful

This resonates with my own experience—

anybody else feel like

you generally work less hard and/or less long,

when the work is less meaningful to you?

Poor Sisyphus doesn’t have that luxury—

he works hard, all day, every day.

He goes to bed at night with aching muscles

and he knows

that his labors the next day

will be just as meaningless

as that day’s were.

**Third Reading**

*Praise (after the earthquake in Haiti)*

Alison Luterman was born in Pennsylvania, in 1958.

The thin sound of singing floated up from under the building,

which was pancaked on its cheap foundation.

Port-au-Prince. Hell's aftermath.

Bodies laid out in rows, covered with white cloth,

loaves of death-bread for spirits to eat.

A hundred thousand buried overnight

in hastily-dug ditches, because of the heat.

And the smell! So no one believed she was really alive,

this girl trapped under rubble for almost two weeks,

until a worker heard tunes issuing from twisted rebar

and stopped, petrified in disbelief.

She was still singing when they pulled her out,

skinny as the edge of a sickle moon.

I watched on TV from my living room

as Darlene Etienne, age sixteen,

was drawn forth from her living tomb,

caroling hymns in Creole.

How many mornings have I struggled

to hush the voice in my brain

saying you will never find your place in this world--?

How many years wrestled the weight of imaginary bricks

that would pin me paralyzed to the bed? But this girl

sang herself through the closed door of the grave

and it opened and she rose.

A miracle. Praise the light.

Praise how I hear her voice deep in my own heart now,

a thin soprano thread pulsing with longing.

**Homily II – Gotta Roll**

I love that poem;

and I recognize it can be misused

I want to stress:

depression is real

For some of us, getting out of bed

\*is\* a Sisyphean task—

in both senses of the word,

unending and meaningless

Luterman words could seem comparative,

and isolating

She writes,

“How many mornings have I struggled

 to hush the voice in my brain

 saying you will never find your place in this world--?

 How many years wrestled the weight of imaginary bricks

 that would pin me paralyzed to the bed? But this girl

 sang herself through the closed door of the grave

 and it opened and she rose.”

It is all too easy, sometimes,

to compare ourselves to others

and to condemn ourselves for not measuring up.

I do not think

that the poet is doing that, here.

I do not hear her

shaming herself,

but finding connection,

and in that connection,

finding encouragement.

She writes “I hear her voice

deep in my own heart now”

In that “thin soprano thread,

pulsing with longing,”

I think that we hear,

not just one woman,

trapped in the rubble of an earthquake,

but the still small voice of Life itself,

calling to us,

stirring in us,

evolving through us,

to see another dawn.

Even in a city

that has been turned into a vast graveyard,

Life still sings.

That seems to be the message

of most of the human responses

to the Sisyphus / Tantalus / Wu Gang

type of story.

It should not be surprising,

that a species which craves meaning

would find some kind of purpose

even in a punishment

designed to be meaningless.

Virtually the whole of Norse mythology

is that life is difficult,

and violent,

and everything—even the gods—will die in the end.

The very best we can hope for

is to die valiantly,

with honor.

That seems at least a little similar

to Gandhi’s statement

that full effort is full victory

And the French existentialist, Camus,

wrote,

“we must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Camus felt that there is no greater purpose to life,

other than what we assign to it.

If there is no inherent meaning in life,

then no one task

is more or less meaningful

than rolling a rock up a hill.

If Sisyphus undertakes his work

with his own sense of joy and purpose,

then even that task

is made meaningful.

For the record,

I do not agree with most existentialism.

I do believe

that evolution is working in a particular direction,

and I find real meaning

in working with evolution

to keep Life heading in that direction.

Either way—

if you think we create our own purpose,

or if we are following

some purpose

found inherently in our evolving universe,

the result can be the same.

We do find meaning in our labors;

and we have friends,

to help us

both with the discernment of the meaning,

and with the actual work.

I do not know

why Dale Gibson picked this topic,

when he purchased the opportunity

to choose the subject of a sermon,

at least November’s auction.

I do know what it brings up in me.

For most of my adult life,

I have worked to create understanding

and increased compassion

between our human cousins.

Now it seems

that there is more hatred

and more division

than ever before.

For at least the last forty years,

I have been concerned about the environment.

It appeared that we were making progress,

waking people up

to the needs of our planet—

and now,

environmental protections are being rolled back

and polluters are actually being encouraged.

Many of the people whom I love—

people who have black or brown skin;

people who are bisexual, gay, lesbian,

transgender or queer;

people who identify as women—

are finding their lives being made more difficult.

It seemed like we were making progress,

like our rock was nearing the top of the hill,

and now I am disheartened

to see it being rolled back down again.

Maybe some of you have felt this way, too.

Again, I don’t know what Dale was thinking,

but there are days

when I look at the events in the world,

and I wonder

if any of our work

has made a real difference.

If it can all be undone that quickly,

and that completely,

then does our work have any meaning?

Then I hear Gandhi:

"Satisfaction lies in the effort,

not in the attainment;

full effort is full victory."

Just because we are not winning every battle,

it does not mean that our efforts are in vain.

Setbacks are annoying,

but they do not erase

the meaning in our lives.

Sean Dennison wrote,

“hopelessness makes us feel

[that] it's useless to take action.

It fools us

into believing there's nothing we can do”

As Sean notes,

that feeling is a lie:

there is something we can do.

There is always something we can do.

We can resist

We can speak out

We can sing—

and even if we cannot sing,

we may hear Life singing to us,

in that longing that we feel,

pulsing in our hearts.

We can acknowledge our longing.

In that longing, we can find hope

Sometimes it takes a little hope

to help us see our next step.

Sean has advice for us there, too:

“When I need hope,

I find it in on the faces of my people.

I find it in their hearts,

when we find each other again

 and stop hiding out,

thinking we are the only one.

 I find it when we come together in community to sing,

to bless one another,

to mourn,

 to strategize.

All we need is hope...

and for that, we have each other.”

So may we be