

“Soul Force”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages  
February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013,  
4<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Epiphany  
*UCC Women’s Week*

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

*“Don’t say you’re too young,” the Lord answered.*

*“If I tell you to go and speak to someone, then go!*

*And when I tell you what to say, don’t leave out a word!*

*I promise to be with you and keep you safe, so don’t be afraid.”’*

*Jeremiah 1:7-8*

Let us pray... O God,

Give us a vision of what can be –

a world without violence and how to make it happen.

We know there will always be trouble and disagreement,

but teach us how to contend without causing injury.

Amen

Today’s passage from Jeremiah is a beautiful example of how our God

is characterized as an advocate for people on the sidelines –

in this case, for young people;

And by Jeremiah’s example, they are encouraged to find their voice

and speak from the heart, while trusting God to help find the words.

Public speaking is a big challenge for any of us – especially for children.

Do you remember the first time you got up in front of a group to speak

or to say your lines in a play or sing in a choir?

It is a great benefit to give young people early opportunities to

speak publicly, to get over stage fright, and be taken seriously

as someone who’s got something to say.

At Mystic Congregational Church in Connecticut,

we had a group of little girls who made up

our Not Ready For Primetime Play Readers Theater.

Our church loved those kids and their performances –

and there was something good achieved that went beyond church.

It was a blessing to hear that some of them – who had been very shy at school,

had become more confident when speaking in class

thanks to their experience in those plays.

It is important – perhaps more than ever, to help give a voice to the voiceless.

That may yet be the legacy that 20 small children – whose lives ended too soon,

will leave to future generations as a clarion call, like Christ’s sacrifice,

to change the world.

Willard, p.2

However, if there is any hope of a national consensus happening soon about gun control, it remains to be seen.

A week after the tragedy in Newtown, CT,

Wayne LaPierre – executive vice president of the National Rifle Association, was expected to offer constructive ideas in the gun control debate.

Instead, he responded with defiance, saying,

“The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun, is a good guy with a gun”, suggesting armed guards be posted in all American schools.

NJ Governor Chris Christie responded,

“You don’t want to make [schools] an armed camp for kids...

We should be able to figure out other ways to enhance safety.”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2012/12/21/chris-christie-opposes-armed-guards-in-schools/>

At a ‘state legislative panel studying gun violence, mental health and school safety’ in Newton, CT, Susie Ehrens – a parent of one of the children

who escaped the Sandy Hook shootings, said,

“We stop being the world’s greatest country

when we allow our most vulnerable citizens to be slaughtered...”

[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/nyregion/gun-rights-take-back-seat-to-calls-for-stricter-laws-at-newtown-forum.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/31/nyregion/gun-rights-take-back-seat-to-calls-for-stricter-laws-at-newtown-forum.html?_r=0)

We should be able to figure this out. We can do better.

LaPierre’s comment about ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’

seems to have been borrowed from what was said by

a teacher from Sandy Hook Elementary School, Kaitlin Roig, who said – to calm her class as they hid in a bathroom...

“...there are bad guys out there now...

We need to wait for the good guys.”

Then, she further whispered to her children,

“I need you to know, that I love you all very much

and that it’s going to be okay.”

She said she wanted these children to hear a human voice say these things to them, fully believing this might have been

the “*last thing they were ever going to hear.*”

<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/sandy-hook-teacher-speaks-ordeal-article-1.1222727#ixzz2JPte4ZTr>

That is probably the most important lesson to be carried away from this otherwise senseless tragedy –

that we are loved and that it is going to be OK, even despite death.

And if we accept that as true, we can stop being afraid,

and start loving others, too, and change our part of the world.

Willard, p.3

Love – or the lack of it, was at the heart of this crisis.

There is a hostage crisis going on right now in Alabama  
that, once again involves guns, little children,  
and an isolated loner.

We can write it off to insanity or a need for better gun control,  
but it will come back to the need for love –  
the need for an authentic relationship of accepting and being accepted.

This is not the same as tolerance, but as an active, nonviolent outreaching  
to be open and affirming of others.

This means changing the ‘culture of violence’ in our society for a start –  
and eventually, the rest of the world.

How do we begin to change such a monolithic problem?

Start by recognizing where others have already started to work for change.  
Start with women and their fight for dignity and justice in society.

Our Gospel lesson today is full of violence –

even Jesus shows a combativeness that seems out of character.

There is violence evident in words that are used – not quite name-calling,  
but labeling like a stereotype, just short of an epithet.

Jesus appears to react sharply to being called ‘Joseph’s son’ –  
which could imply town gossip he grew up with, questioning his legitimacy.  
or a way of reminding him he was still just working class.

Jesus refers to the ‘widows in Israel’, but then pointedly speaks of God’s grace  
for the ‘woman who was widowed of Zarephath’.

His words are sarcastic as he confronts his hometown with their chauvinism.

Jesus is clearly on the side of women who are widowed,

people suffering from leprosy – even those who were illegitimate.

He shows he will speak up for anyone who was powerless and kicked to the curb,  
by giving voice to the voiceless.

What are we to do?

Progress on gun control, improved care for mental illness,  
and regulating violence in movies and interactive video games,  
will very likely be locked in debate.

In the meantime,

we need to work on changing the ‘culture of violence’ of our society  
through education, conversation, and activism.

Where do we begin?

Willard, p.4

Let's begin with the plight of women.

Let's begin to change the 'culture of violence' by learning about the plight of abuse against women – and therefore, children.

Let's begin by learning about their plight – and their fight.

The term, 'Women's liberation' may seem dated,

but it is connected with other struggles for liberation – including African-Americans, gender-oriented people, Hispanic immigrants, Middle Eastern people facing suspicion and prejudice, as well as men caught in oppression they do and that's done to them.

Eve Ensler uses the spoken word like a modern prophet to address the injustices against women in this country and throughout the world.

She is an award winning playwright, actress, and social activist, who has been reaching out to women everywhere – especially, to women in prison.

Her principle work is a one-woman show that goes by... a title

I am reluctant to say from the pulpit, being a series of 'Monologues' from a certain part of female anatomy that sounds like "Virginia".

It is about the experiences of women – their joys & concerns, and the affirmation of themselves as women, despite abuse.

To quote a website dedicated to her work:

*'Ms. Ensler's experience performing [her] ... MONOLOGUES*

*inspired her to create V-Day*

*[which stands for "Victory Day", also "Valentine's Day"],*

*a global movement to stop violence against women and girls.*

*She has devoted her life to... envisioning a planet in which*

*women and girls will be free to thrive, rather than merely survive.*

*Today, V-Day is a global activist movement*

*that supports anti-violence organizations throughout the world,*

*helping them to continue and expand their core work on the ground,*

*while drawing public attention to the larger fight*

*to stop worldwide violence*

*(including rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation..., sex slavery) against women and girls.'*

<http://www.vday.org/about/more-about/eveensler>

It so happens that we are in the V-Day season, February 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> when civic organizations are invited to perform her play or show her videos. I have ordered a DVD of hers entitled, "What I Want My Words to Do to You", which is a documentary about her writers' workshop for women in prison.

Willard, p.5

And it so happens that this week is UCC Women's Week,  
and our National Office is encouraging UCC congregations  
to consider contacting Congress to re-authorize  
the Violence Against Women Act (SR 47/HR 11).

Information about this will be in the next Reporter.

[Go to the [www.ucc.org](http://www.ucc.org) website the "Women" webpage and  
click on "Women's Week 2013 Information and Resources".]

It comes back to love.

Enslers work has helped bring the voices of women – and girls,  
who might not otherwise have been heard  
to venues throughout the world beginning with our country.

She has encouraged people to listen to the stories of women –  
their stories of suffering and joy.

And these stories are meant for men and boys to hear, too,  
in order to change behaviors by changing attitudes.

Creating empathy is the bedrock for establishing healthy relationships –  
where people no longer look at one another as an object  
to be manipulated – or eliminated,  
but as a person deserving of respect and love.

The liberation of women is tied to the liberation of children  
and consequently, that of men.

Children are the hope for our future, because they see everything new.  
They're not blinded yet by fear and prejudice.

And we are their hope as we allow the love of God to work through us  
to help them mature from naiveté to a faith born of wisdom, hope, and love.

It is up to us to put an end to violence against the vulnerable  
by undermining our society's 'culture of violence' and fear  
with the culture of compassion – love in action.

It is up to us to give voice to the powerless  
and thwart those who would dare attack any child –  
the child that is within us all.

It is up to us to begin this work of love casting out fear  
remembering that we are already loved and it's going to be OK.

Amen

*Our lesson today from Jeremiah 1:4-10 is about the empowerment of those who are called to speak God's message to others. Like Moses, Isaiah, and Peter, Jeremiah felt overwhelmed by this responsibility – yet God promised to help him.*

4 The Lord said:

5 “Jeremiah, I am your Creator, and before you were born,  
I chose you to speak for me to the nations.”

6 I replied,

“I’m not a good speaker, Lord, and I’m too young.”

7 “Don’t say you’re too young,” the Lord answered.

“If I tell you to go and speak to someone, then go!

And when I tell you what to say, don’t leave out a word!

8 I promise to be with you and keep you safe, so don’t be afraid.”

9 The Lord reached out his hand, then he touched my mouth and said,

“I am giving you the words to say,

10 and I am sending you with authority to speak to the nations for me.  
You will tell them of doom and destruction,  
and of rising and rebuilding again.”

Luke 4:21-30

21 Then Jesus said to them,

“What you have just heard me read has come true today.”

22 All the people started talking about Jesus

and were amazed at the wonderful things he said.

They kept on asking,

“Isn’t he Joseph’s son?”

23 Jesus answered:

You will certainly want to tell me this saying,

“Doctor, first make yourself well.”

You will tell me to do the same things here in my own hometown

that you heard I did in Capernaum.

24 But you can be sure that no prophets are liked

by the people of their own hometown.

25 Once during the time of Elijah

there was no rain for three and a half years,

and people everywhere were starving.

There were many widows in Israel,

26 but Elijah was sent only to a widow

in the town of Zarephath near the city of Sidon.

27 During the time of the prophet Elisha,

many men in Israel had leprosy.

But no one was healed, except Naaman who lived in Syria.

28 When the people in the meeting place heard Jesus say this,

they became so angry 29 that they got up and threw him out of town.

They dragged him to the edge of the cliff on which the town was built,

because they wanted to throw him down from there.

30 But Jesus slipped through the crowd and got away.