

## A Punk Rock Prayer Practice

October 16, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Psalm 121; Luke 18:1-8*

Good morning First Church. Today we will be turning our hearts to God's healing presence in our lives and world. After we reflect together, we will sing gentle hymns and be invited to come forward, if you wish, to share a concern with our ministers and deacons and to receive a touch of oil and a healing prayer. But first, a story. This past Friday I went to the keynote speech of the William Belden Noble Lecture Series held at Memorial Church just across the way in Harvard yard. The focus of the talks is to take a plunge into the moral and ethical questions surrounding the global climate crisis and the role of religious institutions, organizations and members of the general public, outside the scientific community who are focused on saving the planet. I was especially excited about the opportunity because one, it was being given by one of my favorite authors and philanthropists, John Green and two, because the talk was entitled, How the World Ends. I was curious to say the least.

As he often does, John Green spoke about the human condition, our capacity for love despite the world's cruelty, and how to sustain hope in a time when all the concerns of the world and of our own lives feel so urgent and unrelenting. Whether he knew it or not, he preached a sermon that certainly we all need to hear after a long week of news headlines of possible nuclear attacks, inflation, ongoing structures of oppression, and natural disasters that leave communities destroyed. I'm sure that the college students in the room, starting to figure out who they are becoming, needed those words of encouragement and nuance now more than ever too.

At one moment when speaking about the practice of not falling into despair John said with a laugh, "Having radical hope is very punk rock." I was delighted that he equated daring to have bold hope with being a punk rocker; and I wholeheartedly agree with him. The punk rock genre is associated with being non-conformist, with embracing that which is counter cultural. When church is at its most authentic we too are doing something deeply countercultural together. To stare into the unknown territory before us

as a collective humanity, as well as for us all individually, and for our response to be radical hope in God is an act of resistance to despair and to a pattern of thinking and believing that disempowers. Our practice of radical hope in God through our spiritual practices like prayer, like blessing someone with a touch of oil and calling them beloved, like gathering together as the body of Christ across our differences gives us an opportunity to access sites of liberation within ourselves and our community even when it doesn't seem like the most logical or mainstream response to the tragedy and existential concerns all around us. In fact, embracing that hope is the most practical response we can have to break free of these cycles of violence in our midst.

The story of the parable of the persistent widow that we read together this morning is a story of a woman who continually seeks justice from a judge who is heartless and unrelenting, not unlike our current reality. Despite her lack of power in her position in society, she consistently communicates her deepest desire for justice and healing to this figure lacking compassion. In the end, her radical hope is what sustains her persistence in what seems like a hopeless situation. She is certainly a member of our punk rock band as well. It is her persistence in asking for justice and healing that provides her a sense of agency in her life. This kind of commitment to what she knows is right and to her own healing and the healing of the other through a system of accountability requires a great deal of strength and courage, yes. It also requires a heart that does not cut her off from the pain of her situation or from what she knows to be true: that it is not a lost endeavor to live in the hope of a better world. Perhaps, sometimes even having the courage to say what our deepest hopes and fears are to God and to one another is a taste of the kingdom itself. And what if we say them again... and again... so much so that speaking our hope into the world creates the very reality we are all waiting for. In daring to speak what is on our hearts to God and one another, we might see that goodness and justice and our healing is right here ready for the taking, that God is waiting for us to see that our hope is not unfounded, but is revealing a wholeness already here among us all.

Some of us here today were present over the summer when we started to resume this practice of healing Sundays at First Church, a tradition which stretches back many years. We carry on this commitment today to embody this ancient practice of prayer and anointing each other with oil, choosing to reach out to God who reminds us

of our wholeness and goodness and capacity to carry on with our radical hope in tow even in times when it feels as if the world is about to end.

Friends, we know that this wonderful world is also a world of sorrow, and that each of us bears a burden that is sometimes too heavy to carry alone. Today we wish to offer you a time of blessing and consolation, a time to renew your faith in God's promise of wholeness and well-being for all people, and indeed for all creation. This is an opportunity to receive a gentle word, a touch of soothing oil and a reassuring hand—all signs of God's gifts of peace and hope. Some of you may wish not to come forward during this time. As you remain seated, please enjoy the quiet and the music, and pray for the world, for others, and for yourselves. Whether you remain seated or come forward, whether you ask aloud or silently within your hearts, God knows your need, and God comes to us all with hope and healing and peace right now, in this place, here. Amen.

