

THE ONLY LASTING TRUTH

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
February 5, 2017

Over the past couple of weeks, I've been thinking a lot about leaving Las Vegas. Not literally: as some of you know, I've never been to Las Vegas — a run of good luck I hope lasts for the rest of my life. Rather, I've been thinking about the movie *Leaving Las Vegas*.

Nicholas Cage plays an alcoholic Hollywood agent named Ben Sanderson, and Ben has lost almost everything, including his marriage and his friends. When he loses his job as well, he takes his severance check and announces that he's going to Las Vegas to drink himself to death.

What makes *Leaving Las Vegas* a movie and not a documentary is that we don't believe Ben will do what he says. Sure enough, when Ben arrives in Las Vegas, he befriends a prostitute named Sera, played by Elizabeth Shue, who works for a sadistic pimp. Suddenly, the plot makes sense: Sera will help save Ben from the bottle, and Ben will help save Sera from the pimp. It's a double redemption plot: what could be better?

The answer is that almost anything would have been better than what actually happens in the movie. By the end of the story, Ben and Sera aren't doubly redeemed; they're doubly damned. *Leaving Las Vegas* is a movie about a man who does what he says he will do.

For the past twelve days, President Donald Trump has, for the most part at least, done what he said on the campaign trail that he would do if elected. Beginning with an executive order signed just hours after taking the oath of office, which stopped implementation of the Affordable Care Act, Trump has worked his way in rapid-fire succession through a laundry list of campaign promises, moving to build the wall, keep out Muslim immigrants, politicize houses of worship, approve the pipeline, reduce environmental and financial regulations, pull out of the TPP, defund abortion providers, and so on.

It turns out that Donald Trump is doing what he said he would do. Almost no one believed he would act this swiftly, and this unilaterally, and this recklessly. His decisions, some of which were hastily tempered by his staff or even reversed by Trump himself, have created a climate of chaos, both at home and abroad. It's true that his reckless and cavalier approach to governance may occasionally have the odd positive benefit. But for now, chaos rules in the capital of the free world.

About 20 years ago, the internationally-acclaimed science fiction writer Octavia Butler published a novel titled *Parable of the Talents*. As the *New York Times* noted when Butler died about 10 years ago at age 58, the media continually touted the fact that

Butler was an African-American woman writing science fiction, a genre traditionally dominated by white males. But, the obituary said, “She left no doubt that her background equipped her spectacularly well to portray life in hostile dystopias where the odds of survival can be almost insurmountable.”

Butler’s book *Parable of the Talents*, a dystopian novel set in the mid-21st century, describes how what Butler calls a “pox” had wiped out most of the population of the US in 2015, the result of climate change interacting with economic and environmental destruction. A Texas senator named Andrew Steele Jarret, supported by a white majority voting block known as Christian Americans, had become president. His campaign slogan? “Help Us Make America Great Again!” The novel was published in 1998.

As Butler tells the story, Jarret rules with an iron fist through a government militia known as Crusaders, who wear crosses, drive fortified tanks, and kill or enslave those who resist. One pocket of resistance is a small religious community known as EarthSeed, led by a woman named Lauren Olamina. Lauren’s mother had founded the group and had established their personal and communal practice of self-sufficiency and environmental stewardship in a book titled *EarthSeed: the First Book of the Living*.

The first verse of the book, Lauren says, sets out her mother’s most fundamental belief — that “God is Change.” The verse reads:

All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth
Is Change.
God
Is Change.

Even though Lauren and the members of the EarthSeed community end up living in horrific conditions under a ruthless dictator, they never lose sight of this fundamental belief. Another verse in the *First Book of the Living* reads:

Here we are —
Energy,
Mass,
Life...
Consider —
We are born
Not with purpose,
But with potential.

Ironically, if life is defined by potential, and if change is the only lasting truth, then times of chaos offer the greatest opportunity for change — either for good or for ill. In such times, the challenge is to shape the potential of the moment to conform to God’s purpose, which in Butler’s story comes down to a simple gospel of human connection. Everyone matters, because everyone is ultimately connected to everyone else.

In perhaps the most telling verse from the *First Book of the Living*, we read:

Chaos
Is God’s most dangerous face —
Amorphous, roiling, hungry.
Shape Chaos —
Shape God.
Act.
Alter the speed
Or the direction of Change.
Vary the scope of Change.
Recombine the seeds of Change.
Transmute the impact of Change.
Seize Change.
Use it.
Adapt and grow.

I certainly can’t predict the future, but my guess is that President Trump will continue to do what he has said he will do. The question for us is whether we will do the same — do what we have said we will do. Will we insist that everyone be treated with human dignity? Will we insist that everyone be afforded equality? Will we insist that everyone be offered equal opportunity?

In this time of chaos and danger, will we act to shape the chaos — alter the direction of change, vary the scope of change, and transmute the impact of change? Will we seize the potential for change and use it? Will we adapt and grow?

These same questions confront us as a congregation, here on the cusp of our 198th annual meeting. We live in a time of unprecedented peril for religious institutions, but also of unprecedented opportunity for those who seize the potential for change and use it to adapt and grow.

Like some people in the culture around us, some members of our congregation have sometimes been seduced by the allure of a mythic bygone era, seeking a return to an “older, simpler time,” as Butler describes the temptation in her novel. In this time of unprecedented peril and unprecedented potential, my hope is that we can resist the temptation to look backwards. Instead, I hope we can act to shape the chaos around us and seize the potential that lies before us.

The only lasting truth is change, which is why our calling is a divine calling. In this spiritual community, our experience of God connects us not only to all that is past and all that is present, but also to all that is possible. Together, steadfast and united, we can serve what is possible.