

THERE WILL BE SINGING

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
February 21, 2016

Opening Words:

The theme of our worship service this morning is bearing witness — the spiritual discipline of opening our minds and our hearts to the suffering of others. Through music, poetry, and story, we will bear witness to the suffering caused by human wickedness, with the hope that our experience here will transform our view of other people's suffering and our own.

In her book *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché collects poems from 145 poets who themselves endured conditions of extremity during the twentieth century: political persecution, torture, rape, imprisonment, assassination, and so on. “Many poets did not survive,” Forché says in her introduction, “but their works remain with us as poetic witness to the dark times in which they lived.”

In the 1970's, Forché herself traveled to El Salvador as part of Amnesty International. There she witnessed the unfolding civil war and its pervasive human rights abuses. Upon her return, she published a widely-acclaimed book of poems titled *The Country Between Us*. It includes a poem titled “The Colonel,” about her encounter with a Salvadoran colonel who made fun of people concerned about human rights. The poem will serve as our reading later in the service.

The poet and playwright Ariel Dorfman, author of the acclaimed play “Death and the Maiden,” and the poet Ana Maria Mendoza provide the text for James MacMillan's three-part choral work *Cantos Sagrados* (“Sacred Songs”) about political repression in Latin America. Alejandro, Renée, and the choir will perform *Cantos Sagrados* this morning in its entirety. And my homily will highlight a story by W.E.B. DuBois that bears witness to similar atrocities in this country.

Forché closes the introduction to her book *Against Forgetting* by quoting a question posed by the poet Robert Desnos: “You who are living, what have you done with these treasures?”

Reading:

Carolyn Forché, "The Colonel"

What you have heard is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go [screw] themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

Homily:

The faceplate of poet Carolyn Forché's book *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* contains a three-line poem by Bertolt Brecht titled "Motto." Brecht writes:

In the dark times, will there also be singing?
Yes, there will be singing.
About the dark times.

Great artists — composers, poets, novelists, playwrights, visual artists — create their works in order to bear witness to experiences that must never be forgotten, including the inhuman suffering perpetrated by human wickedness. Even the most horrific suffering, when it gets embraced by the beauty of great art, becomes memorable and perhaps even bearable. Through art, we find ourselves able to bear witness.

In his essay titled "The Coming of John," first published in 1903, W.E.B. DuBois bears witness to one of the founding sins of this nation. DuBois is best known to most Americans as author of *The Souls of Black Folk* and co-founder of the NAACP.

His essay — it's the length of a long *New Yorker* article — tells the story of two young men named John, both from a town in southeastern Georgia. As DuBois tells the story, one John was John Jones, a black fellow who was often awkward and never on time. Yet his broad, good-natured smile conveyed a good nature and genuine satisfaction with the world.

The white folk thought black John was a good boy — fine plow-hand, good in the rice fields, always respectful. But they shook their heads when his mother wanted to send him off to school. "It'll spoil him, — ruin him," they said. But fully half of the town's black folk followed John proudly to the station with his little trunk and many bundles. Then, as the train bore him away, their talk turned to what would happen when John came back: parties, speakings in the church, a new schoolhouse, perhaps with John as teacher, maybe a big wedding. All of this would happen, and more, they said — when John comes. When John comes.

The white folk also had a John — a fair-haired, smooth-faced boy who had played many a long summer's day with his dark-skinned counterpart. "Yes, sir! John is at Princeton, sir," said the Judge every morning as he marched down to the post office. "Showing the Yankees what a Southern gentleman can do." The Judge's dream was that his son would return and settle, and be the mayor of the town and representative to the legislature, as he himself had done many years before. Du Bois writes:

Thus, in the far-away Southern village the world lay awaiting, half consciously, the coming of the two young men, and dreamed in an inarticulate way of new things that would be done and new thoughts that

all would think. And yet it was singular that few thought of two Johns, — for the black folk thought of one John, and he was black; and the white folk thought of another John, and he was white. And neither world thought the other world's thought, save with vague unrest.

Seven years later, both Johns returned. Each had changed, as had their views of the town. The white town gladly welcomed home their tall and headstrong favorite son, but the young man did not veil his contempt for the little town, and plainly had his heart set on New York. "Good heavens, father," the younger man would say after dinner, as he lighted a cigar and stood by the fireplace, "you surely don't expect a young man like me to settle down permanently in this — this God-forsaken town?"

The other John also recoiled from the narrow life of his native town. He noticed oppression that had not seemed oppression before. DuBois writes, "He felt angry when men did not call him 'Mister;' he clenched his hands at the 'Jim Crow' cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things."

The Judge did allow John to reopen the Negro school, after John agreed that he would not — in the Judge's words — "try to put fool ideas of rising and equality into these folks' heads, and make them discontented and unhappy." But John was already discontented and unhappy, a fact which bewildered his people. This once jovial man had become silent and gloomy. When John spoke at the church, he tried to explain. He talked about the new century and the need for new ideas about education and the spread of wealth, about the destiny of black folks and the humanity of everyone. But all the people could hear was the disdain in John's voice for the little world they held sacred. After John finished his talk, one of the elders of the church climbed into the pulpit and held John up for the scorn and scathing denunciation of all.

After the meeting, John left the church and walked down by the sea. His sister followed him. Du Bois writes:

Long they stood together, peering over the gray unresting water.

"John," she said, "does it make everyone — unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?"

He paused and smiled. "I'm afraid it does," he said.

"And John, are you glad you studied?"

"Yes," came the answer, slowly but positively.

She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, "I wish I was unhappy, — and — and," putting both arms about his neck, "I think I am, a little, John."

The final scene of the story is as incisively conceived and powerfully wrought as any I know. John Jones courageously saves his sister from being raped by white John, for which he is lynched. Joyce Carol Oates has rightly included the essay in her collection of the fifty-five best essays of the twentieth century.

On my reading, DuBois' most blistering indictment gets issued in one simple line. Speaking of the two worlds, the black world and the white world, DuBois says: "And neither world thought the other world's thought, save with vague unrest." When people do think each other's thoughts, DuBois eventually goes on to suggest, sometimes they get unhappy, and sometimes they get angry, and sometimes they get tragically violent.

But out of the ashes of tragedy arises the possibility that the future can be different from the past. When one person has the courage to bear witness to another person's pain, when one people has the courage to bear witness to another people's suffering, when one world has the courage to think the other world's thought — then sometimes what's past can be transformed by what's possible. As Carolyn Forché suggests with her image of the colonel's collection of ears pressed to the ground, it depends on whether anyone is listening.

If so, they will doubtless hear singing — the singing about the dark times. Singing soothes broken minds and comforts broken hearts. It makes suffering somehow bearable and hope somehow possible. It welcomes the glimmer of a brighter dawn. Yes, there will be singing.