

“Creating Possibility”
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, Senior Minister
At All Souls Unitarian Church on January 16, 2005

Do you realize the power of your words? Listen to this true story from “The Whisper Test” by Mary Ann Bird. She writes:

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. When schoolmates asked “what happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me. There was, however, a teacher in the 2nd grade who we all adored – Mrs. Leonard. She was short, round, happy – a sparkling lady. Annually we had a hearing test. ... Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back— things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?” I waited there for those words that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in her whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

What we say matters. Our words have the power to create reality and to open up (or close down) new worlds of possibility. And yet we are often so careless with our speech. In the book of Genesis, God creates the world with words. “God said let there be light, and there was light.” It is important that we realize how we also create the world we live in with our words.

This week, Tulsa was rocked by a powerful force of nature. His name was Ben Zander. He came to teach us the Art of Possibility. In the book by that title that he co-authored with his wife Roz, it says, “In the realm of possibility...[when we decide] the essence of a child is joy...joy she becomes. Our small business attracts the label the ‘Can-do Company’ and that is exactly who we are.”

It was in this vein that a small group of the Board of Trustees members and I began a process last month to reexamine the vision and mission of this congregation. In the coming year I look forward to the entire congregation engaging in this discussion about the mission and vision of All Souls for the 21st century. In our small group we came up with the mission: "To realize our highest calling by uniting our great gifts with the world's great needs." This mission recognizes that every person is gifted and that one of our major religious tasks is to discover our gifts and unique talents, and then to use them for the common good. It's also an affirmation that our church as a whole has gifts and that we must utilize our collective gifts for the good of all. From the mission, and its affirmation of human giftedness and contribution, we came up with the vision of being "The model church of generosity, abundance, and possibility."

It's amazing that in just the few weeks that we've been talking about it, the congregation voted to give away our Sunday offerings every week to worthy causes. And from that decision we have already raised and given away \$9,000 in three weeks. After this morning the amount must be over \$10,000. To put that in perspective, we only raised \$18,000 in 52 weeks last year, when our collection was taken up for ourselves. It's only January 16th and we're already over half way to that amount. I don't know about you, but it thrills me to think of being part of a congregation that sees its vision as modeling lives of possibility and generosity and abundance.

To this end, it was a small group from within this church that started the Tulsa Leadership Development Forum (TDLF). They brought us Ben Zander and they packed a 1,500-seat auditorium with leaders from around Greater Tulsa to begin a conversation on possibility for our city. Some of Tulsa's top business leaders, leaders of non-profits,

and politicians were there. Ben Zander has numerous stories about ways that his work has transformed corporations, individuals, and communities from Europe to Venezuela and beyond. But he said he's never seen an entire city begin such a conversation. In my introduction on Thursday night, I tried to set a context for what TLDF is trying to do. I explained that we are trying to start a conversation in the greater Tulsa area to help determine a common vision for our city and its neighbors, because we know that Tulsa is a unique city that lies in the heart of America. What TDLF has done is something extraordinary that has already begun to expand out like the ripples of a stone tossed into a large pond.

As I explained that night, Tulsa is a city that lives not only at the center of our nation geographically, but we live at the heart of the American experience. And the American experience has always been infused with the idea that we can create a city on a hill and be a light unto the nations of the world. This was a favorite adage of Ronald Reagan when he was President, but it came from John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. When he sailed to the new world on the ship "The Arbella" in 1630 with a group of Puritans, he stopped the ship before they landed so that nobody could get off and miss what he had to say – as a minister I can appreciate that little maneuver – and he preached a sermon to all the people on board. In it he said: "We shall be as a city upon a hill, and become a light unto the nations of the world."

Now remember, these people were about to land on a remote, inhospitable, and undeveloped corner of the earth. And he didn't say, "Let's try to cobble together some homes for our families." He said, "Let us create a city upon a hill and change the entire

world.” We mustn’t forget that the people who settled this country were not seeking freedom from something as much as they were seeking freedom for something. They wanted freedom for nothing less than to change human history. Our national culture, and political discourse, have always tended towards the idea that we Americans can create something the world has never seen before, and in so doing we can show the world a new and better way to live. In my experience, Americans really care about one another and the world. And when we care, there’s no limit to what we can do. This spirit of possibility and the spirit of caring and sharing is the flame that lights the American legacy. May we be bearers of that vision – and that sense of possibility. It involves knowing that our city matters and that our individual lives make a difference, because the future of Tulsa, like the future of this nation, will depend on what’s in the hearts and conscience of its people (you and me).

It will also depend on our beliefs about ourselves. Zander calls this “Giving an A.” He says that one way to get out of the realm of competition and limitation is to give everyone an “A” grade from the beginning. When I first heard this, I thought it was crazy. But I’ve come to see that it’s really quite profound. Of course, just giving someone an “A” does not make them exceptional. What it does is transform us, the person giving the grade. Once we are transformed, the relationship shifts – it has to – and the person we are grading, so to speak, has a new possibility to live into. Giving others an “A” changes the only person we can really change, and that’s ourselves. But as the story of that precious little girl, Mary Ann, at the beginning of this sermon demonstrates our attitude about another person can have a powerful effect.

Regarding leadership, Zander tells us, “Leaders must never underestimate the power of those they lead to realize what the leader is dreaming.” He gave the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow. He said, “What if Martin Luther King, Jr. said “I have a dream...but I don’t know if they are really up to it.” Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life provides us with one of the best examples of possibility thinking and leadership in the past 50 years. And talk about giving people an “A”! King, inspired as he was by Jesus, taught his followers to “love their enemies.” He knew that hate only begets more hate, and that love has the power to transform. So King instructed his collaborators to love those who were hitting them and spitting on them and blasting them with fire hoses and epithets. He knew that if he and the others came towards their opponents with hate in their heart and on their faces, that their opponents would feel even more justified in hitting them. But if they approached those who hated them with love, and without raised hands or fists, then those who hit them would have to go home eventually, and live with themselves at the end of the day. It was his belief that the act of hurting a non-violent protester (who acted with love) could transform the conscience of the perpetrators of the violence eventually, and even more importantly, it could transform a nation who witnessed it by exposing the evil that motivated the violence. If that’s not giving an “A”, I don’t know what is!

And the amazing thing is, it worked, and it changed the course of human history. The practice of giving an “A” is that powerful. Think of the courage it must take to give an “A” when the person you are giving it to hates you and is willing to hurt you. It’s hard enough sometimes for us to give an “A” to the people we love – to our spouses or our parents or others.

Zander told a story at Edison High School last week about a mother rushing into a burning building to save her child. It's not courage, he reminds us, that causes a mother to do it. It's love. And we know that every mother would do it for her child without even thinking. So Zander tells us that when we aren't so sure we have what it takes to muster the courage to do something extraordinary, we need to realize what it really takes is love. For people who have trouble giving their mother an "A", it might help to remember what any mother would do for her child in a burning building. There's an article in People magazine about a mother in the Tsunami who had a 2 year old and a 5 year old child in her arms. She realized that she couldn't hold on to both of them or they would all be drowned. So she had to choose. Can you imagine? She knew that letting go of her 2 year old daughter would mean instant death for the baby. So she decided to let go of her 5 year old boy. She literally had to peel him off of her. Hours later, when she and the baby were finally safe, they were reunited with the children's father who had been on higher ground. Miraculously, they later found their son alive. He had been pushed against a wooden door and he hung on for over three hours to save his life.

Ben Zander told this story at the high school and told the students who had little brothers that if they had any trouble giving their little brother an "A" they could keep in mind that their little brother could also survive for three hours on a door in a tsunami. The mother must have given the boy an "A" too, when she pushed him away she surely told him he could do it, he could save himself. That "A" may have saved his life.

In the case of Martin Luther King, Jr., his ability to love his enemies came from a sense of common human brotherhood. As he explained it in the sermon excerpt we

read this morning, the kind of love we must have for our enemies is agape love or divine love. It's the sense that we're all lovable in the eyes of the Eternal. It's an affirmation of our essential nature, rather than our current behavior. He even went on to say that he could love these people, even though he didn't like them. And he tells us that he was glad Jesus did not instruct us to like our enemies, because that would be a lot harder. Loving others, in an agape sense, means being able to hold them in our hearts, knowing that at their core there's a divine essence and that at the core we are not so different from them. And it's because of that essential human connection that we have the capacity to be transformed and transformational.

As a minister, I find myself frequently in hospital intensive care waiting rooms. That experience has opened me to humanity's true interconnectedness. As author Wes Seelinger writes in "One Inch From the Fence":

The intensive care waiting room is different from any other place in the world. And the people who wait are different. They cannot do enough for each other. No one is rude. The distinctions of race and class melt away. A person is a father first, a black man second. The garbage man loves his wife as much as the university professor loves his. Each person pulls for everyone else...In the ICU waiting room...everyone knows that loving someone else is what life is all about.

Giving others an "A" is about bringing the waiting room experience into our daily lives. It's a practice that transforms your life. As Rabbi Harold Kushner reminds us regarding creating social change, "We don't only vote in elections. The small choices and decisions we make a hundred times a day add up to determine the kind of world we live in."

Just imagine the possibilities! Besides practice, all it really takes is love. So, with that in mind, let's try this little hearing test. If you can hear what I say, repeat it back. "I give you an 'A.' I love you. Amen."