

Reflections on the Summer 2011

A Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tom Goldsmith
First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City

August 28, 2011

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For many years now I begin the first Sunday back to church by briefing the congregation on the news from Bolinas, a town located along the coast of West Marin and where time stopped somewhere in the remarkable era of hippy culture. For those of you who are new or unfamiliar with Bolinas, it's a town that attracted a lot of hippies back in 1971 who went there to clean up an oil spill. When they realized there were more of them than there were locals, they decided to stay and just run the town. All road signs meant to direct people to Bolinas were torn down by the newly formed Bolinas Border Patrol. No road signs to Bolinas exist even today.

All these old hippies are still there, never having guessed back in the day that the time would ever come when they'd all be carrying medical marijuana cards and it would be...that easy. Sometimes prayers are answered! Whenever I'm in Bolinas, and rest assured it is only when in Bolinas, I get this urge to grow a gray ponytail. Then I would be absolutely indistinguishable from anyone else...male or female.

Looking for a new way to describe Bolinas for those who have heard my old tales, I searched the Internet and found this very succinct yet accurate description: "Bolinas is artists, musicians, freaks, surfers, nudists, and dogs running after waves." That pretty much sums it up...and that's what energizes me.

But this summer was a little different for Mary and me since we took our dog Bo with us. Bolinas is his name's sake. He's a six-year old black lab mix, totally phobic about water. Last fall I had to rescue him from the 6-inch creek running down Emigration Canyon. He was paralyzed, couldn't get out. But this summer after 14 hours in the car we finally got to Bolinas Beach and he lost his mind. He chased a pelican right into the depths of the ocean before he realized his own foolishness. But the old dog discovered a new trick and started paddling at first, but then caught a wave and rode back to where he could safely stand once again. He became a surfer dude in Bolinas. The town sort of has that affect on all creatures, once they find it.

Surfing is big in Bolinas, and if Bo wasn't running the shore at breakneck speed and keeping the beach free of birds, he would sit and contemplate the surfers. From his perspective it had to seem that these people were just walking on water, and he was mulling the whole thing over in his mind. So I thought I'd tell him about Jesus, walking on water, enticing his disciple Peter to jump out of the boat and walk towards him. Peter did all right initially but then freaked out and began to sink until Jesus lifted him up again and said "Ye of little faith why did you doubt?"

But Bo wasn't too interested in stories about Jesus. He just wanted to figure out surfing. But as I sat there with him looking out at the horizon after the fog had lifted

by early afternoon, I thought a great deal about faith and doubt, prompted mainly by reflecting on the events of the summer through the eyes of a startlingly new perspective: That of a grandfather. Mary's oldest daughter gave birth to Charlotte on July 6th, and they live less than hour away from Bolinas. By the time I got to see Charlotte for the first time in August, she was already quite the young lady at five weeks, with a personality I doubt will ever change. Unfortunately I can't show you a picture of her because I don't have one of those phones that do everything for us we could possibly imagine. I still find it curious when Mary offers to show pictures of the baby and grabs her phone for that purpose...and then moves her finger along the screen in what appears the sign of the cross.

So you'll just have to take my word for it that she's as beautiful as any first grandchild could ever be, and I was captivated by her long and beautiful fingers. I fully expect her to be a pianist, and that she will be playing the prelude for us in church before she's five.

But Charlotte weighed heavily in my thoughts as I studied the horizon, the surf, the tides. There's an uneasy feeling in the world these days, and I believe this past summer contributed a lot to my doubts about where the human race is headed. The little faith I may have had to begin with, slowly escaped from somewhere deep within my soul, which is why this morning's reading was so important to me...probably to all of us: We stand singing and shouting at the gates of Hope... We must bear witness to the possibility of living with the dignity, bravery, and gladness that befits a human being.

But something happened this summer....especially this summer that made me doubt and feel that I was sinking just like Peter did for his lack of faith. I think that someday we will look back to the summer of 2011 as a turning point in either the demise of civilization or (perhaps) the beginnings of restoring sanity and compassion. Our days, weeks, months, and years have always been filled by events we wish had never happened. But a turning point is different – in that it comes as a decisive moment when you can feel and see and sense a change in direction like tides changing their current.

The debt ceiling crisis this summer, which is far from over, revealed a kind of callous heart that had once been unthinkable among legislators from any political party. Maintaining a low tax level for America's richest 2% while assuring that huge corporations would continue to operate with unrealistic tax advantages, and then insisting that the budget cuts be made to so-called entitlement programs has brought city and state governments around the country to their knees.

I prefer the term "vital services" to "entitlement." At this point in time, almost every state in the country will spend less on vital services in 2012 than they did in 2008 even though there are more poor people on the Medicaid rolls and more children in public schools. In Arizona, 100,000 low-income people will be kept out of Medicaid. New Jersey has cancelled Medicaid coverage for 23,000 parents. Texas...ah,

Texas...eliminated prekindergarten money for 100,000 children. Ohio and Pennsylvania are cutting school aid by 7%, which in Ohio is the equivalent to 14,000 teachers' salaries.

All 50 states combined have eliminated 577,000 jobs from state and local governments since 2008 and more layoffs are likely. Washington has grown deaf to the cry of human pain and suffering. We saw so clearly this summer the choices that were made.

Although nothing was terribly new – or as Leonard Cohen wrote some 40 years ago: The poor stay poor. The rich get rich. That's how it goes. Everybody knows. ---So there's nothing really terribly new about all of this, except for a kind of fury that ignited this summer in England, Greece, Spain, and Portugal. In the 27-nation European Union, unemployment among youth stands at 20%. In Spain it's almost 46%. In Israel the summer brought 250,000 Israelis into the streets protesting the lack of affordable housing. Our nation will not be exempt from the rage against failing economies where the youth especially feel hopelessness and powerlessness. As one slogan from Israel phrased it which I think captures the essence of it all: We are fighting for an accessible future.

As Thomas Friedman wrote a few weeks ago: "Across the world, a lot of middle and lower middle-class people now feel that the future is out of their grasp..." And I as a father of 20-somethings and 30-somethings and as a grandfather – can no longer ignore the future as a real catastrophe facing the young and those still to grace this world in time to come.

This summer the governor of Texas, Rick Perry, came out as a national figure vying for the presidency. I assume that if he were elected we would no longer need FEMA because he gets all the emergency assistance he needs by praying to God. Like the drought in Texas. Well, some parts of the country got plenty of rain from hurricane Irene but the water somehow missed Texas. I don't know if this is due to Perry's poor geographic instructions, or because God got confused and thought Texas had actually seceded.

A journalist from I believe a newspaper in Austin, Richard Parker wrote a piece which I think stands as a great metaphor for our worries for future generations. He writes: "Droughts have come to Texas before, but this time it's a killing heat that grips the state. Even the tough, rangy whitetail deer are starting to die. Last spring an old, dark-faced doe that comes around from time to time stood in my front yard, her body plump with pregnancy. But her ribs were starting to show; the fawn inside was unlikely to make it far past birth."

Let me add a post-script, which I just learned the other day. Texas remains the one state in the whole country that refuses to carry out greenhouse gas regulations as introduced recently by the EPA. When will people begin to accept the science of climate change?

This summer has been a turning point we can look back on some day. Even the president has made the decision to resume offshore drilling, and open explorations into the fragile and delicate arctic eco systems for drilling. Or perhaps we can see the turning point, exemplified by Tim DeChristopher's sentencing, where the time for outrage has arrived and civil disobedience has sprung up around the country for one reason only: To make the future accessible.

The mass killings in Norway this summer, will serve as a turning point in the resurgence of anti-immigrant fervor. In much of Europe the backlash against Islam raises concern over the future of multiculturalism, which only mirrors our own social unease and anxiety in this country about people labeled as "other."

It was not a pretty summer. For decades, the group called Americans for Tax Reform has been pressing politicians to sign a pledge not to vote for any tax increase under any circumstance. But this summer we're reeling finally from the effects of Grover Norquist (sounds like a Muppet) who got 234 House Republicans to sign the pledge. Only six refrained. For Norquist and his acolytes, compromise is unthinkable, and thus the very heart of politics that moves the country forward (namely compromise) has been banished from the lexicon and from the House of Representatives altogether. As bad as politics sometimes gets, this summer will always be considered a turning point, and I fear it will be remembered as the decisive moment our nation turned its back on the poor and opened its arms to Christ; a contradiction of enormous magnitude. I am reminded of the aphorism that says that we have just enough religion to know how to hate, but not enough to know how to love.

Doubt haunts my mind as I ponder "whither" our nation and our planet. Where my faith in human compassion and our capacity for rational decision-making once allowed me to jump out of the boat and walk the water strong in my beliefs, I have felt that sinking feeling that accompanies a loss of faith. I look for the hand of goodness and mercy to hold me up; I look for a people willing to be selfless in order to keep me afloat – selfless for the sake of their grandchildren and mine.

When Jesus admonished us to love our neighbors – sometimes referred to as his "executive summary," we come to understand the fundamental moral flaw of not only failing to love our neighbor but our unwillingness to love our neighbor. This is what I find so incomprehensible.

But isn't the greatest challenge to our faith to live wisely when darkness falls. Don't we keep ourselves from drowning by planting ourselves at the Gates of Hope? A lonely place at times, a place of resistance and defiance, a place from which you see the world as it is...and as it could be.

Is this not why we attend this church? Is it not to give each other hope and strength as we envision the world as it should be, and to give each other courage in defying and resisting the movement that eagerly seeks to strip away the worth and dignity of all people.

Welcome back to church. We're going to be plenty busy. We'll need to figure out this past summer as a turning point. Will it mean a time when we really began to go down the tubes, or will it be a turning point that finally restored our faith and ignited our fiery spirit? Will we be able to hold on to that hand of love and peace and justice and sustainability...providing enough faith for us to jump out of the boat and walk on water? May we secure a viable future for all our children and their children. This is our mission, our hope, and our faith. Amen