

**CHURCH SERVICE**  
**OCTOBER 2024**  
**BARBARA A. MEYERS**

**OPENING WORDS**

A QUECHUA INSPIRED PRAYER FROM PERU

GREAT CREATOR, GRANT ME THE LIGHT OF WISDOM.

MOTHER EARTH, BOUNTIFUL SOURCE,  
HELP ME DRAW STRENGTH FROM THE GROUND BENEATH MY FEET.

FATHER SUN, RADIANT CHILD,  
FILL ME WITH THE WARMTH AND ENERGY TO FACE MY TRIALS.

MOUNTAIN SPIRITS, WHO WALK THE WIND,  
GUIDE ME ON THE PATH OF RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION.

MAY THE SACRED WATERS CLEANSE MY SOUL,  
AND MAY THE FIRES OF TRANSFORMATION FORGE MY SPIRIT.

IN UNITY WITH ALL LIVING BEINGS,  
I EMBRACE THE POWER WITHIN ME,  
TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES AND GROW EVER STRONGER

## **CHURCH SERVICE**

**OCTOBER 27, 2024**

**BARBARA A. MEYERS, LICSW**

### **WORDS FOR REFLECTION**

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again. Maya Angelou

### **SERMON**

#### **WHAT LIES BENEATH**

When I look back over the years that I have been coming here, I note that I have often spoken about the dangers, some seen and others unseen, that concern me as we seek to make meaning in our own lives and in the life of the planet. Always, I seek to offer hope and action for meeting those dangers. And I come today to do likewise

Today, I come to speak about the very real dangers to our democracy. Over 200 years ago, our forefathers crafted a form of government previously unknown in the civilized world. It reflected a belief in a government of, for, and by the people – a government from the ground up not from the top down. There is something both beautiful and daunting about this idea. Imagine a place where everyone is equal, everyone has a fair chance, everyone has a voice, everyone has a responsibility – a place where all are welcome. And in the time of our forefathers that democracy was extended to all white men. It did not include

men of color nor women regardless of color. This underlies the daunting aspect of democracy. Democracy is not a fixed thing. It is a living, evolving concept because it is of, for, and by the people. The people – that means you and I and all the other “you and I’s” living in America.

The very idea of democracy is what we all learned about in school. Our history texts focused on all the ways our nation lived out the ideals of democracy at home and abroad. And we all believed in the idea. It was not until my young adulthood that I awakened to the chasm between the ideals of democracy and its reality. It came first with the Supreme Court’s decision that overturned segregation in education in the mid-fifties. Then the sixties brought the fight for civil rights. Growing up in the north, in a white community and a white culture, my naivete ran headlong into the reality of a nation that existed only for whites, especially white men being superior and privileged by their whiteness. It was a time of anger, fear, and rage. In horror, we watched on black and white television screens as small bodies were moved from a church basement; as young black children were escorted to school while being spat upon and threatened by white parents and children; and as police attacked non-violent marchers with dogs, chains, and water hoses. This was America in the 60’s. It was a time of fear, anger, unrest, and despair. It was also a time of great courage. But, there was a distinct feeling of having lost our way as a nation.

In some ways, these same feelings have returned today. There is fear, anger, rage and despair. There are questions about whether our democracy will survive, even whether it should survive. In the years between the sixties and 2000, the Voting Rights Act and Affirmative Action offered opportunities and protections for people of color. People of color now serve in board rooms, higher education, and government. We are beginning to live into the very truth of a government of, for, and by the people reflecting a democracy's capacity to evolve and represent the diversity of its population.

Now the challenges to our democracy come from a segment of our population that has enjoyed its "power over" based simply on the color of their skin.

What we are meeting today is the reality of who we are as a nation. Can we really be a nation of, for, and by all the people or only white people? As I look back over our history, as a nation we have been living through a prolonged adolescence – a nation believing the dream of equality but living a reality of segregation and apartheid. A reality of "me" not "we." A reality of "What can you do for me?" not "How might I contribute to community?"

Repeatedly, we have betrayed people of color. We actively undertook to destroy the Native American culture by slaughtering the buffalo, forcing marches, putting people into reservations, and educating children by disallowing any attempts to speak their native language or practice their rituals. Never have we fully accepted responsibility for what we have done. I note that this

week, the President apologized to our Native Americans for what was perpetrated on families and children through the Boarding Schools. This is a beginning and much more needs to be done, Repeatedly, we have betrayed black people. We passed the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to give them citizenship and equal protection under the law and then Reconstruction and Jim Crow laws took that away. In the 1950's and 60's, we desegregated schools and blacks and whites came together to desegregate lunch counters, buses, bathrooms and water fountains only to have white segregationists shoot, hang, and burn. In response, we passed a Voting Rights Act in 1967 designed to enforce the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments. Then, a white segregationist assassinated Martin Luther King, and the Civil Rights Movement was replaced by the rage of Black Power. Again, there was fear, rage, and despair.

In 2008, we celebrated the election of a Black President and there was great celebration. Beneath the celebration hid the backlash. Those who feared the loss of apartheid redoubled their efforts to undermine the gains. The election in 2016 was directly connected to the election of a Black man in 2008 and all that has transpired since. Affirmative Action has been removed thus making it more difficult, if not impossible, for people of color to advance whether in education, business, or other aspects of our culture. In 2013, the Voting Rights Act was not renewed on grounds that the problem was resolved and protection of voter rights for people of color was no longer needed. As we look around, we see how that is playing out. States around the

country, not just in the South, are actively seeking to remove voters from the rolls.

In summary, the foes of democracy have been working quietly, deliberately, audaciously to undermine the principles of democracy. They are fearful of losing their “power over” and of being invited to share power in a way that may discomfort them. And I believe, we have colluded in this by being asleep or by avoiding our responsibility as citizens in a democracy. At least I have been asleep.

What have we learned? Is this what we want? If not, what can we do about it? Some ideas for the immediate and for the long haul.

- First, we must vote. Voting is the most important gift and the most important responsibility for living in a democracy. But we learned in 2008 and 2012 that voting is not enough. The election of a black President, man or woman, creates a backlash. People will be angry and fearful. I fear for the days and months after this election. A whole segment of our population will be terrified about how their lives will change. And the ground is already being prepared for claiming the election was unfair and illegal. Vote? Absolutely! But there is more we must do than to elect a President if we are to move beyond the adolescent stage of development as a nation.
- Second, we must begin telling the truth of who we have been as a democracy. We must admit to the connection between forced marches and reservations; between slavery, Jim

Crow, lynchings, and mass incarceration; and between our judgments as reflections of how we have devalued other human beings. We cannot stand by and ever allow this to happen again. We must come to terms with our own part and do something to rectify our responsibility. If we do not, our history will continue to corrupt the soul of our nation.

- Third, we must look at how black, brown, and red communities are policed. How members of these communities actually fare in the judicial system. How private penal institutions prey upon the poorest members of our society. We must stop blaming the incarcerated and be curious about how we all have contributed to their situations by enjoying our white privilege and turning our backs.
- Fourth, we must learn how to honor the dignity and worth of every single human being regardless of color, creed, age, ability, or choice of whom to love. That includes those with whom we do not agree. It is too easy to associate only with those with whom we agree. We must work at thinking about how to engage when it is challenging. I am practicing that even with folks with whom I mostly agree. Ask yourself what you do when you hear something that just does not ring true for you? How do you respond or not respond? How might you bring curiosity that disarms and promotes a conversation? This is not easy work. It is often much too easy to just swallow and say nothing and walk away or change the subject. How often do I do this? How often do

you? We must find ways to speak truth with honesty and clarity.

- Fifth, we must learn to stand up to bullies. We have reams of examples in our present culture of how to cave in and allow bullies to have their way. It takes courage to Stand Up. We must assess what values are most important to us. How important is power? How important is it to be true to oneself? What am I willing to lose? Behind every bully is a terrified little child. What would happen if we named their terror? What would happen if we spoke to their terror in an engaging way.
- Sixth, what is presumed here is that we are committed, really committed, to living in a democracy. A democracy that is not perfect, a democracy that is always evolving, a democracy that honors every person. A democracy that asks much of each of us. We cannot just come along for the ride. We must be willing to show up, speak up, act up. What has happened in these last few years shows us how fragile a democracy can be.

In the end, we must see where we went wrong and how we might recreate ourselves in light of who we originally set out to be. This requires an unflinching encounter with the lies at the heart of our history.

I want to live in a country where no one should be made to feel that they are “in this country but not of” this country. I want to live in a country, where everyone has a fair chance regardless of



color, creed, party affiliation, job, or sexual identity. Living in a democracy is not for the faint of heart. It is hard work. I have hope. “To have hope is to run toward the “trouble” to confront the terror and fear, and to face it honestly. This is our only path to salvation. I honor all those who have gone before, all who believed in the idea of democracy and were willing to fight for it not only on the battlefield but in the streets, at the lunch counters, on the buses, in the voting booths, in the jails and were never dissuaded from the dream. I/we can do nothing less.

## **CLOSING WORDS**

In Closing, I want to return to Maya Angelou’s words that I offered for the Meditation. “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” Whatever the outcome of this election, whether we find ourselves in celebration or in grief, we must not turn our backs on the racism and apartheid that continue to exist in America. We must offer our hands to victims and victimizers alike so that we may heal together. To survive as a democracy, we must heal the soul of this nation. May it be so. Amen.