

**Sunday - May 22, 2022**  
**"Religion at the End of the World"**  
**Rev. Ron Phares**

**Story**

This is how I heard an ancient Finnish story about a wizard named Väinämöinen. Väinämöinen is gnarled and wise-eyed in the classic wizarding style. His magic - his creative energy - comes through singing. He would wander in the woods and play his little guitar and sing and magic would happen.

Well, one day he lost his guitar. Maybe it was stolen. Maybe he was, as many wizards are, a little absent minded and he misplaced it. Maybe it lost its ability to stay in tune and, out of frustration, Väinämöinen broke it. Who knows?

At any rate, he found himself without it. And without it, he could not sing. Without singing, no praise, no thanksgiving, no magic, no creation.

And so, weeping for his loss, stumbling through his days like a zombie in a maze, he went looking for his little guitar in the woods, which, coincidentally, had begun to... for lack of a better word, wilt. Branches drooping and cracked. Flowers shriveled up. Insects withdrew and birds stopped singing. Väinämöinen wept.

It was then that Väinämöinen came upon a tree who was also weeping and muttering sadly... Väinämöinen was awestruck. He'd never heard the tree weep before, much less speak. The wizard asked the tree what was the matter?

The tree replied. It said that its life had been hard, that it lived in fear of people carving their initials in its bark or, worse yet, cutting it down for fuel. "It was scary," said the tree. "But I survived all that and, with my family and friends, was even happy most of the time. I know I have been given so much; sunlight, water, shelter, love. But now it seems I'm dying and my family and friends are dying too."

Well, unlike some heroes I know, Väinämöinen was actually very wise. And so he asked, "How can I help?"

And the tree, equally wise, said, "That is kind. But you are just a single person. I don't think there is anything you can do."

"I used to be able to sing," said Väinämöinen, "but I lost my little guitar and now I cannot find my voice and now the forest is dying and I think it's my fault."

And though they were both terribly sad, they found in each other some affinity and comfort, something like love. And in that love, an idea was born. Or maybe not an idea, but... something. A deeper embrace.

"Maybe if I sing with you," said the tree.

And so they sang. And while they did, the forest stirred, a gentle rain fell, and after the rain, dandelions sprang up and then the birds joined in the singing.

When the song ended Väinämöinen found himself crying again. But this time they were not only tears of loss. But also tears of joy and gratitude.

"It's true," said the tree, "there may not be anything you can do as a single person. But there may be something we can do together."

And those were the tree's last words as a tree. Ever so gently it fell to the ground.

Now, I said it was the tree's last words. But I'm not sure if that's true. Väinämöinen very respectfully, very reverently made from the wood of that tree a new guitar. And with that guitar he wandered the woods and sang.

They say it was as if the voice of the tree came through the guitar and sang with Väinämöinen. Whoever heard the song felt their heart break and would begin to cry. But afterwards it was as if a veil had been lifted and everywhere they went, Väinämöinen and his tree, the forest surged back

to life with color, and buzzing, and water, and song. It came alive.

## Reflection

This... what I am about to say... will be inadequate. It will be inadequate because, after I present the problem set, my solution will not contain enough navigational clarity. But more, it will be inadequate because the form itself is inadequate. In a way, the form is the problem set. The sermon, delivered in a liturgy whose old bones are resistant to revitalization given our capacity and calcified expectations, is inadequate.

This is inadequate. Emerson, once Captain Unitarian himself, called us corpse cold in his Unitarian swan song mic drop. Every aged-out young adult who's come up through our youth program that I've spoken with has said the same. But it sort of didn't matter.

We had enough solid citizen types to keep the boat afloat. Meanwhile, we were far enough ahead of the other abrahamic traditions, that those escaping their theologies, politics, and sins found in us a sanctuary that was familiar but different. But now, the well of come-outers has dried up as many of the other traditions have, often as not, opened up theologically and caught up to us politically. Meanwhile, if folks these days escape from one religion, they're more likely to reject all religions.

So our on-ramp has broken down and we have not created a self-sustaining tradition. The boat's still afloat, but we're running out of food. Strangely enough, this on-coming crisis comes at a serendipitous time, where our necessity to recreate ourselves coincides with the same necessity in the broader culture.

As long as progress was a panacea... as long as spraying suburbs with mosquito mist trucks seemed like a good idea... as long as we believed that two steps forward one step back was a winning formula, as long as we measured impact on a line - this... format... this tradition was adequate.

But the line was a lie. We all sold it. We all bought it. I'm no less guilty than anyone else. Our cultural program has externalized our brokenness until it has broken all the world. And now there is no place left to stand, no institution, no eco-range, no past, no future that is not disintegrating beneath our feet. To our children, the future is a tidal wave.

And this should call us into some high terrain. For what this means is that we are now called to be something new. Something remade. The collateral effects of progress have finally reminded us of an ancient truth; our beings and our collective being does not move on a line, Mr. Pinker. No.

No... We do not move on a line. We... reverberate. In all directions. At the risk of being esoteric, I'd say that essentially, we are reverberations. Our impacts are not separate from us and resound in all directions. We resound in all directions.

But the craft in which you currently sit - and by that I do not mean the physical space - this craft in which you sit was built by progress-mind and solutions thinking. And while that is necessary still, it is also no longer adequate. Necessary but not adequate. And so this... this genre of the spirit we have crutched on for centuries... is inadequate. It remains capitalist and consumer-based and, despite our constant warnings, a transactional reflection of our broader culture.

I mean, how many leave here each week with a judgment and critique rather than an experience of the holy? It's not your fault. Nor mine. Not entirely. It's how we have built this tradition. And that's just not what the world needs right now. The world doesn't need more information or more fascinating ideas.

To me, that is easy to see. What is harder to articulate is what we make of the broken pieces of this dying tradition amidst the broken pieces of this dying world. Religion has always been a response to both the trauma and the wonder of life. But I do not think these are separate categories. Vulnerability and love are inextricably linked. I'm not sure how you can have one without the other.

We have for so long refused to be vulnerable. Instead, we have covered our wounds with a quick patch of fascination or, at times, outrage, or, at best, acceptance. We have pasted over our trauma with the anesthetic of consumerism, hedonism, and the anti-christ of status fetish. This felt like security or, at least a facsimile of purpose, but really was just a false sense self-righteousness and a misplaced faith that that would save us. It won't.

And this place, this tradition, this genre is a product of that mindset either as reflection of or refuge from. In the face of extinction, it is no longer adequate. That, my friends, is the problem set.

We are navigating an apocalypse in a craft built of the motivational posters of the privileged. And for a long time that kind of craft served. But it wasn't the apocalypse and they are no longer adequate.

What to do? I think there is a clue in the tale of Vainamoinen. Vainamoinen only heard the tree when his heart was broken. They were able to see each other through their cardinal cracks. And through that connection communion occurred. And through that communion magic was made and life restored.

It might be that even speculating on solutions just doubles down on the problem when what's most needed is a simply to sit together in our vulnerability and let the magic emerge. And look, we are vulnerable. Maybe that is the thing we're meant to know now, battered by pandemic and pandemic response and the increasingly experienced onset of ecological tragedy. Our vulnerability is not a church camp confessional. And if you're not seeing it you are missing your whole life.

I think I may be missing my whole life.

We are all suffering from chronic stress. Chronic stress does not allow us to return to homeostasis and puts us in a constant state of fight, flight, or freeze. Chronic stress is a powder keg. Do you not see that playing out across our entire world, our country, our congregation? The consequences of

chronic stress are not only social, but biological. Chronic pain, depression, heart disease.

Two plus years of pandemic, isolation, and fear in a wicked duet with heat domes, forest fires, and floods. And the consequences of fight, flight, or freeze on our loves and bodies. Friends, we're all traumatized. I love you and I'm sorry.

It may not seem to make any sense to turn into the trauma. But that is indeed the path out of it and perhaps the path out of even its causes. To reveal our heartbreak for what we've done, what's likely to come, what's lost and never was. Like Väinämöinen, who found re-creation by recognizing and reverberating with the grief of another.

I have seen it. In trusted circle with the hurting, following their pain until it met my own. And in that meeting a new way emerged. While the new way did not erase our traumas, it did mitigate their grip and allowed something amazing to happen between us and all the world around us, something like love.

The whole world appeared more vibrant. And yes, the sensation was like dreaming with your eyes wide open. For we had come alive. I could ask for not another day were this moment only filled with that feeling for all here. It dwarfs eternity.

That would be adequate. That would measure up to all our looming consequences. And would change us so profoundly that, I believe, it may reveal new ways of living that could yet give rise to some saving grace... or simply make of our demise something beautiful enough that the cost would be justified.

So how do we do that? Well, I told you this would be inadequate.

I think we need to reimagine church. We need to reclaim religion as an engine rather than a reflection or response. We can generate magic that changes ourselves and the world. But first we have to change.

As mundane as it may seem, I actually think the spirit of the 8th Principle is an avenue into vulnerability. Dismantling barriers in ourselves and our institutions. We can also wonder about how we do Sundays. I don't think that this form is presently adequate to the apocalypse. Religion at the end of the world won't look like this. And if we don't figure it out in the right way, it's going to look like Q-anon.

Say what you will, it's meeting a need. It also points to the old saw that hurt people hurt people. But hurt people who are healing are also the best healers. Let us be healing healers. Let hope come from where the hurt comes from.

A religion relevant to the end of the world won't be a hymn sandwich proposition. Church won't look like this. We don't need more information or fascination, self-congratulation or outrage. We need more exposure, experience, & fundamental connection. We need to see each other's terror and allow that connection to generate a blessing.

It is as the poet Jan Richardson writes:

...there is...nothing that cries out more  
for a blessing  
than when a world  
is falling apart.  
This blessing  
will not fix you  
will not mend you  
will not give you  
false comfort...  
It will simply  
sit itself beside you  
among the shards  
and gently turn your face  
toward the direction  
from which the light  
will come...

As we find faith in something other than solutions,  
may such a blessing guide our wide eyed dreams.