

**“In Times of Success and Failure or, Sa Kadaugan ug Kapakyasan”
a sermon by Rev. Brian J. Kiely
Unitarian Church of Edmonton,
September 19, 2010**

This summer I visited the Philippines on behalf of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. I was invited to preach to the Caican congregation, a rural seaside village about 40 km south of Dumaguette city on the Island of Negros. The people are very poor and either fish or work in rice or sugarcane fields.

The sermon was translated into Cabuyan – the local dialect. My translator and I took turns reading aloud. I have written the sermon in the theological language appropriate to Filipino Unitarian Universalism and illustrated it with an example from a social issue that is of great concern to |UU Church of the Philippines President, Rev. Rebecca Siennes.

Reading: In Times of Success and Failure

By Pere Carl Q. Siennes

Great God,

Help us to have faith that neither success nor failure will separate us from your love.

In our success, cause us to understand that what we achieve, we could lose.

In our failure, make us perceive that tomorrow is a new day,

And give us a humble heart to appreciate those days that are yet to come.

Promise us that your requirements are a clean conscience, a loving spirit, and a forgiving heart.

Amen.

Sermon

Thank you for inviting me into your church today. I bring greetings from Unitarian Universalists around the world. The International Council helps Unitarian groups around the world to meet each other and to learn from each other. The ICUU Principles are:

- Liberty of conscience and individual thought in matters of faith
- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice and compassion in human relations
- Responsible stewardship of the earth's living system
- And our commitment to democratic principles

Today I wish to speak to you about Carl Siennes reading and how this Filipino prayers supports our Principles. I realize that I am a stranger from far away, and maybe have no right to tell you how to live well. But I am called to my position to tell the truth as I see it, and I see a great deal of truth in this prayer.

“Neither success nor failure separates us from your love.” To me this is the most important sentence in Pere Siennes’ beautiful prayer.

God is constant, in us, around us, above us, below us. God’s love cannot be withdrawn, for God is not a human being. God is not small minded or mean. God is not jealous or greedy. God does not suffer from our frailties. God is always there, like a pool of clear water, like the sun that gives life, like the breeze that cools us. We may not always think about the pool or the sun or the breeze... or about God, but they are

still there, available to us when we need them. God is always there whether we succeed or fail, whether we are virtuous or sinful. God is available to us in our relationships, in our daily work, in our love of wives and husbands and in our love of children. God is available to us when we greet our neighbours.

We are one with God, just like we are one with Nature. But as with our relationship to Nature, sometimes we forget we are part of it, especially those of us who live in cities. The same is true with the Divine. Sometimes we forget it is there, all around us. Sometimes we ignore God's presence in our lives. Sometimes we just forget to pay attention. Sometimes when our desires are too great we deliberately block out this love.

That is when we turn away from God, make ourselves more important than other people, make ourselves more important than the things that make life good. We betray ourselves, our friends and our family.

What happens then? When we turn away from God we act selfishly. Perhaps we cheat or steal. Maybe we lose our tempers and do violence to wives and children. Maybe we say things that are hateful to husbands and brothers or the people we work with.

And sometimes turning away from god can become the habit – the bad habit – of a whole village – or a whole region or a whole island. Terrible things can happen then. Hitting wives and children can seem okay, even normal. This must never be normal, this must never be alright. Wives and children have the same God in them that men have.

Inside them? Yes! Did I not say that God is everywhere in us and around us. That means that God is in us as well. To harm another being with fists or feet or even mean words is to raise your hand or your voice against God! This must not be. It is not right.

We can only feel the love of God that surrounds us when we open ourselves to the feeling. Pere Siennes says it right there in his prayer, "Promise us that your requirements are a clean conscience, a loving spirit, and a forgiving heart." It is interesting that he put these three virtues together.

Learning to ignore the divine can become a bad habit. If we do it too often or for too long, it begins to seem that this is how we should live. But that's wrong.

A bad habit is still a bad habit no matter how long we have it. Bad habits in life like drinking too much can kill our bodies. The bad habit of ignoring the God inside us can kill our souls.

The first thing we need to turn back into that feeling of connection and welcome is a clear conscience.

My father was a Catholic. Back in the 1930's he studied to be a priest, but left before he finished his vows. The priests told him that his family needed him more than God did to help in their business.

My father never lost his faith, which was very loving and not harsh at all. Some priests and ministers preach only sin and punishment. My father spoke only of forgiveness, renewal and turning back to the love of God.

The first step for him was also a clear conscience. He taught me how to do an examination of my conscience. That meant pausing in the quiet of the church or some other calm place and thinking back over the past few days or weeks of my life.

How had I acted? Had I treated others as I would have them treat me? Had I been honest? Had I been faithful? Had I been lazy at work? Had I hurt someone to whom I now had to make amends?

In other words, the examination demanded that I imagine my relationship with all around me, with family and friends, with employers and co-workers, with neighbours and friends, with animals in my care, with the world around me.

All of these things are about our relationship with the oneness of God, the wholeness of the divine that is all around us. Was I on track? Was I still in right relationship?

The Jewish word for sin 'hat' means "missing the mark". We set a goal for our life to be close to God, to live well. When we sin or do injustice, we veer off track and miss that mark.

So I like still to do an examination of conscience. If I do it deeply and honestly then I can see where I have failed and decide to change my ways, ask forgiveness of those I have hurt and start to get back on track. That is what helps me come back to a clear conscience.

The second virtue Pere Siennes names is a loving spirit. Notice he says 'loving spirit' and not just 'love'. A loving spirit is more than an emotion, it is an attitude, a disposition, a way of facing the world.

Love is wonderful when it is between husband and wife, between parent and child even between friends. There is not much better than loving someone.

But Pere Siennes wants us to see something bigger than that wonderful feeling. When we are aware that God is all around us, and when we accept that we are part of the divine and that the divine is part of us then we can have a loving spirit.

A loving spirit looks at everything in village, in Nature, in everything we experience and welcomes it openly. A loving spirit even tries to understand the actions of enemies, of hate-filled people in hopes of making friends and making peace. A loving spirit builds bridges in family, in community and in country. A loving spirit is our truest expression of the God within us and around us. A loving spirit is the ocean in which the Divine swims.

When we cultivate our loving spirit we are turning towards God.

Finally, Pere Siennes says we need a forgiving heart. This is really just part of the loving spirit. If we see the world in a loving way, we are usually willing to forgive those who harm us.

But here I do not mean forgiving every harmful and hurtful action done against us. A wife who is beaten by an angry husband may forgive once or twice or even three times. But if the violence continues, if the husband turns away from the loving spirit and turns away from God, I am not sure the wife should keep forgiving.

More importantly I am not sure the village should keep forgiving the violence. Violence only begets more violence. Do you want your villages and even your church to be governed by violence? A wife who is beaten needs the help of the women and the men who are her family and neighbours.

Maybe she is not a perfect wife. Maybe she is not a perfect person...but who among us is? Does that mean she deserves to be beaten? I say no. Pere Siennes says no.

Does she not have the same inherent worth and dignity as anyone else? I say

yes. Should she be safe? Yes.

How can we live with clear conscience and a loving spirit if we allow one in the community to be beaten and hurt?

For a village to permit continuing violence is to allow another bad habit, just like too much drinking or gambling. It is a habit that will kill the heart and the beauty of the community.

The community must protect its weakest members or it is not a community at all.

Yes, we must forgive, but only when someone shows that they are willing to turn back towards God's loving spirit. If they refuse to do so, we must not let them poison our communities.

Yes, we must always be ready to forgive, but the sinner must also decide to turn back to God before we do.

Great God,

Help us to have faith that neither success nor failure will separate us from your love...

Promise us that your requirements are a clean conscience, a loving spirit, and a forgiving heart.

Amen.