

Liberal Religion and the Real World: Love
A Sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
At the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING

by Carter Heyward

Love, like truth and beauty, is concrete. Love is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment, attachment, or being “drawn toward.” Love is active, effective, a matter of making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation with one’s friends and enemies. Love creates righteousness, or justice, here on earth. To make love is to make justice. As advocates and activists for justice know, loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. People working today on behalf of women, blacks, lesbians and gay men, the aging, the poor in this country and elsewhere know that making justice is not a warm, fuzzy experience. I think also that sexual lovers and good friends know that the most compelling relationships demand hard work, patience, and a willingness to endure tensions and anxiety in creating mutually empowering bonds.

For this reason loving involves *commitment*. We are not automatic lovers of self, others, world, or God. Love does not just happen... Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is a choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.

“Grandmother” by Marilyn Krysl

I wasn’t there when your body, signaling, woke you
When you sat, moving yourself to the edge, and stood
and knew July by its heat and wondered what time it was
and steadied yourself, sat down, and called out for my mother

When she came, her impatience visible in the air around her
because it was hot and something in a pot needed stirring
When she helped you into the slip worn thin by your patience
When she asked you which dress you wanted to wear

and when you pulled on the stockings yourself, and the garters
and stepped into your shoes and looked down and knew
and did not tell my mother you knew
When you asked her please would she comb your hair

When you sat down to the meal with my mother and father
and my father asked *would you like some of this and some of this*
When you lifted the glass and gazed through the water's prism
When you drank, swallow by swallow, all of the water

and opened the napkin but did not pick up the fork
When you folded the napkin and pushed back the plate,
pushed back the chair and stood with no help from anyone
and turned, saying nothing, and walked out of the room

When they called you When you did not answer
When you shut the door and looked at your face in the mirror
Your face that friend of long standing, that trustworthy sister
When you took this face in your hands to bid it goodbye

and when you said to them *I want to lie down now*
When they laid you down and covered you with a sheet
and you said *Go on now, go eat* and they did
because they had worked and were hungry and this had happened before

When you lay back in it to let it have you
knowing what you had waited for patiently and impatiently
what you had longed and hoped for and abandoned longing and hoping for
and prayed for and not received was finally here

When you lay back in it to let it have you
When you heard for the last time the clink of the silver
and let go the sheet, let go light on the earth
When your breath ceased to be a thing that belonged to you

I wasn't there
Forgive me
I wasn't there

SERMON

For the last couple of weeks, I have been exploring with you realities of the world which I believe pose a particular challenge to Unitarian Universalists. I began by talking about suffering, and our discomfort with fully acknowledging and living with the suffering that is a part of human existence, both the suffering of others and, perhaps even more difficult for us, our own suffering. Last week I spoke about evil. About the liberal religious understanding of human nature and my concern that it does not leave enough room for the truth of the evil that each one of us can and does do to ourselves and to one another. About the difficulty of believing in the divine spark

within each one of us while still owning up to the dangerous, destructive, selfish, cruel parts of ourselves as well.

At first glance, this morning's topic—love—may seem quite different than the previous two. And yet, not only do I think that love presents a similar challenge to us, I also believe that part of the reason love is so hard for us is precisely because of our difficulty accepting suffering and evil. That only when we have wrestled well with these first two realities will we be able to love in the ways we hope to.

Love, of course, can mean countless different things. It is one of those words that is both overused almost to the point of meaninglessness, and one of the most powerful words we have. I do not doubt our ability to love as individuals—to fall in love, to love our children, our family, our friends. I do not question our basic human instinct toward love, toward connection, toward passion, even toward commitment. I do not doubt that we value love, that we long for it, that we grow in both the giving and the receiving of it, that we need it to thrive in this world. All of these things are part of who we are as human beings.

What I do wonder about is the place love holds in our religious faith. What does love mean for Unitarian Universalists? What role does it play in our religious framework? How good are we at giving and receiving love in a religious context? It is these questions I want to explore with you this morning.

The idea and ideal of love come to us from many places, but directly from our Christian heritage. When asked what were the two greatest commandments, Jesus replied that they were to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Over the generations and across the traditions there have been various understandings of what this means and how it is to be lived, but I believe that ultimately the message is one both of connection and of really seeing and being present to the other, of building a relationship based first and foremost on mutuality. The act of giving love is stressed, but the act of receiving love is also central to Christian teaching, particularly in the call to receive the love of God. Sometimes to receive is harder than to give.

The early Unitarians and the early Universalists picked up on different aspects of love when it comes to its place in religious life. Love was absolutely central to Universalism. The whole development of Universalism as its own religion was based on the idea of a God so loving that he (and I use the masculine pronoun in order to reflect the words of the 18th and 19th century Universalists) could not possibly condemn any of his creation to eternal torment, to hell. The love of God was so powerful it could overcome any challenge, cross any distance. It did not matter who we were, what we did, what we believed—we were loved by a God who had room for everyone. The focus for Universalists was certainly on the reception of this gift of love from God, though also implied was the ways in which receiving this gift would increase our ability to offer a similar gift to others.

The early Unitarians, in contrast, did not embrace love as the central element of religion in the same way. Their focus was less on God and more on humanity, on our ability to reason, to choose, to will. Salvation, went the thinking in the early years of Unitarianism, was open to all, but we had to earn it by living well, by acting with justice, by striving for virtue. We were saved not by love, but by good works. Our own good works. We had to earn salvation through how we lived—a very different way of seeing things. Love was certainly a part of early Unitarianism, though the focus

was on our responsibility to love our neighbor through acts of justice rather than on the gift of love that might be offered to us.

This tension around the place of love remained, even as the two religious traditions moved closer to one another and eventually merged in 1961. Though both messages remain a part of our religious heritage, my experience is that, at least in the ways that we act in the world, the Unitarian perspective is the dominant one. As God has moved away from the center of our religious focus, we have lost the source of ultimate love and are left primarily with the love we are called upon to offer and the love we must earn.

How does this play out in current Unitarian Universalism? Let me offer a couple of reflections.

The first is a passage that comes from a book titled *Pastoral Care in the Liberal Churches*, written by Carl Wennerstrom and completed and edited after his death by James Luther Adams and Seawrd Hiltner. Though the book was published in 1970, it remains reflective of how we are in the world today. Wennerstrom focuses much of the book on the ways in which liberal religious people struggle in the area of pastoral care. Among other things, he writes this:

Our standard liberal, I believe, feels most at home when there is a safe distance between him and the actual sufferings of particular people. He is unlike the thoughtless or unconcerned, in that some part of him does suffer with sufferers. The last thing he would do is to let the rest of the world go by. In a not insignificant sense, he assumes some responsibility for the sufferings of the world...He may not regard his concern and empathy for the sufferings of others to be "taking up the cross," but in actual fact he believes that what hurts one hurts all.

Yet with all these admirable characteristics, the liberal still does not want to get too close. Metaphorically speaking, the first liberal (so far as the distance notion goes, at any rate) might well have been the man who helped Jesus carry the cross to the place where he was crucified. With a job to be done, he was there. With energy to be spent, he had it. And, in carrying a heavy cross, he was not drawn too close together with Jesus. Once the spot had been reached and the outcome was certain, he dropped from sight; we hear no more of this early liberal in the New Testament. Perhaps he was off to the Circuit Court, hoping against hope to get a reversal of the conviction, and having the courage to try. Or he may have been investigating the future support of Jesus' family, or the burial arrangements, or he may have been getting up a petition to Rome about Pilate. What he was about was no doubt of great potential significance. But at the place of crucifixion, he was absent once the cross had been delivered. (p. 37-38)

The activity of the man carrying the cross with Jesus is love of a kind, and an important kind at that. It is part of what Carter Heyward is talking about when she talks about the action and choice of love, the work of love. This is what she is saying when she describes the task of love as the striving for justice. This is the kind of love that Unitarian Universalists as a whole are most comfortable with. It is love that gives us something to do in the face of pain, suffering, evil, and injustice. It is the kind of love that has fueled us for generations. It is also a kind of love that keeps *a safe distance between [us] and the actual sufferings of particular people.*

But implicit in the story of Jesus' crucifixion is another kind of love, one which we are much less comfortable with. This is the love of those, mostly women, who sat with Jesus as he cried out in pain, as he suffered, as he breathed his last. In one sense, they weren't doing anything. They weren't trying to change things, to fix things, to make sure this never happened again. But what

they were doing was at least as valuable. They were offering their presence, their witness to the suffering of another. They were sharing in the moment, and affirming the full humanity of the one who was dying. This is the love talked about in the poem by Marilyn Krysl—the love of pure presence. The love of simply being there with another.

Here's another story to illustrate the difference, a story shared by my colleague the Reverend Susan LaMar. She described a conversation she had with an older woman in a Unitarian Universalist congregation who was deeply upset about her daughter's involvement with a fundamentalist Christian group. When pressed about why she thought her daughter was attracted to such a group she said, in a very harsh tone of voice, "She just has to deal with the fact that she's had the abortion. I had two myself and I got over it. I don't know what her problem is."

I am not suggesting, nor was Susan, that this would be the response of most Unitarian Universalist parents or congregants. But there is something about us that is revealed in this story. There is something in our history, our heritage, and perhaps our personality that makes our alliances to principles and ideological battles more powerful at times than recognizing the pain of any individual. Imagine the experience of this woman's daughter, and the choice she had to make between the religious home and family she knew but which valued the fight for a woman's right to choose over her own difficult experience and a group of people who, while perhaps not sharing the same political and social perspective, was willing to welcome and love her, this young woman who was in pain, who was lost and struggling, who needed comfort much more than a lecture about the political issues at stake.

When we Unitarian Universalists talk about what draws and keeps us together, we talk primarily about principles and values. In fact, we often turn to the seven principles which are the most recent attempt to articulate who we are at our core, and what is of highest value to us. Those of you who have been around for a while are probably familiar with these words, which you can find at the front of your hymnal. They are powerful words. They speak of respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, support and encouragement for people's spiritual journeys, commitment to working for peace, justice, and equality, recognition of the interdependent web of life of which we are a part.

But notice this: With all that they talk about, and all the values and ideals they proclaim, they do not speak of love. Given all the intention that went into putting these words together, this cannot be an accident, an oversight. It will be interesting to see as these words go under revision, as they will over the next couple of years, whether this remains true. (Which is a good opportunity for me to put in a plug for you to participate in the conversation on the newest version of the principles. There will be a potluck and conversation in May on this subject, and other opportunities to follow, so be sure to get involved if you are interested.) In any case, the reality is that right now, and for the last twenty years or so, love has not been a part of our central statement of faith.

This is not to say that we fail completely at this. As I said a couple of weeks ago, I believe this congregation in particular has grown tremendously in recent years in our ability to give and receive love with one another. But, as a religious faith, this remains a challenge for us. Our desire for a safe-enough distance, for things to do and ways to feel useful and productive, for the power that comes with helping, our commitment to principles that we believe are universal, our discomfort

with suffering and the deep imperfection of human nature, and our underlying believe that love is not given freely but rather must be earned—all of this makes it hard for us to sit still long enough to offer the love that is demonstrated by comfort and presence. Love that is based in vulnerability and shared humanity. Love that forces us to acknowledge our ultimate powerlessness in the face of pain and loss.

This kind of love is also a part of the words from Carter Heyward I read earlier:

Love is a choice—not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity—a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives. Love is a choice to experience life as a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than as an alien in the world or as a deity above the world, aloof and apart from human flesh.

It takes a great deal of courage to offer and receive this kind of love. It takes a willingness to get close, an ability to let go of the distance and practical usefulness we find so comforting. It takes a capacity to meet others on equal footing, no better, no worse, no more protected from suffering or our own ability to fail, to fall short, to do harm. It takes time and patience and a great deal of faith that such a love matters. And it does.

Too often I have had conversations with Unitarian Universalists, some in this very congregation, who feel that, if they are struggling or unable to be productive, to be useful, to contribute something of value to others, they don't belong here, *here* in their religious home. Too often I hear and even feel within myself impatience with those who are not handling life's difficulties with grace and self-possession. Here is where we find the echoes of our Unitarian heritage—the idea that we need to earn our salvation, that we need to earn the love we desire and so desperately need.

Luckily we also have within our religious DNA another message—the unconditional love of Universalism. The claim that we are loved as we are, whoever we are. That we need this love, that we need not be worthy to receive it, and that we called to offer such love to one another.

As Albert Ziegler, a mid 20th century Universalist writes:

This is the real nature of Universalism; it is a religion of ultimate and overwhelming confidence. It expressed the cosmic security of which we must be assured for joyous and creative living. God is loving; that love is sovereign.

May we claim this Universalist message of ultimate and universal love as if our lives depended on it, for indeed they do. May we find the courage to give and receive love—not just the love of helping, of activity and a safe enough distance, but also the love of presence, of witness, of closeness and connection. May we know ourselves to be loved, and in so knowing, may we find it in ourselves to offer such love to one another and to all who share our world.

May it be so. Amen.