

*A Person Will Worship Something*  
a sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner  
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church  
Sunday, January 22, 2006

READINGS

from Exodus 32:1-10

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, "Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, this man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." And Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graven tool and made a molten calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord." And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Go down; for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves; they have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them; they have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation."

from *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* by Kathleen Norris

I no longer think idolatry is a problem of primitive people in a simpler time, those who worshipped golden calves in fertility rites. I have only to open a newspaper to contemplate the wondrously various ways in which idolatry is alive in the here and now. I read of a mother in Texas who hired people to murder some of the competition so that her daughter could get on a high-school cheerleading team. As is always the case in such stories, the price of a human life was appallingly low, just a few thousand dollars. Here idolatry speaks to us, in all its glory, asking, what's a human life worth when cheerleading is at stake?

What is worth dedicating ourselves to? And what is not? I must confess that I would put cheerleading far down on the scale, but that may be because I never got to be a cheerleader in high school. For some young people, exerting themselves over their school's cheers may be the healthiest form of devotion they can muster. But I would hazard to say that eventually one must learn that it is not the special events, not the losing oneself in the roar of a crowd, in which love flourishes. It is not in attempting to hand our unformed, needy selves over to the experts or the gurus who are all too glad to take our devotion and our money. It is the people we live and work

among who can teach us who God is, and who we really are. And also, with the gift of grace, what it means to rid ourselves of idols, and live in the real world. (p. 92-3)

## SERMON

This sermon turned out to be much harder to write than I thought it would be. When the idea for this morning's service came to me some months ago, it seemed pretty straightforward. Like a lot of sermons, the basic premise was simple; the challenge would come in looking more deeply at the issue, and how it plays out in our lives.

And so I sat down to write, with the following quotation from our religious ancestor Ralph Waldo Emerson, the quotation which gave this sermon its title, being my foundation. Emerson wrote;

*A person will worship something—have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts—but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*

This, combined with the other readings I shared with you this morning, made the direction of the sermon simple and obvious. Or so I thought. I began, earlier this week, to write. About worship, idolatry, and the importance of dedicating our lives to something worthy of us. About devoting ourselves to something beyond our own needs and desires, something larger than ourselves. In truth, something vast and almost abstract—peace, justice, compassion, God. I wrote, but slowly, much more slowly than usual. The words were there, but they just didn't feel right and I couldn't figure out why. After all, I believed what I was writing.

It *does* matter what we believe, what we worship, to what we dedicate ourselves. And there seem so many things to which people give their hearts and souls, their hope and devotion, so many things which are so obviously not worthy—celebrity, selfish accumulation of material goods, eternal youth, our own instant gratification. Surely to give ourselves and our lives to these things is indeed idolatry. It is a betrayal of ourselves and of whatever is of ultimate value. Who would argue that a life devoted to these surface and selfish aims could hold a candle to a life lived in devotion to justice and peace, to the divine wherever it is to be found?

And so I wrote all this and it was okay, but it wasn't right. It wasn't true in the way I hope to be true here with you on Sunday mornings. Because the truth is this—I was writing in extremes, in the abstract, in the most obvious ways this issue makes itself known. The truth is that almost none of us actually lives our life at the extremes of this issue.

I don't know anyone in this congregation who is a slave to ambition and material success to the exclusion of all love and connection, who is focused on self and self alone. I don't know anyone here who needs to be told that we are called to live for more than ourselves.

At the same time, I don't know anyone in this congregation who lives a life of total selflessness, who has given up all personal pleasure and material want in order to serve the highest values of humanity. I don't know anyone who has renounced the world to be with God.

As with almost all things involving human beings, though we are tempted to talk in terms of opposing extremes, though we act as if it were an either/or situation, the truth is somewhere in the messy middle. The truth is much more both/and than either/or.

Certainly I don't live at either of those extremes. Nor do I want to. And, for me at least, the abstract question of idolatry, the focus of worship has always lived in the extremes. I have long felt guilty at my inability to devote myself more fully to the principles of justice and equality. I have often felt ashamed at my desire to enjoy life, to find joy, to know comfort. I have worried that my search for love, my regular trips to Caribou Coffee, my wish for experiences that do nothing more than make me happy, that these things were a form of idolatry. That they were examples of my own selfishness, my inability to give myself to those larger and grander things which alone are worthy of my devotion.

At the same time, I have experienced these everyday sorts of things as life-enriching and deeply valuable in and of themselves. It is in these times, in these places, with the people dearest to me that I have come closest to the kind of peace, to that sense of belonging and rightness I am looking for so much of the time, the kind of rightness which I believe comes with worthy devotion.

This has confused me, this difficulty in reconciling what I believe is my task as a faithful person and what I have experienced in my everyday life. Even more so, I have struggled with understanding the way my own devotions change. After all, if there is to be something I worship, oughtn't it be fixed and unchanging? How could I imagine changing what lies at the center of my life?

Some of this plays out in a message we hear a lot—the exhortation to live in the now. This is a powerful and important message. After all, it is now, this moment that we have. We cannot count on anything else. But at least for me, I often mishear this message. What I hear is that I ought to achieve everything now, be everything now, devote myself to all god things *now*.

But as we all know, life is a process of growth and development. What we build our lives around at this moment—family, work, God, education, service, recovery from illness or loss, internal reflection, outer action—depends so much on what is happening in our lives, what is happening in our world, much of which we do not have control over.

And so the call to live in this present is right after all, but part of what it means is that we do not have to live up to every ideal or reach every goal right at this moment. Part of what it means is allowing ourselves permission to live the life right here in front of us, rather than scolding ourselves for not living some other kind of idealized life that is simply not possible.

As an example—even though I had actually thought a lot about this ahead of time, I still wasn't prepared for the reordering of my life that took place, that is still taking place, with marriage. I didn't understand how deeply it would challenge the devotions I had developed and push me to think about what really matters, not in the abstract, but right here, right now, in my life. How much it would change what lies at the center of my life.

A friend of mine, another Unitarian Universalist minister, is about to have her first child and I can see her doing the same thing, struggling with the same questions, making significant changes in her devotions. I am coming to believe that it is impossible to live the same way, to devote ourselves to unchanging things when life itself changes so much.

I think it all fundamentally comes down to the question of meaning. What is it that will give our lives meaning? How do we live so that we know that our lives have mattered? What is most important to us, and how is that evidenced in the choices we make here and now?

Much of the preaching against idolatry, including the passage from Exodus, seems to say this—that nothing short of that which is ultimate is worthy of our worship. Anything of this world, anything temporal can only be a stand-in for that which is eternal. This is certainly the message of much of Christianity. In some ways it is the message of Buddhism, as followers are called on to let go of all worldly desire and attachment. For those of the more rationalist and humanist perspectives, this gets translated into reverence for the abstract. For values and principles which live above mere human concerns, apart from human relationship.

It is only in writing this sermon that I discovered how deeply these messages have influenced my own understanding, my own approach to worship, devotion, and meaning within my own life. It is also only in writing this sermon that I have realized how deeply wrong I think this approach really is.

There is a short passage by Mary Oliver in the back of our hymnal which I have used fairly regularly in worship services, but which I do not think I ever really understood until now. The poet writes:

*To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
To love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
And, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

I have always felt drawn to this passage, but also confused by it. It has rung somehow true, but at the same time has bumped up against my own deeply ingrained biases *against* that which is mortal, that which is temporary, that which I learned somewhere along the way is not worthy of my devotion.

When we fall in love we are told not to become dependent on another person or another person's love because eventually, through death if nothing else, one of us will leave. I have heard again and again the supposed wisdom given to women in particular not to make your children the central source of meaning in your life because it is unhealthy or ultimately unsatisfying or because, as they should, your children will leave you and become their own people. We are encouraged to guard ourselves against attachments that make us vulnerable, connections that will inevitably be broken. We are counseled to look to ourselves and perhaps God alone for our identity and sense of self, not giving any power to others to define who we might become.

There may be good and valid psychological reasons for all of this. Goodness knows, we can inflict incredible damage upon each other if we are tied too tightly together, and we have learned much about the importance of having a secure self in order to love well and fully.

At the same time, I believe the spiritual truth is somewhat different. I believe that the spiritual truth is to found in the words of Mary Oliver, words which call on us to love that which is mortal, to understand in fact that our own life depends on it. As she says, this does not mean we can hold onto it forever. Relationships change or end, people die. This will always be true. But the greatest devotion is to love these things in spite of how fleeting they are, perhaps even because of it.

Again and again I have seen this truth in the lives of people mourning the deaths of those they love. Never do I hear that they wish they had protected themselves more, or not loved as they did. If anything it is the opposite—the wish for even more love, more connection, more devotion. The stories people tell about those who are gone are rarely stories of their devotion to God or to an abstract principle or ethic. No, the stories that last are those that are about connection, about love given and received, about the beauty and joy they brought into the lives of others.

This is messy, complicated stuff. Our motives and desires in our relationships with others are almost always mixed, almost always selfish *and* selfless, joyful *and* challenging, meaningful *and* ordinary. We look to others at times to fix us, to rescue us, to make us whole. Because of our own insecurities and imperfections, we inevitably hurt the people we love the most and we falter again and again in offering true devotion.

At the same time, at our best we look to others to believe in and encourage our capacity of love and compassion, to challenge us to be our best selves, to help us realize that we are whole already. We do make mistakes and yet we try again. We get hurt and we hurt others and we risk again.

To devote ourselves to the temporal, the personal means we will be disappointed. We desire love and children and connection and companionship and at times we are denied. We grieve losses and things that never were and still we look for ways to love again.

The Buddhists are right—to desire, to become attached leads to suffering. It leads to sorrow, loss, and pain. It also leads to joy and wonder and discovery and hope and I wouldn't want to live without it.

Some might argue that if we devote ourselves only to these things, to the people and tasks closest to us, we neglect the demands of the wider world. How will the work of justice and peace be done if each of us is focused on simply loving our family and friends, simply doing work that is meaningful and satisfying?

The first answer, the somewhat flip answer, is that if we *all* genuinely devoted ourselves to these things, then there would be a whole lot less work for peace and justice that would need to be done! As the responsive reading from Lao Tse told us last week, if there is peace in every heart, there will be peace in the world.

But there is a second answer well, one much more grounded in the world as it is. I believe that the best work for peace and justice, the best work for humanity as a whole, comes out of love and devotion to that which is most present in our individual lives. As I think of those of you who give immense time and energy to a particular cause of humanity—be it the rights of the disabled or the elderly, the salvation of our natural environment, the struggling communities of the developing world—these devotions come from your very particular experience. Your own children or parents, a transformation journey or relationship, a loss you have known that you do not want others to have to go through.

Yes, these devotions may be to some abstract and ultimate principle, but they rarely arise from the abstract, the ultimate. Instead, they arise from the very personal, the temporal, the mortal.

When Jesus was asked what of the commandments given to us by God was the most important one. He replied, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39)

I would argue that our love for God, in whatever form and understanding that takes, arises most easily and most truly from our love of neighbor and our love of self. For it is here and now, it is with one another that we learn what love is, and what it means to devote ourselves to something worthy.

*To love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
And, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.*

This is not idolatry. This is the ultimate in worship and devotion. The best things in life, the best things in *this* world are more than worthy of the best we have to give.

May it be so. Amen.