

Standing on the Side of Love

In the eighth chapter of the Gospel of John, there is an incident in the life of Jesus. One morning, as Jesus is teaching in the temple, the Pharisees bring to him a woman who has been caught in adultery. It helps to know a little about the Pharisees. They were well-to-do, often in charge, probably interested in maintaining order and the status quo, strict about following the Jewish laws. The writer of John often portrays them as trying to entrap Jesus, asking him trick questions, attempting to prove that he's a troublemaker, one who doesn't quite follow the law as zealously as they do. So they bring this woman, this adulterer, and make her stand in front of everybody. Then, they address Jesus, saying, "This woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone women like this. What do you say?"

Instead of replying, Jesus kneels down and begins drawing on the ground with his finger. The story doesn't say what he writes. Maybe he's just doodling. But the Pharisees are not happy, and they press for an answer. Jesus stands up and replies, "Whoever is sinless in this crowd should go ahead and throw the first stone at her." Then he squats down and begins writing on the ground again.

One by one, the audience begins to drift away. The elders are the first to go, then the rest, until finally, Jesus is the only one left with the woman. He stands up and says to her, "Where is everybody? Hasn't anyone condemned you?"

She replies, "No one, sir."

"I don't condemn you either," Jesus says. "You're free to go, but from now on no more sinning."

The scholars of the Jesus seminar don't really believe this was an historical event in the life of Jesus. They think this "orphan story" was

tacked onto some of the manuscripts of the Gospel of John for political reasons. But there is sweet irony in their “wish that Jesus had said it.”

Well, whether historical or not, the story says something about empathy, putting ourselves in the other’s place, and the courage to stand on the side of love.

This weekend, UU churches all over the country are exploring how we might Stand on the Side of Love, which isn’t necessarily an easy thing to do. It’s pretty easy to fall in love, romantic love, that is. We’re not really consciously in charge of that, our hormones are. It’s fun to receive the cards and candy and flowers that go with Valentine’s Day; that’s the easy kind of love, at least in the beginning. But intense romantic love rarely lasts, partly because it’s a phenomenon of excess dopamine being released in the brain. The problem is we get used to our beloved, and seeing them or hearing them no longer triggers that intense release of dopamine. And what then? Do we move on to someone else who can re-trigger that release of dopamine, or do we begin the deeper work of love of a different sort. It’s one thing to fall in love. It’s another to deeply love a spouse after five or ten or fifty years.

I like to remind couples for whom I conduct weddings that while the average wedding costs \$30,000, the average divorce costs \$50,000. Marriage is a decision that they should not enter into lightly, “but reverently, thoughtfully, and in the knowledge that love is both life’s greatest gift and its greatest challenge.”

Beyond romantic love lie many other kinds of love – platonic love, love of family, love for the poor, sacrificial love, altruistic love, love of neighbor, love of those who are different, and, hardest of all, love of enemies. A full life will have all of these kinds of love in it. We might take an inventory of the kinds of love in our lives. The love of lover, spouse, friend are the easy ones, easy because we feel love, which leads us to act in loving ways. There is usually mutuality, reciprocity, in these loves. But those other loves, they’re more

difficult, they are out there on the growing edge. These require us to behave in loving ways, not necessarily because we feel it, but because we think it is the right thing to do, or because it brings about the kind of world in which we want to live. We might even have to override feelings in these cases in order to act in loving ways. We might have to, as Jesus did, stand up to those who would criticize our actions.

Our Standing on the Side of Love campaign has been heavily weighted toward the issue of Marriage Equality. Jason Shelton's song, which the choir sang a few minutes ago, has become something of a denominational anthem. He spoke of how fear can build barriers, keep love tightly bound. It is usually fear which keeps us from love. In contrast, John reminded us "Perfect love casts out fear." (4:18) But fear seems to be increasing in our culture. We are afraid of terrorists, and fear for our safety is driving our fear of immigrants. We are afraid of immigrants because they might be terrorists or they might take our jobs or influence our children in ways we don't like.

Some fear that if gay and lesbian people are allowed to marry, it will undermine the institution of marriage. Unfortunately, the institution of marriage hasn't been faring very well even among heterosexuals, although we can be slightly encouraged by the fact that divorce rates seem to be leveling off. I know that some of you disagree with me on the issue of Marriage Equality, and I'm not going to dwell on it today. I do want to say I support it. The chief reason I do so, is that I have come to empathize with gay and lesbian people, with the suffering they endure because of society's condemnation of their love. I stand with them. I conduct weddings for them and I work for the legalization of marriage for all, because I believe love and justice require it.

But we also need to stand on the side of love in many other issues. Love is needed whenever there is suffering, and human beings suffer in countless ways. Many people are suffering in our country right

now because they do not have access to health care. About 700,000 of us go bankrupt each year because we get sick or are injured in an accident. About 20,000 of us die for lack of access to care. It mystifies me that we continue to deny health care to people who are ill or injured. TR Reid studied health care in seven countries and concluded the reason we can't provide health care for everyone is because we haven't made the moral commitment. What keeps us from that commitment? Doesn't love require healing of the sick when physically possible? Doesn't good sense say that we'll all be better off if we're all in it together? Doesn't justice require that we make health care available to everyone?

It came home poignantly to me when my grandchild was born. I loved him fiercely the moment he was born. That's one of the easier kinds of love, another example of falling in love. I knew in my deepest self that, "He deserves medical care as much as any other child." I'm sure virtually every parent and grandparent who love their offspring feel the same. The threat of his not faring well because of a lack of care moved me to be more supportive of health care reform. It is often our individual experiences of suffering which cause us to be more compassionate and loving.

Many people are suffering right now because of our immigration policies. But it all seems so abstract. Those immigrant children being ripped away from their parents seem so distant. It's easy to judge them, to harden our hearts, to build barriers, fences along the borders, keep love tightly bound. We might think, their parents shouldn't have entered the country illegally. And yet, if we look back only a few generations, many of us might discover that our own ancestors came here, often illegally, looking for a better life. Can we stand on the side of love and extend that same opportunity to others? I'm not arguing that immigration should not be regulated. But I do ask how can we balance compassion with the need for order and security?

In another of Jesus's encounters with the Pharisees, they ask, "So, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?" and Jesus replies: "You are to love God with all your heart, soul and mind. This is the first and foremost commandment. And the second is like it: You are to love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hangs everything in the Law and the Prophets." Rabbi Hillel, who lived a short time before Jesus, said something similar. Hillel was asked if he could teach the entire Torah while standing on one foot. He replied, "What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man." It's a good definition of empathy. "That," said Hillel, "is the whole of the Torah and the remainder is but commentary. Go learn it." It takes a lifetime to learn to love well.

The only way I can make any meaning of the idea of loving God is that we do so by loving the creation. This leads us to love our human neighbors, but it also leads us to care for the rest of creation, to not destroy its beauty, to take the life which sustains our own reverently, gratefully, in full knowledge that we too shall one day be food for other life; to live in such a way that we make room for other species.

But now to love our neighbors. That's not always easy. Sometimes our neighbors are unpleasant people. Sometimes they don't seem as smart as we are, or they have different customs, or different religious beliefs. It's not as easy to stand on the side of love for those who are not like us.

For ten years my husband and I lived in Atlanta, where our next door neighbors were from Ecuador. They were an extended family of father, mother, and four grown sons. They liked to have parties with loud music and dancing into the wee hours. We, on the other hand, were more like uptight WASPS. If you've seen the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, you'll get the idea. Being a good Yankee, and following the wisdom of Robert Frost, my husband believed "good fences make good neighbors," so the first thing he did was erect a nice, high fence

between the properties. We were a little bothered by the cars being repaired in the driveway and sometimes in the street, and certainly by the noise. We were polite, but distant. And then one day, at home alone with our three-month-old infant son I received a threatening phone call from some sick person who said he knew me, knew I was home alone and would be coming to harm us. We had only one car at that point, and John had driven it to work, so leaving wasn't much of an option. I sought refuge with our Ecuadorean neighbors because they were the only ones at home. They very graciously received me, offered me food and drink, and let me stay until my husband returned. I was so grateful to them, and rather ashamed of our judgment of and distance from them. I was learning to love my neighbors as myself.

One of the participants in our Study Group on Wednesday evenings related that she had heard a speech by Gustavo Gutierrez, the founder of the Christian movement known as Liberation Theology. She said Gutierrez had pointed out that loving and serving the poor was often not a pleasant thing to do. The poor can be unpleasant to be around, unwashed, demanding, sly. We don't serve the poor, he said, because it's easy. Christians do it because Jesus did it. They stand on the side of loving the poor because their faith requires it.

The American Buddhist monk Bikkhu Bodhi believes that while Christianity has much to teach us about how to "express love in action," Buddhism "stands out in offering precise, step-by-step techniques for awakening and cultivating" the virtues which will empower us to stand on the side of love. Buddhism teaches that we need to work on ourselves first, to cultivate in ourselves lovingkindness and compassion. If we can master these virtues within our hearts, loving others, even those difficult to love, will come more easily.

Traditional Buddhist texts distinguish between lovingkindness and compassion. Lovingkindness is a "wish to promote the welfare of beings" and "compassion is the feeling of empathy that arises when we

feel the suffering of others as our own.” Lovingkindness is more of a mental intention, where compassion is a feeling aroused in us. Both are needed, both are valuable. But lovingkindness is considered the foundation for compassion. If we do not wish for the well-being of others, we may not care about their happiness or suffering; the natural feeling of compassion will be blocked.

So, Buddhism offers specific practices to cultivate lovingkindness. One of the most common is one I have commended to you before. There are several versions of it. Today’s version is from Bikkhu Bodhi. It is a simple metta meditation, where we begin with ourselves, and then move outward to others, saying, “May I be healthy, may I be peaceful, may all my good purposes be fulfilled.” There is a specific sequence. We begin with ourselves, then move to a “dear and respected person such as a teacher or benefactor;” then “to a dearly beloved friend; then to a neutral person; and finally to a hostile person.” That’s the hardest: loving our enemies.

Just as Jesus advised “loving our neighbors AS ourselves,” Buddhists teach that “we first have to feel genuine love for ourselves,” before we can love others. Thus Bikkhu Bodhi recommends that we practice first with ourselves, going through the formula several times, until we “generate a soft and warm feeling in the heart,” a true desire for our own well-being and happiness. Only then, should we move outward to the next person. For beginners, he advises working daily for several minutes for several weeks with the first three persons – ourselves, a respected teacher and a beloved friend. Only when we have succeeded in the “softening and warming of our hearts” toward these, should we move to the neutral person and our “enemies.”

Once we have succeeded in cultivating lovingkindness for at least neutral persons, we are ready to begin developing compassion. For that, Bikkhu recommends holding in our hearts and minds a person who is undergoing suffering. It could be a stranger. He personally

recommends taking “a child living under unfortunate circumstances.” As we think of that person, we generate a wish for him or her “to be free from suffering.” He recommends the simple formula “May this person be free from suffering, may this person be free from affliction!”

It is when we “look directly into the suffering of the world, without flinching, without anxiously turning away,” that our hearts “break open,” and “compassion swells up and suffuses our hearts.”

I think we all responded so powerfully to the suffering caused by the earthquake in Haiti because of the pictures coming to us on television and internet. Those pictures allowed us to look directly at the suffering, and our hearts broke open; then we opened our wallets, and some of us are actually going to Haiti, taking our medical and other skills to act to relieve the suffering.

As valuable and as powerful as the meditation exercises are, as noble as the virtues of lovingkindness and compassion are, they are not enough, if they are not followed by action. Bikku says that in his opinion, “traditional Buddhism does not sufficiently stress the need to mobilize love and compassion as motives for pursuing social justice and a more harmonious world.” Christians have learned much from Buddhists about the value of a contemplative life, of doing our inner work, but Christianity has shown us how to “express love in action.”

“How we express love cannot be left to chance or to the whims of raw emotion,” says Bikku. “For love to be an effective agent of change, we need to examine the opportunities available to us to help others. Then we have to select a movement or a worthy cause that awakens our passion and inspires our wish to be of service. . . In this present age, so full of danger and confusion, spirituality and social engagement cannot remain separate domains each sealed off by rigid boundaries. The major social upheavals of our age – global warming, widespread poverty, war, ethnic conflicts, the violation of human

rights, the cruel treatment of animals – all stem from a deep crisis at the core of the human soul. To heal the maladies that afflict humanity calls for something far more potent than international treaties and technological innovation. A more stable solution must be ethical and spiritual. The only solution that can truly work must begin at the foundations, within the depths of human consciousness.”

On this Valentine’s day, I hope you will take inventory of the kinds of love present in your life. Cherish the romantic love, for it is a wonderful gift. But it is only the beginning, only one form of love. Those other, more difficult loves – of neighbor, of those who are different, of those who disagree with us, those who seem inimical to us – those loves also need to be present if we are to be human beings of depth. We can cultivate lovingkindness. We can increase our capacity for compassion. But “love cannot remain by itself”, said Mother Teresa. Love is not fulfilled unless it is put into action. Our spiritual lives are not complete if they simply allow us self-indulgence in good feelings. We must stand and work on the side of love, even though we may risk censure of the Pharisees, even though we risk standing alone.

We could read the story of Jesus and the adulterer as a story about hypocrisy, but we could also read it as a story of empathy and mercy. When challenged, the accusing Pharisees realized they could not cast the first stone because they were like her. They too had fallen short. They too had yielded to temptation. We are all human. We all suffer. And we are all in need of having someone love us in spite of our shortcomings and to call us to our best selves. “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

Here we can do that for one another. May it be so.

Rev. Linda Hoddy

Saratoga Springs.

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Words for Prayer or Meditation

May I become at all times, both now and forever

A protector of those without protection

A guide for those who have lost their way

A ship for those with oceans to cross

A bridge for those with rivers to cross

A sanctuary for those in danger

A lamp for those without light

A place of refuge for those who lack shelter

And a servant to all in need.

A Buddhist prayer

Benediction

Only through the words of our voices and the work of our hands

Can kindness and compassion become real in our world.

May our time together give us the insight and courage to

Stand unwavering, on the side of love.