

Standing on the Side of Love

All Souls Community Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan

February 14, 2010

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INVOCATION

We give thanks for the gift of this day, which we did not create.

We give thanks for the hope that lies in every moment of trial and triumph.

We give thanks for its beauty and promise, and for the light returning from darkness.

We give thanks for hands that hold ours when we are hurting, that hold up our bodies when we are weary, and soothe our spirits when we seek solace.

We give thanks to God for having been given love, to give love back to the world, and from the gift of this day build a greater life for all souls.

BLESSING OF THE TEDDY BEARS [SENT TO CHILDREN OF HAITI]

The teddy bear came about in the first few years of the 20th century when, on a hunting expedition, President Theodore Roosevelt refused to shoot a little bear cub, and the story was captured in a political cartoon. Henceforth, stuffed bears, “teddy” bears, became popular items as symbols of mercy and affection! They became especially popular gifts on Valentine’s Day in the latter part of the 20th century, and will this morning serve a symbolic function for us.

Psychologists say that giving a child a soft, squeezable teddy bear to hug after a severe trauma, like an earthquake, helps the child to regain a sense of order to their lives. They gain courage through comfort. It is for this reason that we gather these teddy bears this morning to send to boys and girls in Haiti, to help them recover a sense of their lives and this world as being a home for the human spirit. These teddy bears are a symbol that when we give affection to others, by willingly taking on their burdens, something redemptive comes into existence. The quality of life is made better by the love we actively give away to others.

And so to bless these bears on the beginning of their great journey of mercy, to bring comfort to our brothers and sisters in Haiti, we offer recite this blessing, and then seal it with a poem written by a child.

We bless these bears on their journey of love and mercy.

Bears

Bears like honey
That comes from bees.

Bears like to nap
Under shady trees.

Bears can be cuddly,

Or big and mean.
 My little Teddy Bear
 Is the cutest I've seen.
 He's at my side
 When I'm happy or blue,
 Here's to my Teddy Bear—
 "I love you!"
 -Angel A. Nettles

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart," wrote Helen Keller. And so it is that we send these creatures of mercy on a great voyage for a great cause.

THE VOWS

Lao Tzu, credited as the founder of Taoism and author of the Tao Te Ching, wrote that *"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage."* Some say the act of creation itself is an act of love, so that with our first breath love exists in us. Then love becomes a force in us that we express towards others, like family, and receive from others, even those not our blood kin. We form "love partnerships." We may even find our way into a church or a temple, and find others who see the world in similar ways, and we come to love them as spiritual companions.

But the challenge of life is to learn to extend affection those whom we do not know and who are dissimilar to us; persons who believe differently than we do and love a partner whom we cannot imagine loving. To stand on the side of love is to choose to give your loyalty to affection itself wherever it becomes real between two persons. *"Love does not dominate; it cultivates,"* wrote Goethe, and when affection is shared between two people, it supports personhood, nurtures the development of fully functioning, free persons. To stand on the side of love is to stand up for freedom in its deepest sense, in that freely given affection between consenting adults multiplies liberty and justice for all.

When two individuals marry they make promises to each other in the form of vows. Men and women, women and women, and men and men, when they choose to live together as life partners, pledge, covenant, and obligate themselves to each other. This morning I would invite you to make a similar vow to all couples of all kinds. I would ask you to close your eyes, raise your right hand, and make a vow, reciting with me this pledge upon your sacred honor, to stand up for and alongside of all those who share love; and who, by sharing affection, assist creation's unfolding unto its fulfillment:

I vow to stand up for all those who, in and through love, choose life partners. I pledge to support them openly and to speak the truth to others about the power of love given and received. I promise to encourage all couples each and every moment, and to cherish the love they have in times of both trial and triumph. I will give them my hand and my heart

to their partnership in marriage, regardless of what others may deem correct or the state may acknowledge as legal. For I serve affection and stand on the side of love.

PRAYER

MY EGO IS LIKE A FORTRESS, HOWARD THURMAN [ADAPTED]

My ego is like a fortress
I have built its walls stone by stone
To hold out the invasion of the love of God

But I have stayed here long enough.
The darkness of my house forgive
And overtake my soul, O Great Love..
All of myself which I would withhold in my storehouse
I let go.
I give myself
Unto thee O Great Love.

SERMON

The words from hymn #34 are taken from the familiar passage in First Corinthians comparing love to other virtues, and is often read at services where two people declare their bond of love before the world. It is not often closely read. It declares faith – the depth of belief so as to move mountains – is not greater than love; neither is knowledge, for it passes away into new knowledge; nor speaking in tongues and being so deeply moved psychologically and emotionally; nor being able to foretell the future or possess optimism and hope. The greatest of all these spiritual qualities is love, and yet religion and our individual spiritual lives are rarely aimed in that direction with devotion and intent.

A few months ago I received this email from All Souls' members Elgin and Jackie Vines:

Dear Brent:

Elgin and I "bought" the privilege of having you preach a sermon on the topic of our choice. We'd like you to preach on Standing on the Side of Love February 14 if that's possible. We think it's important for our congregation to be part of the UUA Standing on the Side of Love effort - and to consider what it means to UUs as individuals, as members of UU congregations, and as part of the UUA (national perspective).

We had a wonderful experience last night, taking part in a musical jam session with The LG Network's PPlus youth group. We presented a check from All Souls to them for over \$530 and continued to forge bonds between our congregation and their Board, their members, and their efforts. They will be adding All Souls to their monthly

newsletter listing of "Spiritual Resources" in the community and have asked for a story about our church - its history and current activities for a future issue.

The reason I offered a sermon to be purchased by an All Souls' member at your auction last fall was because it can deepen community to formalize the conversation between pulpit and pew. It is a win-win, as the purchaser gets a sermon they want to hear from the preacher and the congregation gets money for its work. There is a reason the purchasers – Elgin and Jackie Vines – chose as their topic, *Standing on the Side of Love*. It is another step in making this community into a congregation, to take steps to deepen your understanding of who you are individually and as a congregation, by seeing the larger ways you are connected to others whom you may not know or understand you are connected to.

The *Standing on the Side of Love* campaign is an effort by our national body, the Unitarian Universalist Association, to bring together persons of all faiths and backgrounds to support gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons in their struggle for civil rights. It is another way that we attempt to take the affection we are given at birth and expand it out into civil and political rights, something we have been doing nationally and internationally for over two centuries, leading, as our spiritual forbears did, in the formation of this country in the 18th century; the expansion of rights through the abolition of slavery and the rights of women through voting in the 19th century; the rescue of persons threatened by Nazism in the first half of the 20th century; the civil rights movement of the second half of the 20th century; the gay and lesbian rights movement of the latter part of the 20th century; the movement for immigrant rights at the beginning of this decade; and now the movement to bring down the barriers to civil and political rights that keep gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered persons from enjoying the full civil rights they are do a democratic Republic such as our country. These movements were either started by us, directed by us, or deeply shaped by us. Our history includes the yield of seeing the spiritual life as incomplete when it is confined to the sanctuary and Sunday morning, and interpreting civil and political issues as at their root, spiritual ones. Walking the talk, deeds not creeds, is a Unitarian Universalist motto.

Jackie, Elgin, and I invite you to join such a movement by publicly displaying your support through displaying a bumper sticker on your vehicle, joining the campaign on their web site, and begin the conversation at All Souls as to how the congregation as a group can help persons locally by connecting itself to the efforts of our Unitarian Universalist Association. But, displaying a public declaration of support, like generously giving money to a cause, is but the foundation for living a spiritual life where the sanctuary supports active service.

By choice this congregation is a Unitarian Universalist one. By choice this congregation was founded to be an intentional member of the larger community of congregations known as the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is a national organization tied to other similar Unitarian Universalist organizations throughout the world; Canada, Europe, SE Asia, Central America, and Africa. Our spirituality is not just a local thing. When we join this congregation we become tied to the destiny of persons

across the globe whom we do not know, who live lives we only imagine. *“We are tied together in the single garment of destiny,”* said Dr. Martin Luther King, *“caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.”*

It is fashionable these days to put the church and a congregation forward as a means to meet the needs of its members. Members and friends and visitors are surveyed as to what they need and want and desire. It is not unusual for the phrase, “church shopping” to be used to describe how persons seek out spiritual community and search for ways to fulfill their spiritual needs. And a central characteristic of faith and a spiritual path in American life today is that one chooses what to believe, chooses where to find satisfaction for one’s beliefs, and chooses with whom one is going to share spiritual insights and philosophies.

And there is a part of this “choosing” that is good for it raises up “consent” as of crucial importance in terms of the spiritual life. Religion is, and has been, too often bound up with coercion and tyranny, and requiring people to believe things that were fantastic and superstitious and dangerous; like holding that if I just believe strongly enough I can change my heterosexual nature! Religion can inflict untold suffering and even death upon others, and use theological formulations and church doctrine as ways to punish people in this world under the auspices of promoting what is right and good and correct. Religion has been, and can be the chief enemy of humanity and a foe of freedom in it demands for a blind theological obedience and social conformity. Our way deems freedom a spiritual thing, and so for an individual to give consent, to choose, is a noble thing. It is the practical evidence that creation is formed in Love. It is part of what makes us human, we say. You exercise choice and can become a fully functioning person, regardless of your circumstance

But it doesn’t mean consent as a virtue cannot be held so absolutely as to become a vice! Like all things in this world, consent is limited too. You can’t choose which family you are born into, or certain circumstances of your life. I wish I could grow 11 inches in height tomorrow and help the Detroit Pistons return to glory, but I didn’t choose my body. We constantly debate what things we have choices over, but that only confirms consent has a limited range. In addition, and most importantly, sometimes the things I say I need, desire, and want, especially with regards to spiritual things, mask the fear I have of change. Sometimes the self seeks the need to hold at all costs what Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson called, a “foolish consistency,” worshipping the expected over the revelation of new truth. It can lead to holding superstition and error, over new insight. Held onto absolutely, consent can give fear the permission and expanse to conceal what is real.

The first time I officiated at a what we then called a Holy Union between two women, was in Milwaukee in the mid 1980’s. Nationally some Unitarian Universalist clergy had been performing what are now called Gay Marriages, and being right out of seminary and minister at my first church, and having so little experience in the church world, having been raised secular not religious, I frankly wasn’t sure what to do. The culture in the 1980’s did not embrace establishing partnerships between two persons

unless those partners were male and female, husband and wife. Yet, the culture's norms cannot be the final decider of ultimate things. The state in the 1980's saw fit to legalize only marriages between a man and a woman. Yet, the state's laws cannot be the final decider of ultimate things. The church – members of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Milwaukee that I served and the larger associations of colleagues and congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association of which we are a part of – represented a perspective that was at times ambiguous and confused. Some supported gay marriage and some didn't. You see, even the church, its doctrines and opinions, also cannot be the decider of ultimate things.

Yet, to what would I give my consent? Should I officiate at a gay marriage or not? What criteria would form my decision? What foundation of reasons and justifications for my decision as to which way my consent would go?

That is the limitation of choice and consent. Sometimes we just don't know what to do, what to believe, and how to live. Sometimes in our confusion and uncertainty, we choose simply what satisfies us and our "needs," the "foolish consistency" that worships the status quo over the good that might be, or the comfortable old ways over the uncomfortable new ones. Sometimes we choose what we convince ourselves we need, want, and desire, and sometimes that simply supports our self-interest, our self-indulgence, our self-centered ego, or the comfort of the self, over what the spirit yearns for. Nineteenth century Unitarian William Ellery Channing calls us to an arduous task with a strenuous demand. He calls us to spiritual freedom rooted in a love beyond self:

*I call that mind free which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come;
which sets no bounds to its love; which recognizes in all human beings the
image of God and the rights of his children.*

The human spirit yearns for love. To give it and receive it. By this we become human. To give love away makes us courageously human, and to receive love from others gives us the strength to become ourselves. It transcends what we say and think we need because it is woven into the very fabric of our being and is a real, unseen force in existence. It is the foundation of freedom and abides always. Love will not let us go.

And though it pushes over into poetic, metaphorical language, it must needs be evident in our action, in our communities, in the real world of body and blood. God is love, we say. But it must needs be brought into the form of active human life.

So, in the mid-1980's, without a reason to do so except to be grasped by something I did not understand, to pursue "*light whencesoever it may come,*" as our tradition demanded of me, I started performing gay marriages. Like the bear in the nursery rhyme I went over the mountain to see what I could see. And about a year after I began doing this I needed to take my then five year old daughter with me to a marriage service between two women, and when we were driving back I asked her what she saw and experienced; a bear cub on the other side of the mountain! She expressed the sheer delight of a five year old girl witnessing TWO extravagant wedding dresses! And then

she remarked on how much the word “love” was said and how much love was shown by all the people there.

Regardless of the things I thought or didn’t understand, beyond reason but not at odds with it, I found myself on the other side of the mountain being grasped that day not by the words of a child, but by the ways of the Spirit. I was led by what the human spirit yearns for and grasped by what the Spirit of Life answered back: A love that would not let me go through today and even unto tomorrow.

Wrote 20th century Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams:

We have been living in an era [where] selfish interest on the part of individuals and societies brings only chaos and death in its train. We are caught in a struggle, and we can exercise positive choice only if we accept the responsibility of making our will count. To do this we must be seized by a love that will not let us go

A person is connected to family by blood not choice. You can choose love. A woman can choose to take a fetus to term and birth a baby, a couple can choose to adopt children, an individual can choose a partner. You can choose love. You cannot choose the circumstances of your birth, and parts of who you are. But you can choose what ultimate aim the trajectory of your life will take. You can choose what you serve. You can choose to aim your life towards love in isolation, an inward, a private pursuit whose boundaries are your home or neighborhood. But it will somehow ring as incomplete because love is ultimately the source of freedom, and liberty and justice *for all* is love’s final and ultimate aim. To choose love spiritually is to be willing to be seized by something that will not let you go until, through the bonds of community you establish and struggle to make real, love becomes liberty and justice for all souls.

So be it. Shalom. Namaste. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Be not afraid. And seeing there is naught to fear, and bearing witness to what can never die, go forth into the world in peace.

Be of good courage.
 Search all things
 And hold fast to that which is good.
 Render unto no one evil for evil.
 Strengthen the faint-hearted.
 Support the weak.
 Help the afflicted.
 Love all men, love all women, love all children,
 Love all souls.
 Serving the Most High.
 And rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. Amen.