

Ugh! or Phew!

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
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I'm not supposed to be here today. Well, what I mean is that when I made the worship schedule last spring, I originally scheduled myself off today. It happens to be my birthday and for as long as I can recall, I've taken my birthday off when possible. Then at some point I realized this year my birthday follows the presidential election and I thought, maybe I oughta be here, just in case. Just in case it's again like 2016 when I found myself inundated with requests for pastoral appointments in which tearful congregants and staff expressed their disbelief, anger, and fears over the result.

Well, here we are, sadly with the same man, a traitor to this nation, as president-elect again. A pathetic reality for which there exists no reasonable excuse. And so I won't waste your time or mine pursuing, debating, or excusing something inexcusable. So, let's forget about that and get to a response to our present reality.

Now, I began to outline today's sermon before the election and it had been my intention to shorten the title of today's sermon based on the result of the election and then tailor my message accordingly. Had I stuck to that plan, today's sermon title would be simply "Ugh!".

But then, sometime in mid-October I received an email that prompted me to rethink that idea.

The email read,

"Hello, I drove by recently and saw your sign that says, "love is never wrong". Does this mean that if a grown adult "loves" a child, then it is not wrong? Curious where your organization believes the line is drawn with love."

I should note it is not unusual for ministers to get emails like this from people outside the church from time to time. This one is actually rather tame. Sometimes we get called names or labeled one thing or another... like antisemitic... as I was last year, because of our Black Lives Matters flag.

I don't often respond to such emails especially if they include name calling or labeling. But the email about our sign, "Love Is Never Wrong", prompted me to think about that message.

I considered several potential responses to the email from asking if the individual, who used quotation marks around the word "love", obviously referring to something else, needed a referral to a mental health provider to offering an explanation differentiating between agape (benevolence), phileo (friendship), storge (store-Jay) (familial), and eros (romantic), the most commonly described forms of love in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. And then there's the idea of love as compassion, most prominent in Buddhism, that I could have offered in response.

In the end, however, I replied to the email by inviting its author to reflect on the following parable from the Gospel of Thomas, an early, extra-canonical gospel discovered in Egypt in 1945,

"The kingdom is like a woman who was carrying a sack full of grain. While she was walking along a road far from home, the bottom of the sack developed a hole, and the grain poured out behind her onto the road. She did not notice what had happened, and when she got home, she put the sack down and discovered it was empty." (Translation by Thomas Moore)

My intent wasn't to be clever or elusive, but rather to take the sign's message and the inquiry it generated, seriously. And to do that I knew I couldn't respond with a reply laden with the defensive posture or predictable explanatory arguments my first thoughts reflected.

The parable itself, of course, doesn't answer the question directly. Indeed, the point of this parable and any parable, is not to give us a final, definitive answer about something, but to nudge us toward new perspectives and possibilities. As the spiritual teacher and author Micheal Meade notes, "We live in a world overcommitted to fixed beliefs."

In such a world "Love Is Never Wrong" makes about as much sense as comparing heaven to someone who has been emptied of their possessions rather than rewarded with more. Parables then, point beyond the walls within that keep us from anything other than what we already expect or have been told to expect. And they do this not by appealing to convention or reason, but by rousing the imagination.

Another story demonstrates the point,

A ruler summoned the most powerful elites in his realm to solve a riddle. When all the elites had gathered and the ruler stooped down and drew a line on the floor between them. He then said to them, whoever wishes to retain their high position must make the line shorter without cutting it or touching any part of it. One by one the elites stepped forward, each staring at the line. After some time staring at the line, each resorted to praising the ruler while confidently expounding on their beliefs in the hope of deflecting attention from their inability to solve the riddle. The last of the elites to come forward was man who also happened to be a poet. Without pausing to ingratiate himself to the ruler, he stooped down and drew a slightly longer line parallel to the one the ruler had drawn on the floor and thus solved the riddle.

That the one who solved the riddle was a poet speaks to the power, even necessity, of imagination to get beyond conventional ways of responding to life's challenges.

All of this is to say, the email concerning, "Love is Never Wrong", surfaced three points that cannot be overstated as Unitarian Universalists seeking to meaningfully respond to and engage with the world as it is rather than as we'd like it to be.

The first point is love is the center and work of our faith. As our children demonstrated for us with today's chalice lighting love, resting in the center, informs and permeates our shared values. And love forms the theological basis of historical Universalism.

The second point is the work of love is hard. It's hard because the deep truth of "Love is Never Wrong" is unimaginable to any of us outside the experience of being emptied. It can't be explained or understood so long as we are overcommitted, that is, filled with fixed beliefs about it. Like the woman in the parable, we have to lose all those notions, excuses, defenses, and limitations we carry and use to confine and condition love. And as the parable suggests, it takes time, perhaps a lifetime to lose these. The parable also reminds us this emptying is a process. With love you don't wait to be emptied before you do the work of love. Instead, perhaps without knowing it, you are emptied by doing it.

The third point is simply this, the center and work of our faith does not change with occupant of the white house or any other office. Put another way, "Ugh!" or "Phew!", love is never wrong.

How and where we explore, express, and focus the work of love will change depending on the events of the wider world, but love will guide us nonetheless.

“Ugh!” or “Phew!”, love is never wrong.

Indeed, we don’t “sever the bright thread hope” just because one candidate or another won political office. Mourn this election, sure, but remember the world’s woe’s didn’t start in the wee hours of November 6th and they weren’t gonna stop were we celebrating a different outcome today.

Ugh!” or “Phew!”, love is never wrong.

For we are, as Victoria Safford writes, part of a “tradition of dedication to the common good and faith in people’s power to imagine great change, to imagine and take great risks.” A tradition that has long proclaimed in one form or another,

Ugh!” or “Phew!”, love is never wrong.

Though we may curse and rail against the result of this year’s election, let us not make a habit of it. Instead look to this loss for inspiration to reclaim and recharge our, “beautiful, proud history of work for human rights and freedom, for social change and peace and protection of the earth.”

Ugh!” or “Phew!”, love is never wrong.

But what can this small congregation in Madison, Connecticut do?, we may wonder.

We can love the hell out of this world.

We can offer refuge, solace, and inspiration through worship.

We can work on deepening and renewing our commitment to being a Welcoming Congregation.

We can support our RE program so our children may explore, deepen, and live our UU values out in the world as they grow.

We can feed the hungry, literally, by supporting our local food pantries, hosting or participating in community meals.

We can support the planet by promoting and participating environmental initiatives and building ties with organizations in our own back yard like the local Audubon Society.

We can offer community to the like-hearted if not like-minded by supporting and hosting social, educational, and family events informed by our mission.

We can offer our presence and participation in the community at events that reflect our values or where our values offer an alternative perspective.

We can keep our eyes, ears, and hearts open to the call of love.
We can do all of this and more because,

“Ugh or “Phew”, love is never wrong.

Indeed, “this is the story in which we choose to stand”, Victoria Safford reminds us. And whatever the work of love we engage in in the coming months and years be it deepening our commitment to being a Welcoming Congregation in response to all but inevitable anti-LGBTQ efforts at the federal level, community partnerships to address food insecurity in the face of promised spending cuts, efforts to support immigrants, women’s health, environmental justice or something else we will be doing our part to pass the story of love on. A story, Safford says, we “have no right to put out.”, reminding us,

“Ugh!” or “Phew!”, love is not only never wrong, but it is never not needed.

As we go into the days and weeks ahead, still reeling from the election and its myriad implications, we might take a moment and pause to ponder, what is it we imagine conditions all those “and then’s” in our responsive reading this morning by activist and feminist artist Judy Chicago? A prayerful poem and sublime vision of life, revealing to us the world that awaits us all if we but solve the riddle? A poem that closes, “And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.”?

What comes before, “And then...?”

Well, she doesn’t say, but I’m sure she didn’t have an election outcome in mind when she wrote it.

Might it instead be love?

“Love...and then.”

I think it is. I think it is love.

Let us live imagining it is so and together let us love the hell out of this world.

May it be so
Amen and Blessed Be