

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Theme: “Welcome, Neighbors”
Sunday, August 19, 2018 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community.
~ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Reflection “Finding My Spiritual Home,” McKayla Hoffman

Has anyone ever heard the phrase “If you hang out with chickens, you’ll cluck. If you hang out with eagles, you’ll fly”? It was coined by Dr. Steve Maraboli, a motivational speaker, a best-selling author, and a behavioral scientist and researcher. His idea makes sense...but I don’t know if I fully buy it. This community inspired me to question this sentiment, and I’m grateful for that.

My earliest memories of religious community occurred at a Catholic Church in Fort Pierce, Florida--the Bible belt of the state. Other than the painful fast beforehand and the sermons and my itchy Sunday dress, I loved everything about church--including the people.

After moving to Massachusetts and attending a Catholic church there, I began forming my personal theology. I felt the presence of God’s love most powerfully in nature, where I felt very small against ancient ferns and stones and earth. When I entered sixth grade, I realized that an eclectic form of Paganism was a better fit for me.

Simultaneously, my identity unfurled throughout middle and high school. Beneath the surface, “male” and “female” took turns simmering tenuously beneath my identity line. My glances shifted to girls more frequently than boys, and I tucked away this secret feeling. I had been taught long before this that AIDS was “the gay disease,” and I seriously wondered if I was plagued by it. I bore the questioning glances of those around me, constantly wondering if they knew.

I eventually could not find “home” in my church anymore--not just because of my burgeoning belief system, but because my whole and authentic self was not being nurtured there. I was convinced that nobody could understand my experience of what many Unitarian Universalists call the “Spirit of Life.” For a long time, I tried my best not to worship with Dr. Maraboli’s chickens or eagles, and I decidedly studied and worshipped by myself.

I started my freshman year at Bridgewater State University in 2010. At the end of my second year, I got a Facebook message from Denise Haskins, who’s sitting right over there.

She was my choir director throughout high school, and after retiring; she asked if I would join the choir at First Parish, where she served as Music Director (and still does today). I couldn’t turn down the opportunity to sing for someone who inspired me above many others. I had noticed this “church with the rainbow flag” on many occasions, and after joining the choir and attending a

service, I was overwhelmed. Each service reawakened experiences and impressions that had gone stale, and the term “all are welcome” enveloped me...and they really did mean “welcome.”

There were so many opportunities to engage in service to this community, and they encouraged me to do all of it. For the past seven years, I’ve been very fortunate to laugh with the choir’s sopranos, participate in First Parish Players, and help put together last-minute coffee hours. A few of us recognized the need for a women’s small ministry group on spirituality, and it was deeply fulfilling to worship together with them. Every moment spent with community at First Parish was suspended in a matrix of love and compassion, and this broke open my crystallized heart. Last year, I came out as gender fluid and pansexual to this congregation--and I still haven’t come out to my entire family yet! For the first time in my life, a religious community embraced me at my deepest core. I felt that even if I didn’t come out to them, that part of me that had been hidden away--and the part of me that felt morally unredeemable for so long--had been touched by their love.

I quickly learned that for Unitarian Universalists--and those at First Parish specifically--“welcome” didn’t mean merely sounding platitudes and putting a name to a face. It involved a deeper level of engagement, of knowingly walking the vulnerable path towards our truth alongside others. They embrace the

possibility and challenge of misunderstandings, disagreements, and the internal and communal growth that occurs as a result.

“If you hang out with chickens, you’ll cluck. If you hang out with eagles, you’ll fly.” I’ve heard advice along those lines all my life. We all have relationships with family and friends who either inhibit our progress in life or inspire us to reach for our goals. But this community teaches that creating relationship and finding common ground with others isn’t just about associating with “eagles.” Rather, it’s about learning to grow with others with different opinions, beliefs, and truths--and remaining fixed in that fruitful work. This, I’ve learned, can enable humanity to tap into the forces that separate us and transmute them into instruments of justice.

No, we aren’t always inspired to fly. Sometimes, the weight of trouble in our lives and in our world is too much. Sometimes, we fall down flat on our face--and everyone deserves a home to fall back into. And the diverse tapestry of seekers at First Parish--that rainbow of individuals--provides an empowering home.

Homily

“Our Beloved Community”, Rev. Paul Sprecher

Once, a great monastic order in a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time.

As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the Rabbi and see if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The Rabbi, alas, could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their respective faiths.

"It has been a wonderful visit," said the Abbot as he was leaving, "but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?"

"The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, "is that the Messiah is among you."

When the Abbot returned to the monastery, he told the other monks that the Rabbi couldn't help. He continued, "The only thing he did say... was that the Messiah is among us. Though I don't know what that means."

The monks, too, wondered what this could mean.

The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually

always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me.

As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect.

It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery.

Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.¹

We will all become perfect, none shall suffer ever more, and there will be peace in all the lands – when the Messiah comes. In the meantime....

Most religious traditions offer some vision of what an ideal future might be like. Pure Land Buddhism, for example, urges followers to seek rebirth on another, uncorrupted plane – the “Pure Land.” In the Christian tradition to which we trace our Unitarian and our Universalist roots, Jesus teaches of the eventual coming of what he calls the kingdom of heaven – a time when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, when the mighty will be brought low and the poor will have plenty. But this isn’t just a vision of a distant future, for Jesus also says that “the kingdom of heaven is among you.” That is, his disciples could begin to build a community that would help bring into being this ideal future. And, indeed, after Jesus died, his disciples did begin to build such a community; they ensured that no one among them went hungry, they cared for and cured the sick and they gave strength to those who were powerless. In other words, they learned to care for one another in a new way, a way Jesus spoke of as self-giving love. In the same way, the monks in the abbey of our story recreated their community by changing the way they regarded one another, by really acting out what we commit ourselves to in our first Unitarian Universalist principle, “respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Treat everyone as though they were the messiah. It turns out that if we could give the highest possible regard to each and every person, we could begin to create the world we dream of.

Martin Luther King, Jr., referred to the vision that Jesus pointed toward as a “blessed community.” In our Thought for Contemplation this morning, he was responding to a challenge from some in the civil rights movement who were impatient with his non-violent strategy and who insisted that violence was necessary to bring about change. He responded by saying:

“Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos, the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community.”

So in order to go about creating that ideal future in the distance, it is necessary to begin by striving toward a community based on love in the here and now. And that is, indeed, what we do here at First Parish, our beloved community of memory and hope. Our covenant commits us to both a vision of a more perfect future and the ways to work toward it in the daily reality of living together one day, one week at a time.

Our great covenant commits us, in words we repeat each Sunday, to

Dwell together in peace;

To speak the truth in love; and

To help one another.

Anger feeds on itself. And anger is a natural part of our lives. It’s easy to get frustrated; it’s easy to see the faults in others; it’s easy to get crotchety, like

Brother Eldred. So we have plenty of practice in learning to dwell together in peace, finding ways to meet one another's needs rather than only our own, ways to be of service to the community rather than acting as though the community is here as a service to us.

Speaking the truth in love can be a huge challenge some of the time. We don't want to offend anyone, we say, and so we say nothing and thoughts fester in our minds and then perhaps we say a few frustrated words to a friend or two or we gossip behind someone's back. That is not the commitment we make here. We commit to speaking straightforwardly to each other, in love, so that we can learn and grow. Surprise! It turns out that the person who irritates us most is likely to be our best teacher. Very often the irritation we feel is a projection of something about ourselves. So speaking the truth in love is part of how we grow and learn ourselves.

When he was our parish president, Sam Baumgarten put up signs around First Parish to remind us to live into our covenant all the time. Thus,

Living our Covenant: Keeping an Open Mind
Be True to Yourself Maintain Personal Integrity:
Honesty, Authenticity, Confidentiality

Listening: Sensitively and Patiently

These are other words that express the core of our covenant.

Finally, of course, we are pledged to help one another. We help one another here at First Parish in all kinds of ways but of course in our homes and in the community as well. We visit each other when illness strikes, bring food and

comforting words, do things together to help us learn and grow in knowledge and wisdom – and to have fun together.

Helping one another is not confined to these four walls, either. If we are to build a better world, we also have to play a part in the world around us. Our beloved community serves as a base where we can sustain our spirits and take a message of hope to the world around us as well.

As Jesus was leaving his disciples for the last time, he told them what it would take to be members of the family of the kingdom of heaven that he envisioned. He imagines himself into the role of someone who is needy:

Matt. 25:35 ... “I was hungry and you gave me food.” he said: -- Our offering today is being given to support feeding the hungry at MainSpring.

“I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink” – Well, I won’t claim that our refreshment booth at the July 4th Celebration was an example of this – but we do offer refreshment!

“I was a stranger and you welcomed me” -- All are welcome here, and more than welcome, as McKayla illustrated in her reflection.

“I was naked and you gave me clothing” -- Something we remember to do every Christmas with our mitten tree and other donations for children who need clothes, among other things.

“I was sick and you took care of me” -- We visit and encourage all of those who are in our circle of caring.

And finally, “I was in prison and you visited me. – Our Read to Me Father program at the Old Colony Correction Center down the road has members of our beloved community visiting prisoners every week. Hence the rainbow sign on this pulpit and on our front lawn, which declares:

At First Parish Bridgewater, We Believe –

Love is Love

Black Lives Matter

Climate Change is Real

No Human Being Is Illegal

Women’s Rights Are Human Rights

All Genders Are Whole, Holy & Good

So we are living out what it takes to be a beloved community both within and outside our walls. We do this because we know that *We need one another.* We know that to live the kind of life we want to live, *We need one another.* – that’s your line – let’s try it out: *We need one another.*

We need one another. We need this beloved community of memory and hope. We need to have friends and companions as we travel through life and work to live into our own highest aspirations.

When we mourn and would be comforted,

We need one another.

When we are in trouble and afraid,

We need one another.

When we are in despair, in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again,

We need one another.

When we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone,

We need one another.

In the hour of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs,

We need one another.

In the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure, and stand again,

We need one another.

When we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey,

We need one another.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

We need one another.²

And we all fall short of our highest aspirations. We all mess up. All the time. Over and over. We may be born innocent, but our innocence doesn't last very long. One more reason we need one another. We need the accountability of dwelling together in peace to help each of us become more capable of living peacefully. We need the support of one another when we mess up and want to make right. We need forgiveness when we break our covenant to ourselves, to one another, and to the world around us. AND we can give and receive forgiveness here in our beloved community when we've broken our vows, and when others have broken their vows to us. So we can say,

Though you've broken your vows a thousand times,

Though you've broken your vows a thousand times.

Come, come, whoever you are, wanderer, worshipper, loving of leaving,

Ours is no caravan of despair, come, yet again, come.

AMEN, and Blessed Be

¹ Adapted from *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* by Dr. M. Scott Peck and found online on 11/12/10 at <http://www.ordinarypeoplechangetheworld.com/articles/the-rabbis-gift.aspx>

² George E. Odell, "We Need One Another," *Singing the Living Tradition*, Boston: Beacon Press, #468.