

Giving from the Side of Love September 25, 2011

Before I even get started with my sermon, I'm wondering if I might ask something of you all. May I? What I'm wishing for is a hallelujah. Can I get a hallelujah? Can I get another hallelujah? And another? Hallelujah! Now, usually, a preacher's actually said something worth shouting hallelujah *to* before a congregation feels moved to shout it out. So I'm grateful you've taken the leap without me having yet said a peep, even if you may be asking yourself, just what is all this hallelujah hullabaloo? If you *are* asking that, I'm not sure I can answer yet.

But I can *ask*, isn't that kind of typical of a Unitarian Universalist congregation? We're never *really* sure what we're singing hallelujah about or what or who we're worshipping, or who or what we believe in. But we show up despite not knowing, or *because* we don't know. And, in faith, *not* knowing who might hear or how we might be received, we shout out hallelujah just the same. There's a saying, build it and they shall come. Well, today I say, shout it and they shall hear! Hallelujah!

Of course, we might also stop to ask, just what are we shouting when we shout hallelujah? The original Hebrew means essentially, "Praise ye the Lord," or "God be praised!" Which, for the theistically prickly among us, may

drive us to say, “Wait, I never signed up to praise some angry, unpredictable, made up God. I’d like to take my hallelujahs back, please.” Fair enough. But first, hear me out for a while.

We are Unitarian Universalists, remember, born of the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists back in 1961, and it was our great Universalist forefather, Hosea Ballou who said of the God of whom some of us are so suspicious, “We have no need to worship God with a view to appease his wrath, for there is not wrath in him. God is love and surely there is no wrath in love. We have no reason to worship God in order to secure his favor, for he is already ‘good unto all, and his tender mercies are all over his works.’ We have no occasion to worship God for fear of being sent to a place which our clergy call hell,” Ballou continues, “for there is no such place.”

While Ballou’s late eighteenth-, early nineteenth century language, specifically his gender specificity when referring to the divine, may not be the language we would choose to use today, I would ask you still to consider that one little part Ballou says, which needs, as far as I can tell, no significant updating, and that is that, “God is love.”

God is love. Not God is like love, or God is the creator of love, or God loves this person or that person. No. God is love. So if God and love are

one and the same, and you're not comfortable using the G-word, how about the L-word? Hallelujah! Praise be to love! Hallelujah! Praise ye love!

Do ye praise love? And when I ask you that, you know I'm not asking, do ye praise romantic love or nostalgic love or teen love or puppy love or love of Cookie Dough ice cream, though all those kinds of love are valid. I'm talking about unconditional love. Agape love. Godly love. A love supreme. Do ye praise love in its least manipulative, most compassionate, highest, purest form?

Not that love in its highest and purest form is above the suffering of the world. No, indeed, it's *among* the suffering, among the sick and the poor and the oppressed that love must most urgently weave its way. It must weave its way through the halls of our state's and our nation's capital and our banks and our corporations as well, for while some might call what happens in those hallways success, too often it's really suffering disguised as pride. Or greed. Or hunger for just a little bit more power. Meanwhile, the soul of this state, the soul of this country, gets sicker. Where, in this current state of affairs, is the spirit of life and love?

In Christian teachings, God sent his only son to be among the people, and Jesus Christ was known as the word made flesh. If the word is love, then yes, Jesus emanated love in dedicating himself to the outcast and the

marginalized. But does he really get to be the only one who is word, or love, made flesh?

Walt Whitman, another great prophet, turned things upside down a bit when he said not that Jesus was the word made flesh, but that you--and you, and you, and you and all of you--that you, your very flesh shall be a great poem. All you have to do, says Whitman, is “Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks...have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons...,” he says. “Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.” Not only will your very flesh be a great poem, but it will “have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.”

That is quite a powerful, quite an overwhelming proclamation, that our very flesh shall be great poems. But remember. Whitman doesn't say, “Hey, relax, sit back, rest on some laurels for a while.” He says, “Here is what you shall do.” And then he, like Jesus, begins to preach, to instruct. And *if* his

instructions are followed, *then*, he says, “your very flesh shall be a great poem.”

Well, we too have our instructions. And while I believe that ultimately those instructions come from that transcending mystery and wonder some of us call God or love, *and* that they come more immediately from the words and deeds of prophetic women and men and many other sources, *most* immediately, our instructions come from...us. Just us, this bunch of Wildflowers who, in varying configurations, have been worshipping together for coming on eleven years. This collection of folk mostly from South Austin, but rippling inward and outward all the time, who joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys, each time we choose to show up and make this religious community grow a little bigger, go a little deeper, give just a little bit more love to the world.

We are our own instructors. What have we instructed ourselves to do? Well, from our covenant of right relations we have instructed ourselves to, among other things, “extend the welcome, hospitality, and acceptance at Wildflower Church that we would wish to receive.” We’ve instructed ourselves to “keep the wellbeing of the whole Wildflower Church community at the forefront of our work.” From our mission statement, we’ve instructed ourselves to be deliberately inclusive and open-minded, to

commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice. From our December 2010 Statement of Conscience, we have instructed ourselves to support the Unitarian Universalist Association's Standing on the Side of Love campaign. For those of you who don't know, Standing on the Side of Love proclaims that, "no person should be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression, or violence," and it commits to "*publicly confront* exclusion, oppression and violence based on identity."

Essentially, through our covenant, through our mission statement, through our statement of conscience, we have said to ourselves, "This is what you shall do." And we do. Stridently at times, haltingly at others. As we heard in last week's prayer, in our striving to connect, to act, we must be willing to fail. But striving to connect, through acts of love, is what we are called to do, and so for every time we stumble, it is our call not to lie there in defeat, but to get up once more and, in the words of the prophet Stevie Wonder, "pray to put our best love forward."

Now, I know as well as you all do that putting our best love forward most often involves taking risks. Will we be rejected? Will we misdirect our love and somehow feel we've wasted it as if it were money poorly spent? Will we put our best love forward and see it blossom and come to full

fruition, only to have to grieve its natural end through the fact of our shared mortality? Maybe.

But remember the parable of the talents which we heard Steve read from earlier. “A rich master...gives his servants significant sums of money to hold while he is away....Two of his servants invest the money and make a profit for him. The third is afraid he might lose it, so he buries the money and returns it intact, but not multiplied.”

Now, Wayne Arnason and Kathleen Rolenz say in their book, *Worship that Works*, “We’ve always looked at this parable not as an endorsement of free-market capitalism, but rather as a message about faith in abundance as a component of stewardship.” One way I interpret this parable is that the servants are our Unitarian Universalist congregations and the master, so to speak, is the spirit of life and love itself. You can interpret the master’s “significant sums of money” as the resource of cold hard cash itself, or stocks and bonds, or as actual talents that each one of you has.

Whichever way, Rolenz and Arnason drive the message of the parable home when they say, “Each of us has a responsibility to use [our resources] for the good of everyone. When we are able to that,” the authors say, “we will see a return of abundance of resources that goes far beyond anything we could have realized if we had kept our talents buried.”

So it is that I ask you, today, this morning, now, to act on your spiritual responsibility to use your resources, your talents, for the good of everyone. Singing hallelujah, I promise to do the same, pledging an increase of my own resources for the well being of the Wildflower Church community. We are not generally an altar call kind of people, but I ask you now to come forward, with your completed pledge card, and step up to the altar of beloved community, the altar of the flame of justice, the altar of divinity, drop your pledge card into the heart of this community, and say to yourselves with pride, with joy, with the greatest of love, "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." Hallelujah!

Altar Call

Closing Hymn #116 I'm on My Way