

Love Lifted Me

A Sermon by Scott McNeill

The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

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Growing up in a poor rural Baptist church, we sang a few songs regularly from our hymnal. One of them was entitled, “Love Lifted Me.” I won’t read the whole thing, but some of the lyrics from James Rowe are:

I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,
Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more,
But the Master of the sea, heard my despairing cry,
From the waters lifted me, now safe am I.

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!
When nothing else could help
Love lifted me!

All my heart to Him I give, ever to Him I’ll cling
In His blessèd presence live, ever His praises sing,
Love so mighty and so true, merits my soul’s best songs,
Faithful, loving service too, to Him belongs.

There’s plenty there for me to argue with from a liberal religious point of view and yet there is deep comfort in the notion, that somewhere there is someone who loves us so mighty and so true – that we’ll sing our best songs. Despite not holding a belief in a fatherly God that controls from

above, I can use this song to illustrate a love for humanity that is deep and true.

It's this love that I hope to speak of today, on this weekend full of reminders of love. This weekend, where couples find ways to show their care and singles find a way to avoid the couples. This weekend, where Hallmark and Hershey's really really love us all. On this weekend, preaching about love is a fine line and yet there is a love so mighty and so true that we are called to stop and reflect about the power of this love for all souls.

Two weeks ago, this congregation heard about the efforts that many in our faith are undertaking to support couples in same-sex relationships. Out of our principles, we are called to seek justice, equity and compassion for all people and yet there are more reasons to step up and speak out in support of and with our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered neighbors. Today's sermon is not to tell the same story that Rev. Hubbell preached a couple of weeks ago but to expand on it and to expand on the subject. There are plenty of reasons why same-sex marriage is an appropriate battle to fight – it could help the economy, it strengthens families and because it's the morally just thing to do. But there is one reason that I keep coming back to. It's simply: love.

Love? What's love got to do with it, you might ask? That second-hand emotion; I mean who needs a heart when a heart can be broken? Tina Turner asks this profound and theologically challenging question in her song. Yet, I mean it in all seriousness – what does love have to do with how we feel? Why believe in a heart when we know how often it can be broken? All of us have been in some relationship – be it with parents or lovers, family or friends – some relationship where we love, where we fall on the floor in love – only to be hurt. Our expectations get a little too high, our esteem gets a little too low and suddenly there's a world full of hurt.

And yet – we love. Full of hope, full of fear – we open our hearts to one another in myriad ways and we see the indescribable, uncertain feelings of love. We gain the appreciation and respect of a parent, and more importantly in times of our failure, we see them stay with us. If not a parent, then a friend who can call you at 10 o'clock at night, even after you've had a fight. If not a friend, then a partner – a significant other with whom you share laughs, desserts and even unpleasant moments. If not a partner, then most certainly within these walls, within this faith – a

community. You come, guarded and anxious or open and vulnerable – but you come to be in relationship with the people around you. There is a love within religion because you are bound together. There is a love here whose waters can lift us up when we are sinking down, now safe are we.

One of the best sermons I've heard preached was by the Rev. Veronica Miles and her title was, "This is the answer, 'Love has EVERYTHING to do with it.'" She told the congregation of a love that flowed from God to all of us and could hold us and keep us through our darkest days. It was, as I recall, a love like the song "Love Lifted Me." As I continue to reflect on that sermon and try to understand it given my Unitarian Universalist worldview – I wonder how I can translate a love that flows from God. There are two primary tracts that I follow when trying to translate this into some practical information for living.

The first is primarily historical and comes from our Universalist roots. As a young boy, I grew up hearing all about fire, brimstone and hell as punishment. This world didn't quite make sense to a 7 year old, or to a budding Unitarian Universalist, so I questioned how God – the God we talked of, the almighty father – would punish those whom God created. I found the answers I was given unsatisfying – they left little room for doubt and further revelation. I was told that God both gave humanity free will and that God had control. I was taught that God wanted to forgive us for sinning but only if we were willing to ask for forgiveness. I, being a simple boy, thought that if God was really so much better than humans, wouldn't God forgive us anyway?

I struggled with this for years – particularly when it came to the issue of God and gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Why on earth, I wondered many many nights, would God send gay people to hell if God created them? I wondered so often how love, a genuine and strong affinity between people, how that love could be bad in the eyes of a God who was love. I questioned this for a few years and didn't really get a satisfying response until I heard someone say that if people who were gay didn't love themselves, they were denying what God had created and that was the real sin. This was a lightbulb moment for me – it was the denial of love, denial of relationship that was the real problem. Surely I was right all along and that a loving God, a just God, a benevolent God wouldn't slight you for whom you loved – but that God would push you and call on you not to refuse receiving or giving love, particularly loving yourself.

I then searched for a theology that truly spoke to my sense of God and love and along that path found this faith. I eagerly read what books I could find and with great excitement realized that there had been a religious movement in America centered on God's love for all people – Universalism. This Universalist faith had been strong in rural areas like my own and why not – the message of divine love that cannot be broken is a message for people who are struggling to make ends meet just as it is for those who are held back and oppressed.

While I no longer thought of God as an entity separate from humanity, I did see something resembling the divine. God was love, indeed. God was the relationship between two people, who aided one another in difficulties. I understood this term to really mean holy – that which was beyond us. God was what we could not control – which included, to some degree, ourselves, nature, humanity, love.

And it is out of that understanding that I head down the second path in understanding God and love. This faith, which I have felt calling me throughout my life, is centered upon the agreement that revelation is continually unfolding, in the words of James Luther Adams. Each generation, culture, nation, person – they all have something to add to the story. Ours is not a faith in which you can believe anything you want; instead, it's a faith where you believe what you *must*, instead of dogmas designed by the privileged thousands of years ago. Ours is not a faith where some long bearded man in the sky will pull us out of sinking ocean of despair; instead, it's a faith where we, together as one community, help each other as much as we are capable.

A couple of weeks ago, Rev. Mary Katherine Morn shared with me a story called T'kea's Magic Bread. In it, there is a little girl, T'kea, who would make bread and people would come and tell her their wishes. As she sold the bread to others, she would drop slight hints about the wishes she had heard while making the bread and then...the wishes would come true. There were marriages formed, theatres created and crops aplenty. It's this image of God that I can get behind and this image of magic that helps communities support each other. No one has special access to the magic bread – it was all about whether or not you showed up, spoke your story and let the world take care of the rest.

Ours is that faith. Ours is a faith that says the stories of men and women in same-sex relationships are just as important and loved as men and

women who are in relationships together. Ours is a faith that says that heaven need not exist, that we can do good works and be rewarded in this life, not in the future. Ours is a faith that says that hell need not exist because we are too valuable, too loved, and too divine as people to be thrown away, either now or in the afterlife. Ours is a faith that loves, even when there are people who seem to not deserve it.

This week, the man who shot and killed some of our fellow Unitarian Universalists in Tennessee, pleaded guilty. His letter, explaining why he committed such an unthinkable act, was published by a couple of different media outlets. I read it this week, already knowing some of his reasons but wanting to understand as much as I could what his story was.

Jim David Adkisson was a poor man, hurt and suffering. Although he had at one time participated in Unitarian Universalist congregations and conferences, he found himself in a place of discouragement after his divorce and powerlessness as he fell into poverty. He read words of vile hatred, words that are allowed in this country because of the freedom of speech but which are used to halt the freedom of others. He read hateful words from men not full of hate but from men full of another sin – greed. He read words that were meant to incite violence, to dehumanize the other, to break the bonds of humanity and with those words and with that pain, he decided the only recourse he had was to stop those who were against him and his hatred. He had to stop a religion of love.

It is easy for us to demonize this man. There is a righteous amount of anger we should have at his actions and how the people of Tennessee Valley UU Church will suffer. And yet there is one sentence in his letter that haunts me. He wrote, “if they find out you’re a conservative, they hate you. I know, I experienced it.” There is no doubt that at times, all humans have difficulty with those with whom we disagree. Reading the rest of Adkisson’s letter, I can imagine people in that congregation having a hard time hearing him – he said racist and homophobic things and those actions are not accepted in our churches, churches of love and hope. My sense is that he felt isolated at church, like many of us have felt isolated in other churches. I bet that he couldn’t get his head around our theology and felt it made no sense, just like I, as a little boy couldn’t understand hell. What he did was wrong; it was a morally repugnant act that was undeserved by those individuals on that Sunday morning. But I wonder what we can do to make others feel loved, even when we disagree. One of our early Unitarian

thinkers, Francis David is quoted as saying, “We need not think alike to love alike.”

Let it serve as a moment in time, however, to remember that continual revelation is about sharing our own stories and hearing the stories of someone else. Bearing truth to our experience is half of the equation and love – in any true sense of the word – means being open to the truth of someone else and being open to the change that occurs when you hear their experience. Our community, our faith is founded on this love. A love for all souls – to share their lives with us and for us to know that our truth is ours and yet something may change it. We can go decades unable to flip the switch on a long-held philosophy only to hear it worded slightly different, and know that we too are saved from drowning in our own despairing cry.

In our times of great grief, suffering or isolation, we have been lucky to have love lift us up. Whenever we feel that we are sinking to rise no more, know that this faith will hear our cry and safely guide us to shore. Whenever society tells us that we’re not good enough, that our bodies aren’t what they should be or we aren’t loving who we ought to love, know that real love will lift us up. Whenever we lose partners or family members, old dear friends, come back to this place, to this sanctuary of faith and know that when nothing else can help, love lifts us.