

Plymouth Sunday Service, October 23, 2022, Stephen Crowther

(#78 in a time of covid)

Gathering Music

Welcome - Good morning and welcome to our service this morning (and to those watching online. May want to grab a candle?). If you feel dismayed by world events both near and far; or if the grey ghost of loss has taken up residence; or if you feel angry for no apparent reason – no matter how heavy or light your heart is – please know you are not alone and that you are welcome here - may you find connection and a sense of belonging during our time together.

And so, as is our custom, we light the chalice - **Chalice lighting.**

We light the chalice to warm our spirits, and to kindle the flame of Love and hope.

We light it as a symbol of welcome. May its flame be a beacon of hope to all those seeking refuge and comfort. May it light the way home for those wandering in the wilderness. May it connect with the light of Love in all our hearts reminding us that we are never alone.

(pause)

We have gathered of different identities, sexualities, diverse beliefs and life experiences. We have chosen to come together in this moment for worship. This makes this a holy moment – a sacred moment.

In case there is anyone joining us, who doesn't normally worship with us on a Sunday, I would like to extend a special welcome. Unitarians have no fixed statement of beliefs or creed to which you have to agree in order to be accepted. Our attitude is that religion is wider than any church or faith-group, and deeper than any set of beliefs. Here we practice a free faith unfettered by dogma.

As such, when I speak of God, I invite you to bring your own unfolding, personal and intimate understanding to the name – for it is yours and yours alone and may just be your most intimate relationship of all....

*There is a desire within each of us,
in the deep centre of ourselves
that we call our heart.*

*We were born with it,
it is never completely satisfied,
and it never dies.*

*We are often unaware of it,
but it is always awake.*

*It is the Human desire for Love.
Every person in this Earth yearns to love,
to be loved, to know love.*

*Our true identity, our reason for being,
is to be found in this desire.*

*Love is the "why" of life,
why we are functioning at all.
I am convinced
it is the fundamental energy
of the human spirit.
the fuel on which we run,
the wellspring of our vitality...*

*Love should come first,
it should be the beginning of,
and the reason for everything."*

(Gerald G. May)

(pause)

Our service today will be a reflection on Love – what it might mean for us and the challenges to give and receive Love in a world that seems at times to prize everything but love.

Some words: from Otis Moss III: What do I know for sure about love?

I know that love is not only real, but it's the most powerful force in the universe. I know that love can never be fully described because poets have never stopped talking about it. Singers have never stopped singing about it, and people have never stopped believing in it. I know that it can crack earth and bring people from the dead. It can open doors, and it can lock doors permanently, that when you choose to love, it transforms you. When you choose to love yourself, you crawl out from the shell that you've been hiding under. And it is the only pathway that we get a peripheral glimpse of God.

(pause)

Hymn 1: 174 *A Church is a Living Fellowship*

Reading: *Bishop Michael Curry*

I've come to see that the call of God, the love that bids us welcome, is always a call to become the true you. . . . Not an imitation of someone else. The true you: someone made in the image of God, deserving of and receiving love.

There is a Jewish proverb, "Before every person there marches an angel proclaiming, 'Behold, the image of God.'" Unselfish, sacrificial living isn't about ignoring or denying or destroying yourself. It's about discovering your true self—the self that looks like God—and living life from that grounding. Many people are familiar with a part of Jesus's summary of the law of Moses: You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. *Yourself*. Loving the self is a required balance. If we fail in that, we fail our neighbor, too. To love your neighbor is to relate to them as someone made in the image of the God. And it is to relate to *yourself* as someone made in the image of the God. It's God, up, down, and all around, and God is love.

(pause)

Reflection Part 1:

- Listening to podcasts lately. I've heard repeated the importance of self-love and how it's imperative that we love ourselves before we're able to fully love others.
- *Love thy neighbour as yourself.*

As yourself? Implication and an assumption that one loves oneself. What if you don't love yourself or even like yourself? What if you're always finding fault with yourself? And are plagued by self-loathing? Does it mean we're being asked to treat others the same way? Some of us have such distorted/warped understanding of what love means – based on our own experiences. We first develop an understanding of love in our early years from our primary care givers – commonly, our parents. But what if those caregivers, based on their own experiences, were unable to extend us unconditional love (and their carers before them)? And what if we grew up knowing that being gay was wrong and not acceptable to your parents (as was my experience)? It's not surprising we have a misunderstanding of Love's true meaning. It isn't surprising that we deny and distort parts of our true selves in trying to gain love and acceptance from others. Then, what does love mean? The Rev Jim Loder calls it '*the non-possessive delight in the unique particularity of another*'.

Can we extend this kind of love to ourselves? How do I do this when I constantly find fault with myself or I worry about what others think of me – '*do you like me?*'

Rev Jacqui Lewis says: *loving yourself unconditionally is absolutely a hard thing to do. We're just not trained to do it. We're told we're narcissistic, we're told we're self-absorbed, but in fact, the command to love our neighbour as ourselves has to start with us. How can you make a daily affirmation that you are amazing, you are beautiful, you are gifted, exactly as you are? And try to delight in yourself.*

It isn't easy. It should be. But it isn't.

So, I say we can begin to do this by acknowledging and accepting that it's not easy. And then to acknowledge and accept that I may not like myself much of the time and that I may make unkind judgements of others just to feel better about myself

(ouch!). But I say that when we see these parts in ourselves, we regard them with tenderness and not more fodder for self-hatred. This is the beginning of self-acceptance and loving ourselves. We begin by regarding ourselves with tenderness.

Rachel Held Evans:

I'm not the first to make the observation that to love your neighbour as yourself, you obviously have to learn to love yourself. To love oneself is not synonymous with self-obsession or narcissism – or perhaps it's better to say that to love oneself well is not those things. To love oneself well is to regard one's place in the world with candour and grace, grounded in a humble realization of one's strengths as well as a clear-eyed understanding of one's weaknesses. To love oneself well is to be able to distinguish between what one wants and what one needs. To love oneself well means not to diminish the beautiful creature God made nor to cultivate an outsize image of that same person. To live and love like this, is not easy. To live and love like this, points us toward our true selves, which are part of a greater whole.

(pause)

Hymn 2: 176 Come Together in Love x 2?

To take us into a time of prayer and quiet reflection, some words from Elizabeth Tarbox:

I hadn't walked in the morning for weeks, not since the snow started. So I walked into the wind and it numbed my cheeks and forehead, and I leaned against it and addressed my questions to the silver winter sun softening the ice on Monponsett Pond. What happened? Why am I so often sad and disappointed in myself? How come love has its dark side and feelings hurt and truth isn't kind? Where is hope, and to whom shall I turn, what is faith? What shall I tell them, I said to the torn clouds, what shall I tell these good people who struggle as I do and fail just as often?

And it seems that the soft silver sun and the sound of the wind said, speak the truth, simply, speak your truth.

And so I say ours is a story of faith and hope and love. I say it is our need for one another that binds us together, that brings us limping and laughing into relationships and keeps us at it when we otherwise might despair at the fix we are in. I say it is the Holy we need, the eternal beyond our comprehension, and one place we can find it is here, working and worshipping together. And I say there is a transcendent value worthy of our loyalty, upon which we may set our hearts, and its divine manifestation is love.

Let's come together in **Prayer**: You may want to close your eyes and bring the focus of your attention inwards, to your heart – penetrating its walls and breathing into it deeply. And as you do so, picture yourself breathing in unconditional love etc...

*God of our Hearts, we come to You once again, asking for help.
Help us to open to your presence here among us - and within us.
Help us encounter your presence in the world and in all those we meet as we go
about our daily lives.
We are told that You Love us unconditionally. Some of us find this hard to
believe. Help us know Your Love for us.
Help us when we forget that You are ever present. We ask that You remove
those aspects of ourselves that hold us back from being in your flow of love.
Reshape our failings.
Some of us grew up feeling ashamed of who we were. We learned early on in
our lives that it wasn't ok to be who we were. Shame was planted in us and we
believed the lies it told us. Help us to know that we are wholly loved just as we
are. When we forget this, as we are prone to do - we ask that you remind us of
this truth. Open our eyes and our ears to the truth of the words we are Loved
unconditionally.
And just as we are loved, so are others.
May we learn to love more deeply that which you love.*

Silence

Carla Grosch-Miller's psalm 23:

This I know:
My life is in your hands.
I have nothing to fear.

I stop,
breathe,
listen.

Beneath the whirl of what is
is a deep down quiet place.
You beckon me to tarry there.

This is the place
where unnamed hungers
are fed, the place
of clear water,
refreshment.
My senses stilled,
I drink deeply,
at home in timeless territory.

In peril, I remember:
Death's dark vale holds no menace.
I lean into You;
Your eternal presence comforts me.
I am held tenderly.

In the midst of all that troubles,
that threatens and diminishes,
You set abundance before me.
You lift my head; my vision clears.
The blessing cup overflows.

This I know:
You are my home and my hope,
my strength and my solace,
and so shall You ever be.
Amen

(Psalm 23 redux)

Introduce **CANDLE LIGHTING** while singing **Hymn 3: *Amazing Grace*** - **omit verse**

3

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a soul like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

~~Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come;
'tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.~~

When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.

Reflection part 2:

If we are to *Love our neighbour as ourself*, it begs the question, who is my neighbour? This becomes harder and harder to answer. We no longer live in small local communities – the world has opened up because of the internet – the world-wide-web – so, in one sense the whole world has become my neighbour – connected by the web.

But the web also gave birth to social media. How do we love our neighbour in a post-truth world dominated by twitter and Facebook et al?

Nadia Bolz-Weber: in a post-truth world, in a fake news world, in a world in which we are being fed lines of bullshit, and told it's the truth every day of our lives, in which our worst instincts are being manipulated in order to create click bait? Headlines are manipulated to be sure and trigger the worst instincts within us - moral outrage about the world and about other people, and all that content and being manipulated. Why? So that we click a link? Why? So somebody gets ad revenue. That's the game. In a world in which what I'm told is true, what I'm told about my fellow citizens, what I'm told about my fellow Christians, what I'm being told about the world and myself - feels fairly untrustable right now, because of the ways that it is only trying to manipulate the worst parts of me so that other people can be enriched.

So how do I answer the call to love my neighbour? Especially when they're different from me? When they don't vote the same as me? The irritating family member? The Brexit voter? Boris Johnson? How do we live into Love? What blocks us from being able to do that? This has become my daily struggle - and I don't have definitive answers. But if it is to begin with me, then I need to recognise and acknowledge my own humanity. And try to extend Love to myself. How? Well at the moment, it feels pretty loving to aspire to live an unhurried life - helping me to become more open to/able to be loving to others. If I'm not so busy - there's more room to consider others and myself. Simple eh? No. we live in a culture that thrives on being busy and that prizes success in terms of achieving - money - possessions - influence - status - power. So, to slow down and aspire to live an unhurried life can seem counter cultural. To love oneself can seem like a radical thing to do.

Loving oneself isn't easy. It can be difficult. Again, I say it begins with tenderness - a tender awareness and acceptance of that difficulty. And a willingness to try. This is radical work we're being called to do by Jesus - because our neighbour includes our enemies. This is radical! And counter cultural. And it possesses the power and the potential to change the world. If God is Love and we greet others with Namaste, we are recognising the Divine in each other, then that applies to everyone. God is in everyone. Not just in our friends or the people we like - or just our tribe - but in everyone.

So, loving our neighbour can be difficult work and we may get it wrong much of the time. I know I have. Sometimes, it can just feel just too hard to do. And so I rebel at times.

But I don't believe we can be confused about this - love of self and love of the other is what we are being called to do. In answering this call we must acknowledge and accept each other's humanness - our feet of clay - and we might consider letting go of the need the idolatry of human approval. (Hyacinth Bucket syndrome). And yet, it is the acceptance and approval of others that fuels the adverting industry and thus our economy. We are constantly being told we are not enough, that our lives would be so much better if we bought this... that people would find us attractive if we

bought this... etc. To reject the capitalist forces that control our world, in favour of Love feels like anarchy! It is a Fierce Radical Love and it's anarchic!

And so, we might turn to our source – The Divine Dynamo at the Centre of it all – the God of our understanding – and take the risk of believing that I might be loveable and that I *am* loved – without condition. That I AM ok.

I love watching seagulls on windy days. I delight in seeing them float on air currents – seemingly, allowing the wind to take them where it will. Such freedom. Such grace. To allow the wind to do that. All they have to do is spread their wings and let the wind do the rest. I find it moving to watch and imagine myself as them.

This speaks to the longing I hold for Love, for connection - for God. Can I be like the gulls? Allowing myself to rest on the currents of God's Love? Resting on God's breath? Resting in God's presence. For if God is Love then God's presence is Love. Can I rest in Love? Ah.... that it was so.... To surrender to Love. Again and again.

We won't always get it right – Lord knows – I'm always judging other people negatively! But this doesn't mean I have to stop trying. I keep trying even when I feel 'bad' or tired, careful to extend tenderness and compassion to myself and not beat myself up with the proverbial stick of perfectionism. It takes vigilance and patience and generosity and compassion for ourselves. And it takes a willingness to keep on trying.

And here's God's Mercy and Grace – we are welcomed back each time we stray from the path we are being invited to travel on. And that path can be the Road to Emmaus everyday – *were your hearts not on fire?*

Can we allow ourselves to begin to believe – to let it in – that -

You are loved.

Just as you are.....

Jacqui Lewis:

If we're going to make a world in which our children can love themselves, we've all got to do our part. And I mean all the children belong to all of us. What kinds of messages will we put in the universe for the children? Can we begin to paint a picture in which children see themselves as awesome no matter their skin colour, no matter their religion, no matter their gender or sexuality? Can we begin to paint a picture in which they see themselves as beloved? Because when they do, they'll paint that picture for future generations. And this is our goal - a healed world with people in which they love themselves and can therefore love the other.

Hymn 4: 188 *Let Love Continue Long*

Closing Words: *How well did I love?* by Matt Licata

It is so easy to take for granted that tomorrow will come, that another opportunity will be given to bear witness to a sunset, take a walk in the forest, listen in awe to the birds, or share a moment of connection with the one in front of us. But another part knows how fragile it truly is here, how tenuous, and the reality that this opening into life will not be here for much longer.

Before we realize it, we can so easily fall into the trance of postponement. The spell of tomorrow looms large in the personal and collective psyche.

At the end of this life – which is sure to come much sooner than we think – it is unlikely we'll be caught up in whether we accomplished all the tasks on our to-do lists, played it safe, healed all the wounds from our past, wrapped up our self-improvement project, or completed some mythical spiritual journey.

Inside these hearts there may be only one burning question: how well did I love?

There are soul-pieces and lost parts orbiting in and around us, the ghosts of our unlived lives; those aspects of ourselves that have not been allowed safe passage. To attend to that which remains unlived – to listen to its poetry and provide sanctuary for its emergence – is a radical act of compassion.

One day we will no longer be able to look at, touch, or share a simple moment with those we love. When we turn to them, they will be gone. One moment will be our last to encounter the immensity of one more breath, experience awe at a colour or a fragrance or the blooming of a violet, or to enter into union with the vastness of the sea.

It will be our last chance to see a universe in a drop of rain, to have a moment of communion with a friend, or to weep as the light yields to the night sky.

One last moment to have a thought, feel an emotion, fall in love, or listen to a piece of music. To know heartbreak, joy, sorrow, and peace – to behold the outrageous mystery of what it truly means to be a sensitive, alive, connected human being.

What if today is that last day? Or tomorrow? Or later this week?

Knowing that death will come, how will we respond to the sacred and brief appearance of life?

Perhaps our "life's purpose" has nothing to do with what job we will find, what new thing we will manifest or attract for ourselves, or what mythical awakening journey we will complete. Perhaps the purpose of our life is to fully live, finally, to touch each here and now moment with our presence and with the gift of our one, wild heart.

And to do whatever we can to help others, to hold them when they are hurting, to listen carefully to their stories and the ways they are attempting to make sense of a world that has gone a bit mad. To speak kind words and not forget the erupting miracle of the other as it appears in front of us. Perhaps this is the most radical gift we can give.

(pause)

Blessing: *Blessing the Body* by Jan Richardson

This blessing takes
one look at you
and all it can say is
holy.

Holy hands.
Holy face.
Holy feet.
Holy everything in between.

Holy even in pain.
Holy even when weary.
In brokenness, holy.
In shame, holy still.

Holy in delight.
Holy in distress.
Holy when being born.
Holy when we lay it down
at the hour of our death.

So, friend,
open your eyes (*holy eyes*).
For one moment
see what this blessing sees,
this blessing that knows
how you have been formed
and knit together
in wonder and
in love.

Welcome this blessing
that folds its hands
in prayer
when it meets you;
receive this blessing
that wants to kneel
in reverence
before you:
you who are

temple,
sanctuary,
home for God
in this world.

And so, may the wind of the Spirit blow through our world, giving the answer of God's everlasting love. That as you leave this place, you do so with peace and joy in your heart. Amen

Closing Music