

Embodied Faith

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
May 6, 2017

"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me home."

Thank you for that song... a song of inconsolable grief—
written by Tommy Dorsey after the death of his wife in childbirth,
and then two days later, his newborn son.
It is a song of lament, and we need songs of lament, some of us, in church,
to express what's in our hearts, to release the grief we feel.

Yesterday, there was inconsolable grief at a funeral
at Friendship Baptist Church in Mesquite, Texas,
for a 15 year old boy who should still be alive.
It wasn't a disease, or a car accident, or drugs that killed him.
It wasn't mental illness or poverty or neglect—
he lived in an upper middle class suburb, had tons of family support,
was a well-liked straight-A student and athlete,
had two older brothers who watched him die, and a four year old sister, too.

No, it was a *pre-existing condition*—
a pre-existing condition in this nation of ours, a moral disease, a national disease,
that led last week to a police officer inexplicably shooting into a car

full of teenagers who were abiding by the law

but happen to have skin darker than mine.

Among the symptoms of this disease are: denial, suspicion, fear and the fact that millions and millions of dollars are sent to militarize our police forces but as a nation of citizens we have not demanded millions of dollars for sufficient anti-bias training to prevent such murders.

For some, this disease and its symptoms lead to inconsolable grief. For others, it's just a glance at the passing news. For still others, it's one more occasion to wonder if they or their own child will be next.

I was talking to a friend this week who told me that every morning when she wakes up, she says a single, simple prayer: "Help me to love today." "God, please help me to love." It is a sincere prayer.

We talk a lot about love in this church. So now and then it's good to stop and clarify what we mean by that word—that we're not just talking about an emotion, a sentimental feeling. The love we speak of is a lived ethic. It is a behavior, a demanding practice. Love has to do with how we treat one another. Love is a muscle that needs conditioning and strengthening—as individuals, as a society, as people of faith.

As my colleague the Rev. George Tyger,
Unitarian Universalist chaplain in the U.S. Army
and ethics instructor at the U.S. Army Military Police School, wrote this week:

*"When Jesus said "Love your neighbor"
he was talking about an action not an emotion.
You cannot love your neighbor and call her abomination,
you can't love your neighbor and try to deport him,
you can't love your neighbor and deny them access to healthcare,
you can't love your neighbor and let his kids go hungry.
If love is an action, so is hate."*

Another colleague, the Rev. Amy Zucker Morganstern responded,
*"YES. And that means you don't have to like your neighbor,
approve of your neighbor, even be able to stand your neighbor.
If we waited for those feelings before we did what's right, we'd never get around to it.
How we treat them is what matters."*

How we treat one another is what matters.
That's a Unitarian Universalist approach to faith, to religion:
that it's more important what we do than what we think,
that how we live is more telling than internal convictions or professions of faith,
that our practices of generosity, gratitude, community life and engagement matter,
and that what happens to human bodies- including deportation, hunger,
lack of healthcare, death by state violence- are matters of faith.

Now, many of us have a tendency to make a distinction between body and soul or spirit, the physical and the spiritual, the religious and the secular.

That's a duality that goes way back to the Greek philosopher Plato, who believed that the soul was not dependent on the body, but in fact that the body and soul, matter and spirit were opposites, incompatible. This thought even made its way into the Christian church.

The Catholic monk Richard Rohr tells the story that after four years of taking church history, his professor- who was a priest- summed things up on the last day of class like this:

"Just remember, on the practical level the Christian Church has been much more influenced by Plato than it has been by Jesus."

Hm.

For Jesus, Rohr suggests, there was no animosity between body, soul, and spirit whatsoever.

He says, *"In fact, this is the heart of Jesus' healing message. Jesus healed both body and soul in most Gospel stories."*

Caring for bodies was central to his ministry.

Episcopal priest the Rev. Barbara Brown-Taylor echoes this sentiment when she writes, as we heard in the reading:

*“What is saving my life now is the conviction
that there is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from
the bodily experiences of human life on earth.
My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions
between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual,
the body and the soul...”*

It is an approach also believed by some Humanists
and folks like Ta-nehisi Coates, who in his book *Between the World and Me*
writes about the legacy and realities of American slavery
and it’s destruction of the black body. He writes,

*“The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—
that is precisely why they are so precious.*

...the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings...

There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals.”

Now, you may not agree with these folks.

You may feel there *is* a separation, a distinction
between body and soul, the physical and the spiritual.

But perhaps we *can* agree that our bodies deeply inform
our sense of self, of community, of the Holy or God...

and how we treat the bodies of our fellow living beings *is* a matter of faith.

Some of us have had our trust in our physical bodies shaken,

by accident or disease or struggles with mental health.

Some may feel their body has not been a friend at times, but a foe.

Some are grateful for their bodies and have forgiven them for many slights.

Some may be survivors of abuse, trauma or addiction.

Some may have a lot of stored grief, anger or anxiety in the body.

Some may have learned as a young child that the body is sinful,

or that boys don't cry, or that good girls must be quiet and contained.

Some know what it's like to live with discomfort,

or to be hungry, anxious or cold because we don't have enough money

to be otherwise.

Some may be accustomed to having their body cast them into categories,
of being a place where society's racism, homophobia or sexism plays out.

As Peggy McIntosh, author of the famous piece

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,

said in a talk that some of us were at on Thursday night,

we live in a world that likes to create a pecking order, a hierarchy,

measured by "pay, promotion, press, praise, prizes, prestige, power".

Pay, promotion, press, praise, prizes, prestige, power.

Well, at church we care about another set of measurements!

And they sound more like "praise, prayer, purpose, people, potlucks and the power of Love!"

But that doesn't mean that we can *forget* that in our *hierarchical* society,

some bodies are much more vulnerable than others.

Jesus knew this... and he hung out with a lot of vulnerable people.
They were blind or lame, they had leprosy or were “possessed by demons”.
They were often from the wrong tribe, the wrong ethnicity or religion.
As a healer, Jesus dealt with a lot of bodies- especially bodies that weren’t well.
As I saw it noted on FaceBook this week,
“*Everyone* Jesus dealt with had a pre-existing condition.”

That’s the case here, too. I don’t know if you’ve noticed,
but we’ve all got bodies, and we’ve all got pre-existing conditions.

To our newest members who signed the book today—
We are so glad you’ve joined us, with all of YOUR pre-existing conditions!
We’re glad for many reasons.

First, we’re glad because it means you’ll likely live longer!
There are all sorts of scientific studies that show this.
One is Susan Pinker’s study called *The Village Effect*.
Pinker found that a quarter of people in her study
felt they didn’t have *anyone* to talk to.
Yet longevity, happiness and resilience are all tied
to in-person, face to face interactions.

Face-to face interactions act like a vaccine-
protecting us in the present and into the future.
It can be as simple as making eye contact or shaking someone’s hand—

but it has to be face-to-face, in person, physical presence.

It doesn't work over technology- over FaceBook or Twitter or FaceTime.

Meanwhile, another study by Emily Smith found that
we get in trouble when seeking happiness.

Seeking *meaning* makes us much happier than seeking happiness.

In a book called *The Power of Meaning*, she concludes
that meaning can be derived in four forms:

belonging, purpose, transcendence and storytelling...

all of which can be found where?

Right here! In religious community!

So we're glad you've joined. You'll live longer!

And we hope you'll also find a sense of belonging, purpose and transcendence,
and chances to tell and re-shape your own story.

We're also glad for our new members
because we need you to help change us.

Congregations are always changing;

they always in transition as people come and go, as lives change,

as our priorities and challenges change in response to the outside world.

But we're heading into a period of *intentional* transition,

as we discern our vision, priorities and staffing for religious education going forward.

We plan to take the next year or two for exploration and input,

are hope to find an Interim Director or Minister of Religious Education to guide us.

We'll be asking questions such as these:

-How can we support the ethical, spiritual and emotional resiliency

of our children and youth- and adults?

-What are the most important experiences, practices and beliefs of our faith

that we want them to know?

-What kinds of support and faith development do parents and families,

kids and adults need from us today?

-What makes some kids and youth *LOVE* to come to church- and what doesn't?

Our newest members may have some ideas about that-
and we need you to help shape our future.

We're also glad our new members are here
because we need your help in another way.

You have taken the step from being observers here to being participants.

As participants, the very first job you have-

maybe the only job you'll ever agree to- is... what?

Yes, to love-- to welcome others to this community.

It doesn't matter if you're a hugger or a non-hugger, an introvert or an extrovert,
if you like people or *don't* really like them.

We only ask you to try to love them.

And remember—we're not talking about an emotion here,

but a lived ethic, behaviors, practices, concrete actions...

that can sometimes be as simple as smiling at someone or knitting a prayer shawl,
saying hello, making the coffee or standing up for someone's rights-
someone whose identity is different than your own.

You know, there's a common experience among those who become
parents or godparents or aunts and uncles,

whether by birth or adoption, through family or friends.

And that is the experience of loving a child before she or he even arrives--

before he or she is physically present, in your arms.

Has anyone had that experience here? To love a child even before they arrived?

That's what we ask each other to practice here:

to love people before they even arrive-

no matter what kind of bodies walk through the door.

The next person might be fat, tall, short, lean, fit, old, young.

They might be in a wheelchair or temporarily able-bodied.

It doesn't matter, because before you start to welcome people,

you only need to know one thing:

We are looking for folks with pre-existing conditions... the more the better!

If you are pregnant, you're welcome here!

You're welcome here if you were born with freckles or asthma or with any shade of skin,

if you were born a girl or a boy or transgender, straight or gay or queer,

if you were taught to keep a stiff upper lip or to tango,
if you have cancer or diabetes, arthritis or high blood pressure,
if you live with anxiety or depression-- we welcome you.

If you are in recovery you're welcome here:

if you're in recovery from addictions to alcohol or drugs,
if you're in recovery from having been sexually assaulted or raped,
if you're in recovery from a childhood religious experience, join the club.

After all, *we're all in recovery here*—

at the very least from being born into a racist society,
a homophobic society, a sexist society.

That's a pre-existing condition that we all share.

You're welcome here if your pre-existing condition
is that you were raised Christian or atheist, Jewish or Muslim,
Hindu or Humanist, pagan or Buddhist or nothing at all.
If your pre-existing condition includes a sense of shame or sinfulness,
we welcome you here-- but we warn you, we're going to invite you to lay that burden down.

It doesn't help anybody.

You are good enough, just as you are.

You are blessed with a body, and as imperfect as it is, it is a gift.

It is a gift to be alive.

Here's what our Unitarian ancestors suggested:

The pre-existing condition that *really* matters is that you were born with inherent worth and dignity, with potential for goodness, a likeness to God. Our Universalists ancestors said that the pre-existing condition that really matters was that all of us are beloved on this earth, already loved by God, that there's nothing to DO to be "saved" other than recognize our blessings... and that *all people* should get the chance to be holy and happy.

It's good to be human, to have a body.

It is such an usual gift, a unique and precious and powerful gift- this incarnation as a human being!

As we encounter one another- embodied beings, one and all- may we find the strength to love, to be a blessing in this world.

Amen.

This sermon written with the help of and gratitude for the collected readings of the May 2017 "Soul Matters" small group and worship resources packets on the theme of "Embodiment".

Readings:

An excerpt of a meditation by Hildegard of Bingen, a Christian mystic (1088 - 1179).

“I am the one whose praise echoes on high.

I adorn all the earth.

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green.

I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits.

I am led by the spirit to feed the purest streams.

I am the rain coming from the dew

that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.

I call forth tears, the aroma of holy work.

I am the yearning for good.”

By the Rev. Barbara Brown-Taylor, from her book *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith.*

“What is saving my life now is the conviction

that there is no spiritual treasure to be found

apart from the bodily experiences of human life on earth.

My life depends on engaging the most ordinary physical activities

with the most exquisite attention I can give them.

My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions

between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. ...

Whoever you are, you are human.

Wherever you are, you live in the world,

which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it..

Earth is so thick with divine possibility

that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere

without cracking our shins on altars.”