

The Things We Do For Love
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sermon “The Things We Do For Love”

On this second day of caucusing, I am heartsick. Raised in the theoretically diverse but effectively segregated suburbs of New York City in a mixed-race family by a mother who at least once did call herself feminist, I learned that we should be independent-minded, honest, and fair; that we should vote for conscience and honor the choices that others made...and I learned that every person deserves a chance—that we are all supposed to be equal before the law and before our peers. I also learned that we don't live up to our ideals.

Still, watching this campaign has been painful. Now the choices appear to be three. They could be characterized by age, by gender, by experience, by race, by party, it will always be two-and-one. After years of escaping it, the American public as a whole is suddenly face-to-face with identity politics. Anyone of mixed minorities knows the drill—there's no room for half-and-halves when the battle lines are drawn. You're either with us or against us; either part of the problem or part of the solution. In one of the greatest ironies to come out of our political and social systems, in trying to figure out what to do to reduce prejudice we are most likely turning some other group into “other”, that irretrievable, faceless, nameless black hole of a category from which no humanity escapes.

Divide the candidates any way you like, stand on whichever side you will, and you will hear that “we” are the saviors and “they” are not. And you will see the teeth and talons and claws and anger and fear and grief.

I am so glad politics matters this time. I am so glad people care who leads us. But I am utterly heartbroken by the process. In a system where we could be voting for competence and not against values; where we don't expect to be killed or maimed for exercising our right to vote; where we know we *have* a right to vote; where we could be celebrating each person's free exercise of their rights at every primary and every caucus, instead we are grumbling and arguing and backstabbing and undercutting...and there is far more than the usual amount of identity-based knife-wielding.

If you ask any supporter out there, they will tell you that they are doing it because they care, because they stand for our country and for a renewed strength of democracy, for all the things we can be and are not and for all the things that need to change. They will tell you they are doing it for love.

I can only offer this: we sure have a funny way of showing it.

Doesn't love start with an open heart?

When we love we take on a certain degree of obligation, even expectation of continuation, of reliability, of dependence; even a summer dalliance is really *forever* for a moment in the heat of first heartfall. We want what is lovely to last always. And so we know that the expectation must come with its companion, heartache. Wishing for something does not make it true, and humans are impermanent and changing creatures. In loving it is our task to be so strong that the pain of loss does not destroy or discourage us but calls us to free grief that we might lighten our hearts and turn again to the perennial task of love.

So it is that the first commitment of love is to survival—our own, and the second is to grief and grieving; the flowers and bows of courtship are the third, or pretty trinkets or extra kindness or loving attentions—and as courtship turns to love, these, the seemingly unimportant, become the hub of our daily practice of love. Whether we are loving children or parents or beaux or good friends, our beloveds at the best stand under a gentle spring rain of reminders that they are loved. If it becomes a drenching rain, as in the early stages of romance, it must slacken lest it become flood with mudslide in its wake. If it dries up, the drought must end, else the land will wither and die—not for absence, but for neglect. Not I have not said the beloved will die, for people can move and when parched will find deeper wells and greener pastures. Even children, ignored, will find another place to nest if their parents forget to water them consistently and with care. These little everyday things are indeed the body of loving. Some relationships are drought-resistant, hardy things, deep-rooted and stubborn. They will survive with very little but blossom and fruit handsomely with deeper tending. Others require constant attention, like hothouse roses.

It's easier to believe in the hothouse roses—they make us feel needed—and over time we have developed a complex cultural mythology around this maintenance watering of love—elevating little gifts freely given to a vast array of the possibilities and obligations of entering into a relationship, one being to another.

And that mythology is our downfall.

When we craft a myth we must remember that it is allegory and metaphor; story, not an actual account of a constant reality. We must remember that it is calling us to our best selves, not demonstrating the everyday. And knowing that, we must move forward in a real space and a real time, not mired in futile attempts to be the superhuman hero of the day.

It is not our task to be those heroes.

It is our task to be ourselves.

And as our love calls us to service, to watering, we remember this: our task is not to produce water from air. Our task is not to be the underground river. Our task is simply to take up the water and pour.

If this were another faith, I might talk about how god will save us, and if there is one, perhaps she will. If I had a different theology I might remind you that Jesus fills that watering can with the miracle of his everlasting life and the water of this green earth.

What I will tell you instead is that you are responsible for knowing what fills your watering can, and when it is empty and when it is full. You are responsible for knowing what is clear, clean water and when the water is so putrid that it must be drained away. You are the keeper of the buckets and the well and you must know your resources like you know your dirt-encrusted gardener's hand.

You. Must. Know.

It is bad enough to destroy the gardens of your own soul with fouled waters. It is bad, we all live with the results, but they are yours to risk. Heaven and earth forbid that you destroy someone else with the same errors.

Every one of us has, deep within, a clear cool spring of water straight from the heart of the earth. From that spring we can give freely, we can give without ceasing and the gift becomes a prayer of our hearts, manifested by our hands, and it can save the world.

But like the goose that laid the golden egg, that spring flows as it will flow—not faster, not bigger, and not at all if it is abused. The resources will move or disappear if we forget the awe and respect that they are due.

Deep in our hearts we already know this. We know it like breathing, like sunrise, like food and drink, like fire and air. We *know* it.

And we know its twin, that sinking, stomach-pit feeling when we have agreed to strip-mine our souls.

It starts innocently enough: a friend wants a favor: a car, a listening ear, a babysitter. Then they need it Sunday, and then they need it again Wednesday, when it runs smack dab into something you wanted to do with your time or energy or resources. But you say yes, because you believe the myth of love that says you will say yes no matter the cost.

And then comes the feeling.

There is anger and resentment and fear and envy and irritation. And some of it you direct at your friend, and some at yourself.

But you did after all say yes out of love, so you feel pretty righteous. What right have they to keep asking?

Right.

Stop for a moment.

The friend just asked.

In that asking, there was trust.

If we lied and said yes when you meant no you betrayed not only your own heart but the friend and the friendship. A begrudging gift is tainted; gratitude we are offered for gifts not freely given will not be received into an open heart. “You’re welcome” will not fall meaningfully from our lips. It’s this simple: they asked in good faith, and we lied.

We lie with the best of intentions, striving to meet the standards of those heroes in the mythos that surrounds us. We lie because family men provide and nice girls do and good mothers sacrifice for everyone. We lie to protect ourselves from the imagined consequences.

will they *say* if we say no?

If this were sex, it would be a no-brainer. When one person asks another person if they would like to have sex and the person says “no”, there is only one right answer: “okay”.

Not “pleasepleaseplease...”

not “if you loved me...”

not even, “you’re the only one and if you don’t I’ll surely die.”

I’m sure we all know that.

So *why* is it so hard to respect other versions of the same conversation?

Would you like to dance?

“no”

“Okay,”

Would you like some wine?

“no”

“okay.”

Would you serve on this committee?

“no”

“okay.”

Not pleasepleaseplease.

Not “If you loved us you would...”

And most certainly not, “you’re the only one and if you don’t we will surely die.”

If we do not respect the answers we get, we cannot trust the answers we get.

When the Conquistadores went to Mexico and South America in the 15th and 16th centuries, one of their goals was to convert the aboriginal peoples to Catholicism. And they did. By the thousands. At knifepoint.

Now the modern church acknowledges that conversions under duress don’t count; that someone unable to give consent cannot be said to have given themselves freely to anything.

It is our obligation as a free religious community practicing our faith to honor the boundaries and choices of all those with whom we come in contact. In this way we are living our faith. We gather here in spiritual search. It is deeply challenging and vulnerable work, with rich rewards, and tremendous risks. Support and trust are at the heart of our process, and those little gifts that shower down on each of us from those who love us keep our relationships loose and limber and lubricated for the stretching and growth. None of us wants to be caught in an acid rain. If that is community, we are better off digging our own wells.

If we are going to live in an abundant and loving world, it starts right here. It starts with a little faith and a little humility, because none of us are irreplaceable. Except in very rare circumstances, there are others who can do at least as good a job. Believing otherwise requires a profound arrogance, which we should not claim with anything like pride.

Have faith that someone else can do it.

Perhaps they will even do it better.

Perhaps their abject failure will prompt profound transformation. We never know how events will unfold.

Perhaps their act of love will transform *them* and be good enough for the person who needs it.

Let go of the superhero ideal. You are not meant to carry the entire weight of the world. No human is. No one.

Your contribution to a just world is a gift given from your own deep call to give. When we are called to struggle between greed and generosity; between self-serving and service to the world; between holding on and holding faith—then we are called to the deep spiritual work of sacrifice and even though it is hard or harsh or painful or soul-searching, *therein* lies the growth: in discernment and in choice. It is not always the time to struggle. It is not always the place to risk. We do not always take the path we expect to enlightenment or self-transformation.

Sometimes the biggest “yes” begins with a single “no”.

And then we can truly act in love.

Blessed be and amen.