

Sermon: Love and Intimacy in Community

Location: First Unitarian of Toronto

July 19, 2009

Reading:

Poem: "Coconut" by Paul Hostovsky from Bird in the Hand.

Bear with me I
want to tell you
something about
happiness
it's hard to get at
but the thing is
I wasn't looking
I was looking
somewhere else
when my son found it
in the fruit section
and came running
holding it out
in his small hands
asking me what
it was and could we
keep it it only
cost 99 cents
hairy and brown
hard as a rock
and something swishing
around inside
and what on earth
and where on earth
and this was happiness
this little ball
of interest beating
inside his chest
this interestedness
beaming out
from his face pleading
happiness
and because I wasn't
happy I said
to put it back
because I didn't want it
because we didn't need it
and because he was happy
he started to cry
right there in aisle
five so when we

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got home we
put it in the middle
of the kitchen table
and sat on either
side of it and began
to consider how
to get inside of it

Sermon:

I've been thinking about love the last few weeks. One of the advantages of being a guest minister and being in a free pulpit is that in the absence of a particular topic that I know to be relevant to the life of this congregation, I get to exercise whatever thoughts I have for you in the form of a sermon.

Love, therefore, is the focus of this sermon. Love is a pretty broad word. In the Greek language, there are at least six words that are used to refine our understanding of love and in the theological context of a sermon we could take love in any one of a number of different directions.

Building on the themes of the last few Sunday's when we talked about Emerson's notion of self-reliance and that sense of the divine within us all and last Sunday's sermon which dealt with the idea of cultivating our authentic self, today I am going to explore the importance of loving yourself and how truly loving yourself is really a pre-requisite for loving others – and when I say others, I'd like you to consider others in the context of a congregation.

In the Christian scriptures, specifically Matthew 12: 28-31 we find the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable opens with the Sanhedrin, who were legal minds in Israel at the time, trying to trap Jesus by asking him what the greatest commandment was. Jesus' answer was to love god with all your heart. The second, he tells them, was to love your neighbor as yourself. I have often wondered about this second great commandment – to love your neighbor as yourself. Is that the right standard? What if I don't love myself? What if I don't know how to love myself?

If I can't love myself – experience self-forgiveness and compassion and reconciliation and, perhaps most importantly, trust – how can I ever really give it, why would I give it to another? I might go through the motions, say the right words, act in a public manner consistent with one who loves others, but if I can't actually enjoy the fruits of love - the trust, the compassion, the forgiveness, the truly transformative power of love from myself to myself, how can ever give it to another.

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I, personally, see that play out in my own experience in the poem offered as this morning's reading. That poem, innocently titled "The Coconut" haunts me – it exposes to me my faults as a parent and I feel guilt and shame whenever I read it. I first heard it when a colleague used it as the reading for a sermon she wrote and for me, it was wonderful and horrible at the same time – a punch in the proverbial gut. The author, Paul Hostovsky, sets me up with the opening lines;

"Bear with me," he says, "I want to tell you something about happiness." Well, Paul Hostovsky, I want to know something about happiness – John, I found it in the grocery store with my son in isle five. And then he reveals happiness to me:

"and this was happiness/ this little ball of interest beating / inside his chest / this interestedness/ beaming out/ from his / face pleading / happiness" - YES! He's right, that is happiness – I've had a few five year olds myself and they've done the same thing! I'm with you Paul Hostovsky, tell me more – and then it comes; "and because I wasn't/ happy I said / to put it back / because I didn't want it / because we didn't need it/ and because he was happy / he started to cry..."

Every single time I read that poem I am confronted with those times in my life where I have extinguished the joy of someone I love. I am transported into the grocery store – pushing the cart with one of my kids in tow and rather than celebrating with them the discovery of something new and wonderful – I bark at them to not touch or to not ask if we can get this...

I contemplate this imaginary failure along with real failures and I beat myself up. I do not pay attention to the part where the father in the poem brings the coconut home and together they contemplate how to get inside. I've done that as well and you think I might cut myself some slack – move into a place of love and grace but I don't. I beat myself up. I don't instinctively consider my reflection on this poem as an opportunity for transformation – the opportunity to be a better parent – no, I prefer to beat myself up and remain fixated on feelings of guilt and shame and anger – truly and unholy trinity – these are the antithesis of love and they are nurtured inside me.

Those damn poets. They capture human truths with a few simple words. The poet Robert Creeley captures my ability to nurture my pain, my shame in his poem "The Flower:"

I think I grow tensions
like flowers
in a wood where
nobody goes.

Each wound is perfect,

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encloses itself in a tiny
imperceptible blossom,
making pain.

Pain is a flower like that one,
like this one,
like that one,
like this one.

I think we (can I say “we” or should I say “I”) all do this and maybe not even consciously– but I get a sense that for many of us we seem to keep a running moral inventory on ourselves and we nurture those tensions, those failures, like flowers.

Why, because we don’t love ourselves enough, we are caught up in a cycle of guilt and shame and anger. We feel guilty when we violate our own moral standards by not being a better parent or spouse or friend – which leads us to shame, the fear that if you knew what I did or what I thought about what I did, that it was somehow bad – if you knew that, then you’d see me as not good enough or even worse – unlovable.

And because we have at some level – at an unconscious level – accepted even partially the premise that we are bad – that we are unworthy of love - anger emerges as one of the dominant reactions – anger for some of us is very passively presented - for others, it’s on the surface. I am angry with myself for my failures and defensively angry with you, whom I imagine must see into my soul and see the roots of my guilt and shame as clearly as I do.

But you don’t, do you? How could you? The issues that trigger us are often small and trivial. It’s the gently critical email that I receive from my boss, the driver on the QED this morning who cuts ME off (it’s personal, right) or the innocent family member or close friend with whom I find myself in a position where I don’t measure up to an unrealistic image of a husband or a father or a son or a friend. This is deep stuff. These are issues that are core to our identity – core to the formative experiences we have had with our caregivers as children and can take a lifetime to acknowledge and understand.

But we have to try to understand them. We have to do this work, If I don’t do the work, if we don’t do the work, to really understand who we are and come to love and cherish ourselves – it becomes next to impossible to do that for another. So taking that line of thinking to the next logical step, thinking about that commandment which calls on us to love our neighbor as ourselves, we can say that choosing not to love ourselves - choosing not to do the work to love ourselves - makes it tougher to be a member of a loving community.

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I got to tell you, I just picked up a copy of *Anna Karenina* earlier this week. I've never read it – or any of Tolstoy's other works and – as a literature major I've chosen to forgive myself for this incredible oversight – so part of the deal I made with myself is to actually read the book. So I went to the library on Tuesday and I read the first line of the novel – “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Now, I have not really begun the book yet – but I'm willing to bet – just from those opening lines, I'm going to find themes of love and identity and family and community and forgiveness and redemption.

Why is every unhappy family unhappy in its own way, I would imagine it's because of the exponential explosion of complexity that can take place when a family or community and its individual members choose not to love themselves and because of this can not come to love each other in a meaningful way. Giving and receiving love in a community is inherently more complex when we when we have not made the choice to love ourselves. When we come together as individuals who have not made the commitment to do this work, we run the risk of having our own anxieties and triggers shape and form the community itself. Let me be clear I am not talking specifically about you because I don't know you well enough – but I have seen this in other congregations.

When exploring some of the anxieties and tensions that existed in a congregation I worked with in the past, one of their senior members of the congregation summarized an example of institutional anxiety when she explained to me that at their congregation, when things started to get good, when we begin to build membership and put some money aside, when we're ready to take an important next step and really take off, we become afraid we sabotage our efforts. We've done it several times in the past and I'm worried we're going to do it again.

Another Unitarian at another congregation marveled at how during board and committee meetings, people who, under other circumstances would behave in socially acceptable ways seem to forget the norms of social interaction inside the congregation. It's not just our faith – we see these tensions being played out publically in denominations all across Canada and the US.

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. I would argue, however, that just as love is probably the overriding way in which happy families are all alike, an absence of trust may be the thread that links unhappy families or communities. Trust, in a practical sense, means that you place confidence in someone to be honest with you, faithful to you, keep promises, vows and confidences and not abandon you. Trusting another and trusting yourself requires a realistic perspective about people and an expectation of failure. Trust needs to be combined with a willingness to forgive and grows best in an environment of acceptance and love.

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That some communities, churches, synagogues, congregations have problems of trust it's not a new problem – it's ancient. We go back to the Christian scriptures and we find Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (that is the church of Corinth), contrary to popular opinion, was not written for wedding services, but to address what environments of acceptance and love – environments of trust – actually look like in a loving community. Paul tells churches that are struggling to understand how to model love that "Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth" (1 Cor 13:4-6).

We know this – right? Deep down we know this. But we also know that the practice of it is not easy and I think it's made all the more difficult when we are asked to give to others something that we don't give to ourselves. Love enables us to find truth and rejoice with each other in its discovery. To embrace love – to foster an environment of love for each other and ourselves these are the reasons we come together as a community of faith.

I offer this to you as a general reflection – ideas that have been running around in my head - do they apply to you individually? As a community? I'll leave you to answer those questions – and encourage you to use Shawn as a resource if you make a choice to explore these questions in more depth.

Don't be afraid to name the problems and address them, either as individuals or as a church – a community of faith. If you sense any fear or anxiety at all in making a change for a new way of being of loving in the context of a community – of operating in a spirit of love for yourself and for others – If you have these fears, I'd ask you to remember the words of the poet Marianne Williamson, who writes that;

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Amen and blessed be.

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