

“Love Never Ends”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
An Easter Sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 27 March 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

I’m here to proclaim the good news to you this morning, but you may have noticed that there didn’t seem to be much of it this week. I’m sure you’re familiar with some of the stories: the bombings in Brussels on Tuesday that killed at least 31 people, an alarming new study published on Tuesday by climate scientist James Hansen and his colleagues warning that climate change presents a dire global emergency requiring immediate action, Wednesday’s highly disturbing acquittal of former CBC Radio personality Jian Gomeshi on four counts of sexual assault and one count of choking, the passing in North Carolina and Kansas of new discriminatory laws against LGBTQI people, and so on.

With so much to despair about in the world, we might feel more at home in the somber mood of Good Friday. Easter’s jubilant message of hope and joy might seem somehow wrong, even as we’re surrounded by all of the familiar symbols we see every year. Some of us might even feel like flushing all those jellybeans, chocolate bunnies, and weird-tasting colourful Peeps down the toilet right about now. As they say in Brooklyn, fuhgeddaboutit!!

But I set out to preach to you on hope this morning. And I’ve been a little perplexed wondering how I can do that. Amidst all the world’s brokenness and tragedy, how do we find hope? Maybe just by showing up like you have and being present no matter what you’ve brought with you today. Maybe by caring enough to speak out against injustice knowing the system is corrupt and unlikely to change. Maybe by honouring the cycle of life and anticipating renewal again even when it’s cold and grey outside and we get more ice and snow...

I want to tell you a couple of stories of renewal that I came across again this week that made me hopeful.

On Tuesday I attended a screening of a documentary called “Waste Land” at the U of T. It was sponsored by the City of Toronto's Long Term Waste Management Strategy. I saw it when it first came out five years ago. At the time, I was quite heartbroken and lost, and the film gave me hope. It’s auspicious that I got to see it again a few days ago when I was feeling so weighed down by the news.

The documentary traces world-famous Brazilian artist Vik Muniz’s experiences getting to know some of the trash pickers , or *catadores*, in one of the largest landfills in the world, Rio de Janeiro’s Jardim Gramacho. He spent about two years making his so-called “Pictures of Garbage,” a collaborative project together with the *catadores*.

For me, the film depicts a powerful story of redemption and hope. I don’t think it’s entirely ironic that an opening shot lingers on the huge statue of Jesus called Christ the Redeemer with outstretched arms that sits atop Mount Corcovado overlooking the city of Rio. Muniz and director Lucy Walker give voice to some of the poorest and most marginalized people in the world by documenting their experiences. As Muniz points out, they are essentially class-based Brazilian society’s Untouchables—humans who are invisible, undesirable, and entirely cut off from mainstream society. It’s no coincidence that all the pickers he talks to are people of colour.

Jardim Gramacho is an island separated from the city; Muniz explains that it’s where “the bad” goes. The hardworking *catadores* work day and night in the most deadly and horrible of conditions. Trash is constantly unloaded from trucks literally on top of them. They run around frantically picking through endless piles of rotting stinking trash in search of salvageable materials that they can sell to earn a little money to survive off of. With humour and sensitivity Muniz listens to their stories, develops relationships with them, and makes them feel seen and valued, some of them seemingly for the first time in their difficult lives. He finds these people beautiful and admires their zest for life.

The project involves a return to Muniz's roots. He grew up lower middle class in Sao Paulo in a house without running water or sewage. Talking to the pickers makes him realize that he could have ended up like them. He was lucky, though, and escaped to become a successful artist. Muniz sees the project as a way of giving back to his people. He's reached middle age and has a great deal of material success. His wife is more skeptical of what good his temporary help will do for people so stuck in poverty, but Muniz is convinced he can make a difference.

Muniz is known for foregrounding the use of materials and for work that has some kind of social justice content. His vision for the project with the trash pickers was that he would use the everyday materials they collect and sell as the materials for art. Their lives would be transformed at the same time as the recyclables. As with his other projects, Muniz asks the question, "Can art change people?"

We meet Tiao, the energetic young president of the pickers' cooperative, a community organizer and father who's passionate about workers' rights and doesn't want his kids to have to work in Jardim Gramacho. We meet Zumbi, both of whose parents worked as *catadores*. He serves on the board of pickers and salvages books from the trash pile so that he can create a community library. We meet the outspoken and committed Valter dos Santos, an elderly man who's worked the pile for almost 30 years but says he's proud of the work and believes that it's good for the environment. Being poor is not bad, he says. It's nothing to be ashamed of. We also meet stylish and openhearted Isis, who's worked on the heap for five years and desperately wants to leave. She's been abandoned by her husband and has lost her children as well, but lights up whenever she talks to Muniz or his crew.

Muniz brings these motley characters together and makes portraits of them based on famous works of art such as Jacques-Louis David's "Death of Marat." They spend weeks in his studio helping him construct images out of the materials they've collected. In the process, he teaches them about art and photography. Their collaboration culminates in his taking Tiao on a trip to London, where his portrait is auctioned off for an unbelievable sum of \$50,000, which Muniz gives to Tiao, who uses it to expand the capacity of the work of

his co-operative and to save up for his family's future. Tiao bursts out in tears at the London auction house:

Muniz asks him, "Why do you think you are here?"

Tiao: "Because once a friend and I had a dream of creating an association. We created the association. It was a crazy dream. Nobody believed in us. Not even my family. Nobody believed in me."

Vik Muniz: "This is only the beginning, Tiao. This is only the beginning. "

Tiao: "I am so happy. God was so good to me, so wonderful. "

Vik Muniz: [hugging him] "*You're* the strong one. *You're* the one who is doing everything. "

The film ends with Tiao and the others proudly hanging up their portraits, adorning their simple homes with valuable works of art. With the proceeds from the art sales most of them are able to start new lives away from Jardim Gramacho and to fulfill some of their dreams.

I chose today's reading because it's one I feel I need to return to over and over again. As you probably noticed, this reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is not your standard Easter lectionary reading announcing the resurrection of Jesus. For me, though, it captures the essence of Easter—that love makes all things new and keeps bringing us back to life. There's a fullness of life that is always possible, even when we're feeling the most broken, the most forgotten, the most lost or silenced. Especially within a loving community based in a mutuality of giving and receiving there's the possibility of moving from deadness and despair to a brighter place of hope. I think that's what Paul's talking about as he writes to one of the earliest Christian communities.

As theologian Richard Niebuhr writes in his book *Christ and Culture*: "In freedom from sin and freedom from law they were empowered by love to rejoice in the right, to bear all things, to be patient and kind. Out of the inner fountains of the spirit of Christ there would flow forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Not as

lawgiver of a new Christian culture but as the mediator of a new principle of life—a life of peace with God—Christ did and does this mighty work on the creation of a new kind of humanity.”

One of the ways I understand Unitarian Universalism is that it’s based in a relational theology. We covenant to one another to live into our highest selves. We aspire to do better and aim higher, knowing that we will probably fall short. As we say each week, “Love is the doctrine of this church…” Love sustains us and guides the work we do both within and beyond these walls.

My questions for you this morning are, *No matter how crappy your life might seem or how broken the world appears, can you still be open to the possibility of transformation? Can you somehow feel your spirit yearning for new life? What within you wants to come alive (again)?*

This week I also found myself dipping again into the memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie*. As you may know, it’s a series of conversations between a middle-aged journalist named Mitch Albom and his old college professor Morrie Schwartz, who’s rapidly dying of ALS or Lou Gehrig’s disease. They meet on Tuesdays and discuss the meaning of life. It’s a beautiful story of return and renewal.

Although Morrie’s clearly dying, he’s still so wonderfully alive. As Albom writes, even after holding a “living funeral” with a small group of family and friends in his home, “the most unusual part of [Morrie’s] life was about to unfold.”¹ Big-hearted, loving Morrie would share much wisdom with his younger student, ones that would eventually get transmitted in the form of this international bestseller.

Mitch doesn’t feel worthy of Morrie’s love. He doesn’t feel he’s lived up to the ambitions he had in college. Over the course of their final weeks together Morrie imparts many different teachings about work, forgiveness, death, compassion, family, relationships, and the wider culture. The thing he keeps coming back to, though, is love: “Love wins. Love always wins.”²

¹ Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie* (New York: Random House, 1997) 13.

² *Ibid*, 40.

With his awareness of his impending death, Morrie seems to have even more concern for people who are suffering. He tells Mitch that the most important thing he's learned during his illness is to learn how to give love and to receive it: "Let it come in. We think we don't deserve love, we think if we let it in we'll become too soft. But a wise man named Levine said it right. He said, 'Love is the only rational act.'"³

In a later conversation about whether Morrie thinks he'll be forgotten, he says no: "I've got so many people who have been involved with me in close, intimate ways. And love is how you stay alive, even after you are gone."⁴ Morrie insists on the importance of being fully present with people and doing deep listening. Mitch admires his ability to openly show his emotions, something his baby boomer generation doesn't seem so good at.

During their candid discussion of death, Morrie says that everyone knows they're going to die but nobody believes it. The wisdom he shares is that if only we had more awareness of our death we could be more engaged with our living. He prefers the Buddhist approach: "Is today the day? Am I ready? Am I doing all I need to do? Am I being the person I want to be?"⁵ Morrie tells him that once you learn how to die you learn how to live, and he makes sure to repeat this so Mitch hears it and takes it in. He says we take too much in our lives for granted and are not spiritual enough. Conscious of the fact of his dying, Morrie has a heightened awareness of nature. He notices subtle changes to the trees outside his window. Mitch tries to look out the window with the same intensity. This doesn't come easily to him.

Morrie's mantra is "Love each other or die,"⁶ which is a paraphrase of poet W.H. Auden. The book ends with Mitch's saying goodbye to Morrie just before he dies. He gives his old professor a kiss and leans in to press his face against Morrie's. He lingers there, and for the first time, he cries real hot tears in front of his teacher. He doesn't hold back. Morrie must have been pleased.

³ Ibid, 52.

⁴ Ibid, 133.

⁵ Ibid, 88.

⁶ Ibid, 163.

The book ends with a coda. One of the last things Morrie told Mitch was not to give up hope in reconciling himself to his estranged brother. Shortly after Morrie's death, the two brothers talk again, and Mitch is able to tell him for the first time how much he means to him and that he loves him. With that, their relationship is renewed. Morrie was right: love never ends.

I encourage you this morning to look around for glimmers of hope within yourselves and within your communities. They're there, even if at times very dim and hard to discern. The power of love and relationship is that it is endless and dynamic. Just when we think it's dried up or lost forever, it returns, and we rediscover feelings of joy and hope. On this Easter morning, let yourself be open to new life. *Let love in.*

Blessed be and Amen.