

“To Be Loved”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 3 July 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.

A few weeks ago I was at a vigil on the campus of the University of Toronto for the victims of the Orlando shootings. People gathered outside the LGBTOUT student centre. It was just a few days after the tragedy, and the vigil provided much-needed space for an overwhelming sense of grief and loss felt by individuals in the community and allies like me. Two student leaders read the names and ages of the 49 victims in the Pulse Nightclub on Latin Night on June 12th. Then there followed several moments of silence. Later on they provided an open mic if anyone chose to share some words.

For me one of the most poignant moments of the hour or so we spent together out on King’s College Circle came during some spontaneous intergenerational dialoguing. A young woman university student acknowledged her generation’s debt to those in the queer community who came before her and the many strides they’d made in the struggle for justice. She said she wouldn’t have grown up with the sense of freedom and safety she’d felt had it not been for the work of earlier generations.

A little later a gay Jewish man in his fifties stepped forward to testify that he’d been in the movement since he was a teenager and that no matter what victories had been won or, as with Orlando, new setbacks occur, he wasn’t planning to leave. He would always remain active in the work. As he looked around at the young faces surrounding him, he said he wasn’t going to give up or desert his siblings in the struggle. “*Your* lives matter too much,” he insisted, choking up suddenly. It was as if he needed to reassure younger members of the queer community that they wouldn’t be abandoned, that too much was at stake in the struggle against bigotry and oppression, and that the older generation had their back.

The red thread throughout the words shared that evening was that *love would prevail over fear*. As all of the tapers still burned strong and were held firmly in people’s hands, I couldn’t help wanting to lead them in singing “This Little Light of Mine,” our UU anthem. I didn’t, though. I left the group

emotionally drained but hopeful somehow and uplifted by the spirit of the community and its unwavering sense of solidarity.

My original seed for today's sermon is a phrase in James Baldwin's letter to his fifteen-year-old nephew James that prefaces arguably his most important book, *The Fire Next Time* (1963). Baldwin's phrase describing his nephew's birth leapt out at me: "[H]ere you were: to be loved. *To be loved, baby, hard, at once, and forever*, to strengthen you against the loveless world."¹ Without even having much of an outline or anything, I kept turning over that phrase in my mind and heart—"to be loved." What does that really involve? What do we commit to when we love our children, our nieces and nephews, our godchildren, our students or mentees?

Baldwin tells his namesake that although he arrived to an unjust world based in white supremacy, he should know that he's deeply loved by his family and that their love will enable him to survive. While white society will tell him over and over again that he's worthless, he should know that he's from a long line of poets and tough hardworking people.² Needless to say, to be held so securely in love under such difficult conditions can be critical in your development as a person. Especially among marginalized groups, it can mean the difference between life and death. It's a point that bears repeating, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, the most prominent black writer of his generation, who's often compared to Baldwin, chose the same form of a letter to his teenage son for his recent bestselling book *Between the World and Me*.

As a gay black man, Baldwin left Harlem to live in Greenwich Village for a time, but decided to move to France, where he spent most of the rest of his life, except to return to the States a number of times so that he could be more active in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. In France Baldwin felt that he could safely be out there and that the colour of his skin was less of an issue than it was in racist postwar America. Sadly Baldwin really never felt at home anywhere. In fact, he described himself as ultimately homeless. He never found the community or the love he was seeking.

In the last couple of years, we've been made increasingly aware of the vulnerability of black bodies, but also of other bodies: Indigenous women's bodies, transgendered bodies, cisgendered straight women's bodies, refugees' bodies, and queer bodies. Unfortunately, violent actions driven by fear and

¹ James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1998) ed. Toni Morrison, 292-93 (emphasis added).

² Baldwin was a lifelong advocate for black children who had a deep concern about their self-esteem, but he also knew that the need for strong self-esteem was universal: "Every child's sense of himself is terrifyingly fragile. He is really at the mercy of his elders...I am talking, then, about morale, that sense of self *with which the child must be invested*. No child can do it alone." In James Baldwin, "Dark Days," in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998) 794.

hate often seem to dominate the headlines nearly every day. It's hard to ignore the suffering of these marginalized and oppressed individuals.

Where does this hate and violence come from? Of course this is a complex question that requires a sophisticated answer, but I keep coming back to one of psychologist (yes, I consider him one) James Baldwin's core ideas that white supremacy derives from self-hate. As he sees it, white people can't stand themselves, and that's why they need to dehumanize black people. Throughout his work, Baldwin kept urging for the need to love, or else people will continue to oppress and kill others: "*The emptier our hearts become, the greater will be our crimes.*"³ Is it any surprise that it's oftentimes homophobic gay men that perpetuate violence against other gay people?

Theologically my response is to keep returning to the Golden Rule of *love your neighbour as yourself*, the emphasis being on the last part of the phrase "as yourself." If you feel shame and disgust at who you are and your own body, is it any wonder that you'll feel shame and disgust for the people around you, especially those who are different from you?

Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr argues that part of the problem historically in our Judeo-Christian culture is that we're stuck on seeing ourselves as rooted in "original sin," when what we should be doing is living from a place of Original Blessing. As he writes, "We live in a time of primal shame, and we don't seem to know how to escape it. I find very few people who don't feel stupid, inadequate, dirty, or unworthy today, even if they do not consciously admit it... *We all have had feelings of radical, foundational unworthiness.* I'm sure they take ten thousand different forms, but the shame is usually there."⁴

In contrast, when we know that we are loved, and that we can love ourselves, something shifts: we no longer need to put down or bully others and can begin to show acceptance and love towards them. The more self-compassion we can cultivate, the greater the compassion we'll be able to extend to others.⁵

Not all of us were fortunate enough to have great mentors growing up. I reflected on this nearly a decade ago when I was asked to serve as a mentor to a high school freshman named Alison in the Coming of Age program at my home congregation in Brooklyn.

³ James Baldwin, "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998) 178 (emphasis added).

⁴ Richard Rohr, Daily Meditation for Friday, July 1, 2016, "Original Shame and Original Blessing" (emphasis added): <https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/>.

⁵ For interesting contemporary ideas about self-compassion, please see Dr. Kristen Neff's TED talk, "The Space between Self-Esteem and Self-Compassion": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IvtZBUSplr4>.

As part of our mentor training, we were asked about mentors: Who were they for us? What was the nature of the relationship? I realized that I hadn't really had any such person in my own life, so I thought all the more reason to try to become an important figure for my mentee Alison!

If you know anything about the Coming of Age curriculum, I was committing to being a kind of faith guide and support for a year leading up to the kids' writing their credo statements and presenting them to the congregation. Ali and I developed a close relationship that has extended way beyond the parameters of the program. She finished university a year ago and is now serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal. I couldn't be more proud of her and all of her accomplishments! The 10 or so kids in the program that year went on to become good friends and several have stayed to join the congregation as young adults.

Who were your mentors? It could have been a parent, but as we know, relationships between parents and kids can be fraught. Maybe it was a beloved grandparent or aunt or uncle, or a teacher or coach. Would it have been someone from your religious community--that is, if you grew up in one?

Have you been a mentor to anyone in this congregation? I suspect that there are more mentors here than we may realize, and maybe there's something to Oprah's claim that we're *all* mentors, whether we see ourselves wearing the label or not. I recall Peter Brydon's beautiful children's story from a few weeks ago and the lovely image created when he asked the children to stand around the chalice and then gradually circles were formed around them of those in the community who love and care for them. You may have noticed that quite a big circle of caring emerged that morning!

We are talking about people willing to listen as we live the questions, who will hold space for us when we are hurting and confused, who love us just as we are. As Parker Palmer writes, "people who help us grow toward true self offer unconditional love, neither judging us to be deficient nor trying to force us to change but accepting us exactly as we are. And yet this unconditional love does not lead us to rest on our laurels. Instead, it surrounds us with a charged force field that makes us want to grow from the inside out—a force field that is safe enough to take the risks and endure the failures that growth requires."⁶

Posing the question, "Who is walking with me?,"⁷ Jean Vanier replies an "accompanier." According to him, it's "someone who can stand beside us on the road to freedom, someone who loves us and understands our life."⁸ Vanier

⁶ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 60.

⁷ Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1998) 128.

⁸ Ibid.

stresses that accompaniment is needed at *every* stage of our lives, not just in our earliest years or youth.

All of us need to be loved and can become mentors. In your intergenerational relationships may you discover the kind of mutual growth and learning that Ali and I experienced during the Coming of Age program and beyond and that Baldwin inspires. May these relationships bring more love into your life and into that of the wider communities of which you are a part.

On this Pride Sunday I want to leave you with some hopeful examples of the healing, transforming power of love. This past week the Ontario government announced that beginning next year it will start issuing gender-neutral licenses and health cards. Also last week, and more surprisingly, was the announcement from the US military that it would change its policy to allow openly transgender people to serve.

One hopeful local case of bridge-building worth mentioning was an iftar dinner (or fast-breaking nightly meal during the month of Ramadan) Friday a week ago attended by about 200 people here in downtown Toronto. It was unique in bringing together the city's LGBTQ and Muslim communities. The occasion was remembering the victims of the Orlando shootings. Mayor John Tory made an appearance.

The Orlando tragedy shooter Omar Mateen was known to have had homosexual relationships, something that's evidently caused some members of the Muslim community to reflect on controversial LGBTQ-related issues and to look at some of the homophobia and fear in their own religious community.

In our denomination you hopefully saw the wonderful video of Saskatoon lay leader Liz James' son Anthony that got widely disseminated on the internet a couple of months ago. It was Anthony's idea to create a video responding to a rap video by a mother of three children insisting on the need for gendered bathrooms. The video's called "Stand Up, Stand Up, People of Grace," and many Canadian congregations, including our own, contributed something to it!

Anthony's courageous words bear repeating here: "If you haven't found a place where you feel loved, you have to keep looking, because it's out there somewhere for you. Don't stop looking till you find the place where *in your heart* you feel safe and loved and accepted." As his video strongly suggests, that place could be our Unitarian congregations.

Finally, did you see the touching video from the Sheriff's Office of Orange County (Orlando) that started going viral on Friday? It shows police officers, detectives, and various other staff dancing and letting loose to Whitney Houston's song "I Wanna Dance With Somebody." Throughout

people hold up “Love Always Wins” signs. The hashtags are #KeepDancingOrlando and #OrlandoUnited--the message being that no matter what we still need joy and to keep on living.

Love always wins. It’s a good mantra to repeat when we’re in despair and can’t believe there’s yet another violent shooting incident. It’s a good mantra to repeat this Pride weekend too. Love always wins. Let it be our motto. Please repeat after me: “Love always wins!”

Blessed be and Amen.