Loving the Hell Out of the World  January 29, 2017 Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris

Readings

From Rising Strong by Brene Brown and Braver/Wiser by Erika Hewitt

Empathy is not finite, and compassion is not a pizza with eight slices. When you practice empathy and compassion with someone, there is not less of these qualities to go around. There’s more. Love is the last thing we need to ration in this world. The refugee in Syria doesn’t benefit more if you conserve your kindness only for her and withhold it from your neighbor who’s going through a divorce.

My wish for all of us wounded, scared human beings is that we steer clear of those who would frame compassion as “a pizza with eight slices” and instead seek out those who remind us, in word and deed, that love is mysterious and abundant; it is evidence of our inherent wholeness; and it’s the place where we knit ourselves into each others’ lives.

From Joanna Fontaine Crawford’s Boots and Blessings Blog posted Jan. 27, 2014

To love the hell out of the world means to love it extravagantly, wastefully, with an overpouring abandon and fervor that sometimes surprises even yourself. That love flows out of you, sometimes slow and steady, sometimes in a torrent, sometimes filled with joy, sometimes with fierceness, or anger, or a heartbreaking pain . . . . so much love that comes crashing down on you, gifts from the Heavens in the form of the smiles and cares from others, a giggle burbling up from a toddler's fat little belly, the soft, sweet smell of star jasmine catching you unaware, not knowing where it came from ... but it's here. And you're here. And just to live. . . swells your heart with enough gratitude and love that you must release it or burst. And so you love, love the hell out of the world. . . . Without scale, without ratio, without carefully allotting how much you will give versus how much you will receive. You love because you must.

We love emphatically, actively, with our hands and feet; pushing the wreckage aside, reaching down, stretching until we fear our arms can go no further, but they do, we touch fingers with others, then grab on for dear life, pulling them out to safety, then going back in to remove the hell itself, before it traps someone else. We round a corner only to find hands waiting for us, to pull us to safety, to warmth. . . .

We work, in great passionate swoops and in slow, plodding routines, to put that extravagant love into action. . . . Misery, ill health, disease, viciousness of greed in the face of want, voices that shout hate or whisper meanness, soul-eating addiction, humiliation, despair, injustice that curls up nastily, poisoning the spirit of giver and receiver ... we do not flee. Bone-chillingly afraid we may be, but we step forward. We are the only form love will take and the work is ours to do.

Our job, our mission, is to take all of that love, all that overflowing, passionate, undying love and train it on the hell that exists in this world.
We are Unitarian Universalists -- from one source, to one destiny -- here to love the hell out of the world.

Sermon

Yesterday was quite a roller coaster — for those held in detention at airports, for those refused access to flights, for those refused access to family members, for those who face uncertainty and fear. Some relief came when a Federal Judge for the Eastern District of New York issued an emergency stay halting the President’s Executive Order banning entry into the US from seven majority Muslim countries. And more relief came this morning with a similar order from a Federal Judge in Boston. The phrase that became the prompt. . .and now rests at the heart of this morning’s sermon. . .is taking on more and more meaning. . and urgency. . with each passing day.

The phrase — Love the Hell Out of the World — originated back in 2014 with Joanna Fontaine Crawford, minister of the Live Oak UU congregation in Austin, TX. Without scale, without ratio, without carefully allotting how much you will give versus how much you will receive. You love because you must. We work, in great passionate swoops and in slow, plodding routines we do not flee. Bone-chillingly afraid we may be, but we step forward. We are the only form love will take and the work is ours to do. Our job, our mission, is to take all of that love, all that overflowing, passionate, undying love and train it on the hell that exists in this world. We are Unitarian Universalists -- from one source, to one destiny -- here to love the hell out of the world.

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When he stopped by to tell me he was gonna get a sofa, and a table where he could eat his meals and a microwave so he could cook in his own apartment and asked if we could help; when she knocked late one night to say that she had gotten out of an abusive relationship and her son needed his medication and asked if we could help; when the social worker called and said the couple she was with was in urgent need of food – it was an emergency – and asked if we could help. . .because you have said yes the answer is yes.

When guests come to the Food Pantry, when that last minute request to host non-violent civil disobedience training comes, when planning began for the Boston Women’s March and leaders were looking for a place to meet – because you have said yes the answer is yes.

When we together bless and send one of us to witness to the harm done by income inequality, when we bless and send some of us to serve lunch with Common Cathedral lunch, to take part in the Women’s March for Peace, to march in Boston and DC just a week ago yesterday, when some of us witness over and over and over again on behalf of climate justice – wherever these folks go. . . we go with them, in love. You have said yes.

Compassion is not a pizza with eight slices. Neither is love. . . or justice. There is enough to go around – for one another and ourselves, for those we have not met yet and those we will
never meet. All these yeses, all these actions; I have to believe they love a bit of hell out of the world.

We are the only form love will take and the work is ours to do.

This past week an email invitation was sent out asking folks to join in a dinner or brunch hosted by fellow First Churchers. Yes, these gatherings are the kick off for the Annual Budget Drive – more on that in a moment. These gatherings are also – and as importantly – an opportunity to take a deep breath and remember what this community means to you/could mean to you, why you came, why you stay, how it sustains you. After 30 years in ministry it feels as if every deep breath I take might well be accompanied by such a memory. One among them is the response from my home congregation in Lynchburg VA, a congregation I left for Divinity School in Nashville back in 1978. In October 2013 when my mother died I called the minister of that congregation whom I did not know well and asked for his help. Would he officiate at her memorial service so I could care for my Dad? Without hesitation he said yes. When time came for the service members of that congregation whom I had not seen in decades showed up with hugs and condolences. Many of the memories I treasure are times like that when folks showed up – for me, yes, and for one another. Some of those memories are from here and of you.

In this place as nowhere else. . . in this place we are reminded, in word and deed, that love is mysterious and abundant, that it is evidence of our inherent wholeness, that it is the thread with which we knit ourselves into each other’s lives.

We are the only form love will take and the work is ours to do. PAUSE

Now to the other reason for the dinner and brunch gatherings – the Annual Budget Drive. All the First Church yeses and all the First Church ways we show up for each other and for justice; all the First Church ways of loving the hell out of the world are possible because of your financial contributions. As a colleague (Lynn Ungar) once said, “Money has everything to do with religion, with the choices we make about how to be with ourselves, our neighbors, and with the divine. Religion is about life and life has a lot to do with money.”

In this church. . . . money has to do with the building. And the music. And the programs for our children. And the care we provide for our youngest. And all the work that happens in the church office. And the worship service. And the justice work. And the staff who offer leadership and support. In this church money has to do with each one of us. When it comes to financial needs and resources, no two of us are exactly alike. When it comes to making a financial commitment, there’s a lot take into account, much of it personal.

Here’s what I know. I know that your Search Committee and Standing Committee, with the help of one of the UUA’s compensation consultants, have done a thorough and thoughtful job of planning the compensation package for your new minister. I know that you value and appreciate the staff – Ellen, Andrew, Marjorie – who are continuing with you. I know you appreciate the work they do. I know that you want to be as welcoming, as inclusive as possible.
I know you want folks to continue to find their spiritual home here for generations to come. I know that you want to continue to be a voice and presence for justice. I know these things.

As you think about – and feel about – your financial commitment for the coming church year, I ask you to consider this. With a 2% increase in overall pledge giving - about $2500 total - you can offer your continuing staff a compensation increase. With a 5% overall increase in pledge giving – about $6,000 total- you can provide that compensation increase, support broader and deeper outreach, greater inclusion and strengthen your collective work for justice.

Unitarian theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams said often that in order for goodness to triumph, it must be institutionalized. This is, and must be, one such place, one such community. . . where goodness is deeply, fully and wholeheartedly institutionalized. . .where you are called, and called again, to love the hell out of the world.

We are the only form love will take. The work is ours to do.