

# “Liberating your Love”

**Worship “guts”: Story, prayer, readings, sermon**

## **Story for All Ages**

It is now time for our Story for All Ages! This morning I will share a koan – a short story or dialogue used to teach students of Zen Buddhism.

The Zen master Ikkyu had always been very clever. One day as a young monk, he got himself into trouble by accidentally breaking his master’s favorite teacup. “Oh, no!” he said, and then, “double oh no!” he thought, as his master came into the room, scowling, as it was clear that there was no hiding the truth of what had happened.

Quickly, before the Master could say anything, Ikkyu asked, “Master, why must people die?”. The Master replied, “It is natural, my son. Everything in this world experiences both life and death”. Ikkyu held up the pieces of the broken teacup and then said, “Master, death has come upon your teacup!”

## **Prayer and Meditation – words by Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig**

In the silence that follows the spoken prayer, you are invited to type a joy or concern that you hold in your heart this morning into the chat window. To aid in the sharing, I will read each one aloud. The sharing of joys and concerns will not be part of the video recording that we post on YouTube.

These words a prayer of Reverend Laura Horton-Ludwig

## The Imprint of Love

Spirit of life and love,  
light within and without,  
mystery from which we have all emerged,  
(and) within which we live and die:  
be with us now as we allow ourselves  
to drop into the silence and stillness  
at the center of our being.

As people of faith,  
we seek to live in a spirit of love,  
a spirit of community, justice, and peace.  
And yet, in so many corners of the world both far and near,  
we see divisiveness and hate.  
If we look deep within ourselves,  
perhaps we will even find those shadow energies there too.  
We struggle to respond to the outer world  
and our inner dramas  
in ways that manifest love.  
At times we may fear that love will not be strong enough.

At times we may question whether love really is at the root of all things,

in this world with so much struggle and suffering and discord.

We may struggle to hold on to our faith in love,

knowing that if all things come from the one source we proclaim,

that source must somehow hold hate as well as love,

violence as well as peace,

evil as well as good.

This is the mystery within which we live and die.

These are the questions that haunt our days and nights.

And yet we are not without hope.

Our struggles and our questions testify to our longing for peace, for love.

Our very longings

are born out of that mystery

we dare to address as "Spirit of life and love."

In the stillness and silence of our own heart

we read the imprint of love

created not by our own will,

but planted there for us to discover.

By what or whom, we cannot know, and yet it is there:

A clue,

a talisman,

a beacon,

a light within.

May it keep hope alive

even as we dwell in mystery.

May it guide us all as we seek to act wisely and well.

May it help us to be vessels of compassion for one another

and for our world.

Amen.

## **Reading**

[Hear the words of Anthony DeMello:](#)

You know — all mystics — Catholic, Christian, non-Christian, no matter what their theology, no matter what their religion — are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well.

## **Reading**

Our second reading this morning is from the Book of John in the New Testament, Chapter 3, verses 16 and 17.

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

## **Sermon (about 1850 words)**

### **Intro (450 words)**

My name is David Fu, my pronouns are he/him, and I serve as a Worship Associate here at Channing Memorial Church, Unitarian Universalist. As you can see, our Beloved Reverend Jane Smith is out of the pulpit this morning, and as you can probably surmise, one of the duties of a worship associate is to “fill in the gap” in some way, shape, or form in the Minister’s absence, which is once a month during the fall, winter, and spring, and every week during the summer. Occasionally we have a guest preacher, but more often than not, a worship associate leads the service. This presents an opportunity for the Congregation to hear a different voice and perspective, and sometimes, because they are a member of the Congregation, a Worship Associate can address topics that a Minister cannot.

Putting together a service involves a fair amount of work. In addition to all the logistics, there’s the issue of the content. Just what are we supposed to talk about? And, relentlessly, Sunday comes every week. Fortunately, we have access to a UUA resource made just for this purpose called Soul Matters. Soul Matters lays out monthly themes for the year, and each month it provides a helpful packet chock full of readings, service elements, stories, and so-called “sermon seeds” to help us “do the worship thing.”

Though it hasn’t been mentioned explicitly by name, this month’s theme is “liberating love”, and it has been there, quietly underpinning our worship. Reverend Jane talked about agape as “liberating love” last week in celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. I decided to take “liberating love” in a slightly different direction. Rather than viewing “liberating” as an adjective modifying the subject noun “love”, I decided to view “liberating” as a verb form, taking the

noun “love” as its object and to consider “liberating love” as an action; hence the title of this sermon, “Liberating your love”.

Well, aside from this perhaps too clever by half wordplay, is there anything here? This morning, I of course will be making my case that the answer to this question is “yes”. I will be doing so in three parts, with the headings

- What is this love of which you speak? Which is pretty short,
- God liberates Its love – storytime, and
- Rejecting the “broken world paradigm”, which relates the above to how I see and want to live in this world

And before we get started, I’m going to throw in the usual “God language caveat”, that is, I will be using the word “God” in this sermon, and you should feel free to substitute whatever language you might prefer in its place.

All right. Let’s go.

### **What is this love of which you speak? (231 words)**

We are born in love with this world. What I mean is that when we are born, we do not know fear, even if it is only for a short time; what I mean is that when we are born, we do not know hate.

We start our lives trusting the world to provide for us – we have no choice, and thankfully, in most cases it does. It provides food, clothing, shelter, love, and we love it in return. But then we learn to reign in our love. We are *taught* to fear the stranger, to be careful, and to avoid many risks. We are *taught* to fear death in order to survive – a practical lesson to be sure, but once we’ve grown up, we need to let this fear go, at least to some degree, because, if there’s one thing we know in this wild, wonderful, wooly, and sometimes woeful world of ours, it is that we all must die – even our teacups.

I believe that this love that we are born with is a gift from God. In the words from our prayer, it is “an imprint of love created not by our own will, but planted there for us to discover.” And this is the love that I believe we need to liberate. And the good news is that we have a great example to follow – that of God.

### **God liberates Its love (684 words)**

A device that I often use in a sermon is the illustrative story. I take a character or situation out of history, out of fiction, or even out of a movie, and I use it to make my point. It’s an excellent technique, because, among other reasons, it lets me leverage the work of some of the greatest story tellers to a commensurate effect. With this in mind, I’m going to do this now, and choose the “character” God from the Bible. Because this is Channing Memorial Church, I don’t have any qualms about this, and because this is a Unitarian Universalist church, I’m going to use the gender neutral pronoun “It”, with a capital “I”, as God’s personal pronoun in most of what follows.

So, what is the story about God liberating Its love? I claim it goes like this. God created the world and humankind, and it was good, but It had mixed feelings about the whole affair. Yes, there were all the lovely plants and animals, but the *people* – made in Its image – It loved them so much, but they just wouldn’t behave. From the very beginning in Genesis with Adam and Eve, and then Cain and Abel – why couldn’t they do better? God gets fed up with it all and destroys the world with a giant flood, only saving the family of Noah and the animals. After some reflection, God realizes that global destruction when the people misbehave is not really a sustainable practice, so It promises Noah It won’t do that again, and Noah and family are to repopulate the earth and have dominion over the animals etc., etc., etc.

God thinks to Itself, “Hrm. Maybe if people had more rules to guide them, they wouldn’t misbehave so”, and so the Old Testament is filled up with rules. Many, many rules. And still the

people misbehave. And God gets angry. And It does a lot of smiting and such, but It keeps Its promise to the descendents of Noah, and It doesn't wipe the slate clean again. Life goes on.

We fast forward to the New Testament and the Book of John, and today's second reading

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

These two verses, and especially the first, are arguably the most famous in the Bible, and they are held most dear and close to the hearts of many Christians. And it's everywhere if you know to look for it. You may have seen "the rainbow hair guy" at sporting events holding up a sign that simply reads "John 3:16".

One question that I had, whilst meditating on these verses is, "Who is 'him'?" The pronoun is ambiguous. Does it refer to God? Or does it refer to Jesus? Most Christians will tell you it refers to Jesus. But as a brief aside, I found a very interesting sermon which makes a case for its referring to God on the interwebs by one John M. Miller, titled "John 3:16 & 17: Who is 'Him'?".

But all this is not relevant to my point. My point is that up until the New Testament, God's love for the world was *conditional*. Rules needed to be followed. Or else. But then, by sending Its only child, Jesus, into the world, *God* liberates *Its* love. Jesus is sent not to condemn, but to spread the message of love – of liberating your love. And even though we as humanity once again rear our ugly ugliness and crucify Jesus in response, God does not smite, God does not punish, God does not "wipe the slate clean". Instead, even though people keep breaking the rules; even though people keep hurting one another; even though "everything is a mess"; God turns the other cheek and accepts the world and humanity for what it is. And then, for good measure, It resurrects Jesus.



[Pause] Cool story.

And now, the last bit.

### **Rejecting the “broken world” paradigm (475 words)**

You may have noticed the phrase “broken world” bandied about in our services. It’s a popular concept. The UUA even has a “healing a broken world” video series. And this popularity extends into other religions as well, as an internet search on the phrase will reveal. And I understand the phrase as an acknowledgement of our problems, I accept its sentiment, and I embrace the call to action implicit in the word “healing”, but these words make me uncomfortable. There are two reasons.

The first reason is that I believe that a “fix the broken world” mentality, even if well-intentioned, can be a precarious thing. Looking at history, I believe that many of humanity’s darkest moments have been the results of this kind of thinking, because the first thing humanity has done has often been to look for someone to blame for this brokenness: “We’re in a terrible depression: it’s the Jews fault,” or “Make America Great Again”.

The second reason that I don’t care for this language is that it is hard on my psyche to accept the idea that the world is broken. I feel that to do so is to condemn the world, and I don’t feel qualified to make such a judgment, and I don’t want to make such a judgment. And I don’t want to live in a broken world. I accept that there are serious problems, and I accept that I need to do my part to address them, but to me, that’s just part of life. And to believe that I live in a broken world would deny me the good parts: the wonders of nature, the kindness and love of others, the beauty of music, the utter fabulousity of it all. Though everything is a mess, all is well.

And Jesus was not a “fixer” of the world. Not in that sense. Jesus’s message was not “heal the broken world”, and it certainly wasn’t “Make Judea Great Again”. Jesus’s message was “Love

God, and love one another.” The wondrous irony of this is that if humanity actually listened to and truly heeded Jesus’s message, an awful lot of things would get fixed.

So, I reconcile all this by saying that the world is not broken – but the world needs our love. Our agape, yes, but a love even bigger. We should emulate God and love this world, we should not fear it, we should not condemn it; even though we hurt ourselves and one another, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes on purpose, even though we will be hurt. In these times, we may lose our love for life and for the world and all the people in it, but like Jesus, our love for this world can and will be reborn, and it can be set free again – if we just have the courage and the faith to believe.

Amen.