

An Essence of Love

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 12, 2023

As the tale would have it, a night's storm washed upon a beach thousands of starfish as the turbulent waves sought to empty the ocean of its inhabitants. Witnessing these ill-fated starfish, a young girl walked among the creatures tossing them one at a time into the ocean. As she bent down and tossed the helpless sea life back into the salty waters, people around her watched in amusement. One of the skeptical bystanders approached her, asking, "Why are you doing this? There's no way you could save all these starfish! You cannot even begin to make a difference!" The young girl, momentarily deflated, nonetheless bent down and tossed a single starfish back to its aquatic home. She looked at the bystander, and said, "Well, I made a difference to that one!" The bystander looked at her with an inquiring gaze, and after several moments bent over and tossed a single, solitary starfish back into the sea. Others joined them and, together, all the starfish were saved. ¹

This tale carries within it so much wisdom regarding the actions and motives of a love inherent in a person, exemplified in this child. The young girl did good in this world and chose actions of love without any expectation of receiving anything in return from the starfish, nor accolades for work well done. Ultimately, she carried on even through mocking criticism. She chose love instead of indifference towards the helpless creatures; motivated, perhaps, on bringing well-being to the world around her. Her goodness inspired others to join her.

This story is comforting and inspiring in another way as well. There is so much ill in this world – we need not look long and hard to be met with unnecessary violence, devastating war, and natural disasters that displace and kill thousands. It is daunting, akin – in a related and yet amplified way – to a beach of thousands of suffering starfish. All we can do is address what is

¹ <https://www.thestarfishchange.org/starfish-tale>

within our own reach from a place of love – we make our actions, however small or seemingly insignificant, based on the love we carry within.

So, Love. Love is not something to gain nor give as some sort of barter nor is it enacted with any ulterior motive. Love – if we connect to our core – is simply present, is inherently there to orient us in the world. It is what we each hold within – if only we can access it.

Pure love expects nothing in return. Persian poet Hafiz offered an inspiring reflection on the relationship between the earth and the sun. The sun demands nothing in return from the earth for the warmth, sustenance, and light it offers. It simply offers it through its very existence. What does a love like this do? It illuminates the entire sky!²

This reflection reminds me of beautiful, enchanting, sprawling fields of wildflowers. Instead of brown and green our senses are met with pinks, purples, and blues, with fragrant odors and petals delicate to the touch. These flowers simply are. And solely through being, they offer basic goodness and beauty and poetry to the world around them. In fact, it is this uninhibited beauty that becomes their livelihood, scents and colors offered to unassuming insects who pollinate in return – life supporting life. Lilies, tulips, Queen Anne’s lace – unconditionally beautiful and inspiring – present, consistently, throughout any tumult; cultivating love and goodness simply by their being in the world. Can uninhibited, inherent love help us survive as well?

Origin stories of various faith traditions provide the “why” to these musings – Why is love inherent? Philosopher John D. Caputo offers an applicable musing on the book of Genesis, offering an interpretation of the Christian and Jewish origin story. Caputo reflects that in the act of creation, God did not create something out of nothing, but rather created order out of chaos. The wind and water and land were here, immersed in darkness and quite destitute. God addressed these barren and lifeless elements and in doing so brought them to

² From *Soul Matters Worship Series* February 2023

life – awakening them, in a way.³ The book of Genesis elaborates on those six days that God brought the earth to life, culminating in the reflection, “God saw everything that [God] had made, and indeed, it was very good.”⁴ (Genesis 1:31). Caputo reflects, “[God] is not responsible for the fact that the elements are there but for the fact that they are fashioned and called good. Creation is not a movement from nonbeing to being, but from being to good,”⁵ Towering oaks and humble buttercups? Good. Ferocious tigers and scurrying ants? Good. Our friends and beloveds, ancestors and children, elders, mentors, even those we disagree with – good, good, good. This goodness was God’s “contract with creation,” the “first, last and constant covenant” – creation is good.⁶ We are called to live into this.

The faiths stemming from this story of creation are not the only ones to acknowledge that all of creation is inherently good – our own faith espouses this fundamental understanding of life in this realm. Love is inherent. Hate, envy, greed, excessive anger – these are not. If we are love, the rest is a façade, a defense, a barrier we construct. Each one of us will stray from love – another truth inherent to life! And yet we can each return. Practices of meditation calm the mind, offerings of forgiveness relinquish past harms, the fundamental compassion and understanding directed at both ourselves and others allows us to calmly accept and repair any misdoings.

This brings me to a reflection on the basic teachings of process theology. In this theology, God – the sacred of many names and of no names – is not all knowing nor all powerful. Instead, God has the power of persuasion. God works to persuade each of us to choose good. The God of love whispers goodness in our ears – if only we take notice! Evil and harm and hurt occur when we ignore these divine murmurings – when we choose not to heed the call of the sacred. What are we called to do? To listen to the sacred – to that which is calling us towards good. To let these whispers guide us in each of our actions. We hear this in the call of a songbird, the hymns

³ *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* by John. D Caputo pg. 58

⁴ Genesis 1:31

⁵ *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* by John. D Caputo pgs. 66-67

⁶ *Ibid* pg. 67

of forest, the orchestra of the ocean. We are invited to feel this in our hearts, in our center. Those whispers of the sacred.

A Jewish re-interpretation of the story of creation offers great wisdom as well. The tale begins that “at the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe.” While creating all that is, God exclaimed, “let there be light”⁷ and ten vessels filled with that sacred, divine light rushed towards all creation. Had all these vessels arrived whole and unbroken, the world and all of creation would have been perfect. The vessels, however, were too fragile for this sacred light. The vessels cracked and shattered, and shards of glass descended upon the earth as if droplets of rain or a shooting star – the sparks fell and scattered everywhere. That is why we were created – to gather and return those holy sparks. Only when all the shards are reunited can the vessels be restored, and the world will finally be complete. One interpreter of this story concludes, “Therefore it should be the aim of everyone to raise these sparks from wherever they are imprisoned and to elevate them to holiness by the power of their soul.”⁸ In this Jewish origin story, we are created for the purpose of finding divine light and love and sacred perfection – our inherent purpose is to find that which will make the world whole. So how do we go about this? We search and gather and collect love and sacred light in all the earth’s hidden places!

The first God we spoke about whispered, “You are good, good, good.” A process God may murmur into our ears, into our hearts, “go forth and do good.” We now have the divine command, “Go, find goodness, and return it to me.” We often do this as the small child returned the starfish to the sea – one simple, pure, unassuming act at a time. All these entities offer and instruct love as a way of being, not something we direct towards nor receive from anyone else. Warmth, compassion, joy – a calling to enhance everyone’s well-being – these are all states of mind; are all states of being. Love is our essence. Within each of us we hold a flame of love, a spark of being. Some theologians pose the following question: If the sacred is

⁷ Genesis 1:3 NRSV

⁸ *Tree of Souls* by Howard Schwartz pg. 122

an entity of love, which is my understanding of the holy, could this entity have created us simply for us to offer love in return?

Christians often reflect on the phrase, “What would Jesus do?” Colleen posed to me the Unitarian Universalist version of this question, “What would love do?” Together, we contemplated. There is that love commonly professed in Unitarian Universalism. My own sermons often preach on tending to the least of these, which I carry deep in my being. This kind of love – no matter how easy or hard – is inherent to our faith and who we aspire to be in the world. We are well versed in loving the marginalized, but what about our enemies?

The connotations of the English word “love” can offer a stumbling block; the word encompasses so much. In exploring love, we need to clarify what kind of love we’re discussing. Love need not be synonymous with affection – we are not called to tend to our enemies or those causing us harm as we care for our young children or our devoted, loving partners. Rather, it means acting out of goodness, as espoused by the various versions of God we have been exploring. It is easy to respond to ill-will or harm or anger with hate, vengeance, or reciprocated anger. It is harder to respond with level-headed calm, dignity, and resilience. How can our response to any form of bigotry or violence be met with intentions that center the well-being of the whole? Our desire for the welfare, security and happiness of the whole that arises from the love held innately within us guides our responses and the consequences we impose.

What would love do? Love can mean holding someone accountable so they can learn from their misdoings. It can mean withholding thoughts of malice toward the one causing harm, allowing us to temper our reaction. It can mean removing someone from community where they can no longer do harm, or insisting on reparations to make amends with those who have been hurt. Our choices and decisions are not centered on vengeance for the harm we have been dealt but instead centered with love. Love is a state of mind that impacts our relationships with anyone – including our enemies.

What would love do? A colleague, Rev. Darcey Laine, offers a powerful reflection: “By embodying and manifesting love, by grounding our actions, our choices, our words in that bedrock of love that underlies and supports everything, that is deeper than the suffering and struggle of this moment.”⁹ An embodiment and manifestation of this essence of love we each carry guides us towards an equitable, joyful, peaceful realm of the living. Remember, too, that love is not perfect. Love is grace, love is an acceptance of what is. Perfection is the enemy of love. Love calls us back from our transgressions over and over and over again. Love reminds us, we are each good. We are each good, good, good.

Let us return to the reflections of Christian philosopher Jon Caputo. Caputo writes of the Kingdom of God as being rather inside-out and backwards – he writes that it is a kingdom not composed of the wealthy, the beautiful, the privileged, the elite. Instead, it is a kingdom filled with, quote, the “ill-born, powerless, despised outsiders who are null and void in the eyes of the world,” and yet, Caputo offers, “precisely for that reason the ones whom God called and set apart, whom God chose, even favored, singling them out for all their singularity and exceptionality. They are the people of God.”¹⁰ The least of these comprise the Kingdom of God.

What does our own kingdom look like if we live our lives with this essence of love? If we ask ourselves, in each decision, in each of our actions, “what would love do?” We create a place where enemies can become partners on our quest for wholeness, where anger can be met with a calm request for introspection and apology, and violence can be met not with reciprocated brutality but by holding one accountable. Anger is not met with anger, nor vengeance with vengeance nor greed with greed, but instead each with that which offers good towards the wellbeing of all.

⁹ From *Soul Matters Worship Series* February 2023

¹⁰ *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* by John. D Caputo pg. 48

Antithetical, this kingdom -- where the faint whisper to be good overrides the anguished cries towards vengeance, where we search for goodness and light, not wealth nor prestige, where goodness rules all, we are each good, good, good. Where we strive, not for power, but to be like the lilies and the tulips and the Queen Anne's lace – pure and good for no other reason than to be pure and good. Where we aim to be the sun – offering warmth and sustenance and seeking nothing in return. May this be the kingdom within which we all reside.

May it be so, and Amen