

Courageous Love, Sacred Community

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 23, 2022

Many of the sources we draw upon as Unitarian Universalists teach of our duty to create heaven on earth – we intentionally create heaven in this realm, we do not wait for one in the unknowable beyond. So I wonder, what do heaven and hell look like on earth? I share with you a parable found within the folklore of many cultures. This morning, we use the term “God.” I invite you to interpret with any term for the sacred that feels right to you.

One day, a curious man approached his God and inquired, “What do heaven and hell look like?” God responded by showing the man two different doors. Crossing the threshold of the first door, the man spotted a table filled with people all sitting around a large pot of delicious looking vegetable stew. And yet when the man looked around, he saw that each individual sitting around the table looked sickly, thin, and famished. He realized they were holding spoons longer than their arms – once they had reached out to fill their spoons with the aromatic soup, they could not bring it back to their mouths to eat. The man shuddered at the scene, and God said, “You have seen hell.” The man and God approached the second door, and upon entering the room, the man saw it appeared to be the same – there was a large table holding upon it the delicious stew, but in this room the people were plump, joyful, and laughing. They had the same long-handled spoons, but instead of trying to feed themselves, they were feeding each other. The man looked at God and said, “I don’t understand.” God smiled and replied, “It is simple. Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy only think of themselves.”¹ Heaven, and hell.

So, I wonder about heaven and hell on earth. In absorbing the wisdom of this story, we see that heaven and hell are not about the things that surround us, but about the care that people offer one another. And so I suggest heaven and hell are not castles in the sky versus the fiery depths of a world run by the devil – those metaphors seemingly representing so much of what

¹ <https://sofoarchon.com/heaven-and-hell-the-parable-of-the-long-spoons/>

we find in society. If not abundance and frivolity, what is heaven? Heaven is a place where there are no “least of these,” because we are all equal. It is a place where we learn to love each person in the interdependent web of life, even if love is simply wishing good will. Heaven is where the well-being of the community is cherished above all else and the web of life is tangibly felt and the goodness we practice ripples out to all. In palaces, whether in the sky or in Beverly Hills, we may find sorrow and loneliness and judgment. In dwellings and communities and circumstances seemingly akin to hell we may find strength, and community and compassion. It is not where we are, but how we extend love. It is how we engage as a community. When, together, we experience love, we always find heaven.

I want to focus on the communal aspect of heaven on earth. What can we do together that we cannot do alone? Individually, we can make those small yet crucial changes that affect lives in profound ways. As we heard in our reading, just because we cannot put an end to all hate and suffering on our own, this does not mean we cannot try and do our part. Each thing adds up, and dozens of small things serve as a sea change in the world of justice or equity.² If we are intentional about being in community, those drastic changes become prevalent, and society wins, and goodness prevails and liberation reigns. And yet, as a culture, we have work to do.

We live in a culture where individualism rules. Where values of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency are prized above all else. We are taught to prioritize our own needs and to cultivate independence in order to be hailed as important and successful.³ Often, we are trying to feed ourselves with spoons longer than our arms! How does this contrast with cultures focused on the collective good? In collective cultures, social norms and rules promote selflessness and altruism; family and community are held as more important than the individual. Society prizes spirits of generosity and holds as “good” those who are helpful, dependable, and attentive.⁴ Each way of being in community has its strengths and weaknesses. But I wonder, in drawing wisdom from collective cultures, what can we learn? Can we learn to

² From *Soul Matters Worship Resources October 2022* Karen G. Johnston

³ <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-individualistic-cultures-2795273>).

⁴ (<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-collectivistic-cultures-2794962>

set aside those bonds of individual success, those chains of self-sufficiency, and instead focus our energy on those communal needs and the care and compassion for others that ripples out to all? Initially, we may find this challenging.

I think of what is easy, and of what is courageous. I reiterate some of the ideas we discussed last week: courage is the ambition and ability to break free of those societal norms we have been immersed in since birth. In this case, letting go of the individual for the communal – breaking free of the status quo to create a world where we use our spoons to feed one another. Let’s reflect on those wise words of God: “It is simple. Love only requires one skill. These people learned early on to share and feed one another. While the greedy only think of themselves.”⁵ Love is courageous because it requires vulnerability. Love is courageous because it calls for us to wish unconditional goodwill towards all humanity. Love is courageous because its opposite – hate – is so easy. Love is courageous because we don’t see everything as a contrast between good and bad, holy and unholy, but each person as a mix of the two. Love is courageous because it reframes the way we perceive and engage with our enemies.

In exploring love, let’s pause for a moment to define love. Let us engage with the wisdom of theologian and philosopher Thomas Jay Oord. Oord writes, “To love is to act intentionally, in sympathetic response to others (including God) to promote overall well-being.”⁶ So, intention. Love is something we choose to do – it is a decision – it is based on the free will we have as autonomous individuals.⁷ Love is a sympathetic response – The lover and that which is being loved influence each other – love cannot exist in a vacuum, It's about relationship. This can be people influencing each other, yes, but also people influencing nonhumans, or our own future, or our sacred – any relationship we engage in.⁸ And people affecting people – this extends to distant strangers as we are held in relationship by the web of life. My prayers affect God, my compassion affects both my beloveds and strangers, my self-compassion affects my future self,

⁵ <https://sofoarchon.com/heaven-and-hell-the-parable-of-the-long-spoons/>

⁶ *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 15

⁷ *Ibid* pg. 16

⁸ *Ibid* pg. 19

and my environmentally conscious choices affect the wildlife in my backyard, and all of this affects me in return.⁹ We love each other. And in these effects, we engage with that which serves to create overall well-being – the well-being of the individual, the local community, the global community. Well-being means we encourage one another to flourish.¹⁰ Self-love is a prerequisite for any kind of love – we cannot offer others what we cannot offer ourselves.

I want to explore one type of love: Agape. This is the love I reflect upon when I think of those courageous lovers: the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi or Jesus. Agape is that entirely selfless love. Agape meets evil with good – it promotes well-being despite a confrontation with ill-being.¹¹ To me, this is the hardest of all loves. This love is not one of affection or intimacy. This is the love that calls upon us as Unitarian Universalists to acknowledge and honor that inherent worth and dignity found in each person. It is my belief that even the most harmful of people were born with inherent worth. Sin, evil – to me this is when people deny their own worth and simultaneously deny the worth of others. It is not to listen to that goodness within but to ignore it and to instead let hate reign. It is to intentionally create harm. So, can we extend our spoons to feed those who intentionally cause harm? If extending our spoons means simply yet profoundly wishing goodwill towards all, I think I can try to connect to that goodness within. Like those courageous lovers who have come before me, I can try to pray for those who persecute me.

So, intention. Can we intentionally act to promote the well-being and happiness of each being we are connected to in the interdependent web of life? Can we practice lovingkindness, as Buddhists do, extending that love we feel for those we care deeply about to those we hardly know to those we dislike to those we despise? This is the Buddhist idea of the intention of goodwill – to be practiced by all. We wish goodwill to all. Can we offer love and disagreement simultaneously? Yes. Let us set – as Buddhists do – an intention of harmlessness – thoughts and actions guided by compassion. An acknowledgement that all beings – just like each one of us –

⁹ *Defining Love: A Philosophical, Scientific, and Theological Engagement* by Thomas Jay Oord pg. 19

¹⁰ *Ibid* pg. 24

¹¹ *Ibid* pg. 43

are striving to be free of suffering. Those who are creating harm are simultaneously suffering from pain, fear, and sorrow.¹² Can we wish them freedom from this bondage as we wish for ourselves and those we love deeply? Intention for goodwill and harmlessness can orient us in this world, serving as a catalyst for unconditional love for all in this realm and beyond.

Why do we choose to intend to do good? As a Unitarian and as someone who values the theology of humanism, I believe we choose good because humans are inherently good. As someone who espouses the beliefs of process theology, I also believe that I do good because God is encouraging me to do good, and I listen to this call from God. I can see this call from a deity being parallel to a call from nature. Is nature not inherently good? Do we not see love as a mother bird works to feed and protect her chicks? Do not flowers prevail each spring regardless of the hardships of winter? Are elephants not altruistic? If nature serves as that ultimate thing that is greater than ourselves, I believe it calls each of us – among every living thing – to live lives of goodness and love and compassion. Let us respond to the call of God, to the call of nature, to the call of our own hearts and let us create heaven on earth. Evil and sin – this happens when people do not connect to and respond to this goodness within and this goodness beyond. Yet we cannot control that. What we can control is us, and our ability to love and offer genuine wishes of well-being to all.

In this question, “Why? Why do we do good?” I am reminded of a Jewish origin story. As we reflected last week, these stories shape how we engage with the world around us. The story reflects that, “at the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe,”¹³ and that presence was darkness. In Genesis God proclaims, “let there be light,”¹⁴ and in this story God sent ten vessels of primordial light to earth. Had all vessels reached the earth intact, we would be living in a perfect world. However, these vessels were too fragile to carry all that God had bestowed them with, and they shattered, scattering fragments of light everywhere. The holy sparks

¹² *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* by Bhikkhu Bodhi pgs. 29-33

¹³ <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/32246?lang=bi>

¹⁴ Genesis 1:3

scattered “like sand, like seeds, like stars.”¹⁵ And this is why we were created. We were created to collect these scattered fragments of light and goodness – no matter where they have been hidden – and return them to God.¹⁶ We are called to find goodness and love all around us – even in the most difficult of places – and in doing so repair the world. This is the task of those of this faith. I think we can all find wisdom in this story. Let us search for goodness and love and create the world that was meant to be. May we forgo the individual for the communal and make each action one of finding and creating goodness for all of those in our midst.

As we reflect upon this Jewish tale and the fabled parable of the spoons, may our thoughts lead to intention lead to action lead to heaven on earth. May our courageous love become contagious – one small or big act leading to a plethora of acts to follow. May all of those at the table of humanity feed each other aromatic soup one spoonful at a time. May we work as a community to find those shards of delicate goodness and light all around us. May the compassion we feel for those we love extend beyond to those we do not know all the way to those we dislike, to say the least. Beloveds, today we are called to love. We are called to move beyond individualism and work for the common good of all humanity. To rid this world of all remnants of hell and create a heaven of interdependence and sacred love. May love reign, and compassion prevail. May all of those in this web be well.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹⁵ <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/32246?lang=bi>

¹⁶ Ibid