

An Orientation of the Heart

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 10, 2021

As a society, we have been conditioned not to see the unhoused, those in our midst, right alongside us, asking for food or money. We've all encountered folks sitting on the sidewalk, making their way down a crowded street, navigating through cars stopped at a traffic light, sign in hand. And yet while these folks are right there - sometimes so close we could reach out and touch them - we are conditioned not to notice. This tension - this disconnect between personhood and worthiness - holds a place in history, whether referring to those with leprosy condemned in the Bible, or those within the confines of a jail cell, or those with mental illness formally kept in horrific institutions. We see this within the systemic racism infiltrating our society today! Each example demonstrates the power of engaging with the world through what we have been conditioned to believe, instead of through a lens of love. What happens when we shift our focus, when we are intentional in how we respond to those around us? We see people. Folks with a family. With a lifetime of stories. As beings with strength and perseverance.

Crucial in this endeavor to understanding the marginalized as people with full lives is relationship - cultivating relationship. When I attended seminary in Chicago, there was a two block walk between our building and a Starbucks - a path we all traveled frequently. And on this block, each day, was an unhoused man, standing by a potted plant with a metal can in hand asking for money. As we frequented this path between lessons and coffee breaks, we got to

know him. For this reflection, I'll call him Paul. He told us about his children. About his life. We engaged with him. We learned his favorite Starbucks order and drank our coffee with him. Paul was a person - with a rich history and a calm, caring demeanor. Through this relationship we defied this conditioning - whether these lessons were taught to us explicitly or through a lifetime of implicit teachings. We observed Paul with a lens of love. What does it mean to engage with the world through a lens of love? It means opening up the potential to care about everybody - those who are suffering, those who we disagree with. It means opening our hearts to all of those around us. It is what Rev. Victoria Safford calls an orientation of the heart - "a disciplined understanding of your own relationship to other people, to everyone else on the planet, to every living thing."¹ Choosing to make our own decisions on how to respond to people from a place of love and caring - a catalyst to justice work.

Father Gregory Boyle calls this kinship - he calls this compassion. He invites us to see the marginalized not with judgement, but with awe.² Awe that people are able to simply survive through the adversities placed upon them! Awe for single mothers raising children on welfare, awe in those behind bars, dehumanized, for crimes not equal to punishment. True compassion - this lies in understanding everyone we encounter, including those on the margins - as kin - cultivating a deep sense of mutuality. With this sacred understanding that no life is less than our own.

¹ *Walking with the Wind*, Victoria Safford

² *Soul Matters Packet October 2021*

I understand this idea of kinship as acknowledging that we all come from the same place - whatever that place may be to each and every one of us. Just as siblings emerge from the same mother and/or father, so too do we each emerge from this planet our mother; we emerge from that spark that gives us souls and makes us more than simply a compilation of cells. Kinship means unconditional love no matter the circumstances. Although we must note that sometimes, especially in those intimate relationships, love may call us to step away - we need to be conscious of what is unhealthy.

Our society places an overwhelming emphasis on the importance of individuality - of the self. Highlighting the strength of navigating this life on our own; of accomplishing goals without leaning on another. Society teaches us that autonomy is of utmost importance; to think of ourselves as individuals. This compassion we are addressing - this kinship - this calls us beyond individualistic ideals and instead lifts up the beauty and importance of connection, of relationship, of beloved community - where people of all identities and backgrounds come together in a place of love and sacred interdependence. We are all interconnected, and we cannot survive without one another. We need one another in times of hardship and in times of joy; we need one another to learn about this life and travel together on spiritual journeys; we need one another when we are in times of abundance and we need one other when we are hungry, tired, or cold. We need one another in kinship - in mutuality and love. As we learned in our Time for All Ages, we live in heaven when we help each other, when we feed a hungry mouth. We live in hell when we only work to help ourselves.³

³ *The Parable of the Long Spoons*

And so we have these personal relationships - whether cultivated with a stranger like Paul, or with a sibling we have known since birth. This direct relationship allows us to see more easily through that lens of love - we come to understand each other through intimate personal connection, not through those subconscious judgements we all carry within us. We are called to make this leap from simple personal relationships to relationships with those we will never meet - all of those within the beloved community we are striving to create. We have the sacred opportunity to place these feelings of connection and understanding and love and care upon those we have never met and those we never will meet. Only then are we truly in a network of kinship - our hearts oriented towards love - a collective force for justice.

These ideas of kinship and love and justice are prevalent in so many of the world's faith traditions. In Christianity, our kinship is established through our common ancestors from the Garden of Eden - the first two humans to ever exist - Adam and Eve. The most sacred text in Christianity - the Bible - calls us to love everyone in our midst; to care for anyone who is hurting. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is written, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"⁴ The second great commandment of this faith tradition calls us into this network of kinship where each and every soul is worthy and every struggling person is to be received with love and care. And yet it is notable that throughout the Bible, people are not treated this way. We spoke earlier about

⁴ NRSV 22:37-39

the chastised lepers at this time, treated with disdain. Christianity has a sacred response to this disdain - within the least of these, we find Jesus. The savior of this faith calls each soul to see him in the hungry, in the sick, in the marginalized. In those we love intimately and those we will never meet. No matter what our faith, no matter whether or not we see Jesus as divine, we can each find our own personal holy in those that surround us - in our network of kinship and sacred relationship. The Spirit of Life in the unhoused along a city street, the Goddess in those who need to sell drugs to survive, the sacred in the sex workers. We are called to love each soul in which Jesus may reside with the same love we ourselves desire and need - to love them as ourselves. Mother Teresa, Catholic nun, reminds us that we "belong to one another."⁵ When we lose sight of her sacred Christian ideal, we lose the ability to live a common life in peace, a life of love. Mother Teresa often shared the pray attributed to St Francis of Assisi, of which we will hear a selection:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me bring love...

O Master, let me not seek as much

to be loved as to love.

Those of the Quaker faith, the faith I was raised in as a child, follow similar sentiments in the kinship of all humanity - the importance of cultivating relationships. Spiritual leader, Parker Palmer, who draws faith and strength from his Quaker background, wrote that "spirituality

⁵ *Soul Matters Packet October 2021*

refers to the eternal human longing to be part of something larger than one's own ego."⁶ Again, to go beyond this idea of individualism, to go beyond a sense of our own importance - spirituality is, at its core, this longing for something more! For community and love and sacred connection. If we live a life with morals and values and worldviews drawn from our own spiritual lives and commitments, there will be no other way to interact with all of those around us than with a foundation of love. This inherently draws us beyond ourselves - away from that hell of only helping ourselves.

Or Eboo Patel of the Muslim faith, who worked closely with President Obama on faith-based partnerships, who sees all the land and people that comprise this country as sacred. We are a holy place - holy when we do the work welcoming everyone into our midst, when we relate to one another through love.⁷ He cites a passage of the Qur'an: "We made you different nations and tribes that you may come to know one another,"⁸ We were made different with the intention of relationship; of honoring and celebrating these differences within and between us.

This Muslim teaching is similar to that of Father Boyle, who understands that there is no us and them, just us.⁹ I recognize this as not a "them" of another faith. Not "them" of another race. Not "them" of another socioeconomic class. Not "them" of another country of origin or political affiliation or sexuality or ability. Not "them" of another nation or tribe. Instead - getting to

⁶ *Soul Matters Packet October 2021*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ 49:13

⁹ *Soul Matters Packet October 2021*

know each other - creating "Us." Humanity. Kinfolk. To me, all from the same mother - this earth. Us - taking care of one another and creating heaven on earth.

What about our own faith? I am reminded of our 7th Principle on which we covenant to live together: respect for the interdependent web of all life. Together as a faith we honor and celebrate our interconnectedness; what affects one affects us all. When one child is hungry, we all feel that hunger. When one person faces police brutality, this harm ripples throughout our web as well. Injustice against the marginalized hurts not only the target of that act, but all of us - just as a beloved sibling's pain becomes ours as well. We cannot thrive as a collective until we learn to love all of those as we love those within our inner circle; until we are intentional about the orientation of our heart; until we work to cultivate sacred relationships with those we otherwise might not ever have engaged with. I see this in our proposed 8th Principle: "Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions." This is our commitment as a faith to hold ourselves individually and collectively accountable towards the kinship of all of us - working to dismantle those systems that destroy - systemic racism and oppressions of all kinds.

Some of the most powerful ways we can do this is to create a relationship with those who are marginalized, but with whom we will never meet. The video of George Floyd that went viral sparked a revolution. When people in the streets hold signs of the face of Breonna Taylor and chant "say her name," they make oppression personal. By creating these relationships, making

the oppressed real people, we create change. Through loving those we have never met - through seeing all of humanity as kin - we create beloved community.

Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Scott Taylor says that our religion teaches us not to ask “What do I want?” but “Whose am I?” This is an orientation of the heart. We are presented with two options that orient our lives and our decisions: we can focus on achieving wealth and gaining prestige - centering on accumulating objects and clinging to that which bolsters our pride - our material success. Or, we can find our purpose through community and connection.¹⁰ We can find ourselves in the kinship of our collective humanity - orienting our lives through belonging, love, and justice. We can love our neighbors as ourselves, reaching beyond our ego to find that basic spiritual grounding that connects us all. We find purpose by seeing the holy in each person, by becoming an instrument of peace, shaped and molded by relationships with those at our sides and those we will never meet. Whose are we? We belong to one another.

May it be so, and Amen

¹⁰ *Soul Matters Packet October 2021*