



RETURN TO WHO YOU ARE SERIES

LOVE AT THE CENTER

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Do you love your child because they are perfect, or do you help them grow into a more perfect version of themselves because you love them? This is the question asked over 200 years ago by Hosea Ballou, a young, emerging universalist wrestling with the contradiction between the message he heard from the pulpit of his childhood church, and the love that he experienced from his own family. Here's the story. Hosea Ballou was like many children, he loved to play in the mud when given the opportunity. And he was always asking questions that challenged the adults around him. Hosea was the youngest of 11 children, and his mother died when he was not quite two years old. His older sisters took on many of the caregiving roles, including much to their dismay, washing Hosea's clothing and bathing him when he came home after a romp in the mud.

They appealed to their father, asking him to insist that Hosea stop playing in the mud. And so he told Hosea sternly to stop. "Why?" Asked Hosea. "Because," said his father, who was one of the preachers at the Baptist Church that their family attended. "Just as we try to live a good life and be kind to other people and to follow God's plan, we try to stay clean." So Hosea tried it, he really did. But it wasn't easy, and sometimes there was no avoiding it. So his sisters pleaded again, and his father repeated even more sternly, "You must not play in the mud." Hosea was sad and asked his father if he was angry with him. "A little angry, but mostly disappointed," his father said. "Do you still love me?" Asked Hosea. And his father responded more tenderly this time. "I will always love you, Hosea. No matter what you do." "Even if I get really muddy?" "Yes, even then."

As Hosea grew older, he saw more clearly some of the hypocrisy of his father's preaching. "How can it be?" He asked, "That God would only let some people into heaven and exclude others, even those who lived good lives. Why would God create a living creature whose destiny was eternal punishment?"

Hosea eventually came to the conclusion that everyone in the universe will be saved, the theology of universal salvation or universalism. When his father questioned how he could believe such a thing, Hosea said, "Remember what you told me when I was little? No matter how muddy and mischievous I am, you will always love me." So why would God's love be any different? How could God's love be smaller than his all too human father's love? Many of us have been Hosea. Whether with innocent joy or a streak of mischief, we did things that our parents disapproved of. And they may have been disappointed in us, maybe a little angry, but they didn't stop loving us.

Who taught you about love? Not transactional love or self-sacrificial love or contingent love, but everlasting love, courageous love and open-heartedness. If no one or not enough people in your life have showed you and modeled this kind of love, hear this. You are loved here. This church loves you, and I love you. I said these words to our graduating seniors last spring as we blessed them in worship, and at least one of them went home to their parents and said, "Reverend Beth said that she loves me."

When I say this to our youth and to you, I mean it as an invitation to return to who you are, which is beloved, and as an encouragement to see others as beloved, to mirror and magnify this truth, and to treat others as such. We are born good, created with a spark of the love some call God and the God some call love inside of us. So return to who you are. Too many people in our world today don't see themselves or others as beloved. Instead, they see themselves or others as imperfect, sinful, dirty, unworthy, ignorant, alien, not beloved. And this and a general lack of love for humanity and respect for dignity is the mindset that guides a lot of policy decisions and societal and international relations these days.

The love of power trumps love of neighbor, of God, and even of self. Like the poet, Rosemary Wahtola Trommer, I can't save the world, can't save even myself, can't wrap my arms around every frightened child, can't foster peace among nations, can't bring love to all who feel unlovable. So I practice opening my heart right here in this room and being gentle with my insufficiency. I practice walking down the street, heart first. And if it is insufficient to share love, I will practice loving anyway.

This love that I'm speaking about is not exactly the sweet, sentimental love that we celebrate on Valentine's Day this week. As Anne Moral Lindbergh said once, "People talk about love as though it were something you could give like an arm full of flowers." And a lot of people do give love like that, just dump it down on top of you, a useless, strong, centered burden. "I don't think it is anything you can give," she said. "Love is a force in you that enables you to give other things. It is a motivating power." Our Unitarian Universalist theology of love is no strong scented burden. It is at the heart of our faith, a faith that love is eternal and love will prevail, because it is a capacity of the soul inherent in every human being. That is the doctrine of our church. The shared values of Unitarian Universalism that we, your ministers have been preaching about in recent weeks are all expressions of this love.

Transformation is made possible by love. Pluralism is rooted in love. Justice and equity are impossible without love. Interdependence goes hand in hand with love and reverence for life. Generosity is inspired by love. These values, all of which have this love at the center, are what guide our living. But some of you might say, "It's really hard to be loving right now. I'm just too darn angry." Is anybody

feeling that way? Listen to that anger. It's a sign that something is not right in our interrelated world, and it's a call for transformation in the way that we meet one another, and in the way that we meet the moment in which we live.

Our religious values are not just ideas that we hold dear, they are practices motivated by love which we embody and enact, and not without some risk. In a feminist ethic of risk, Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch distinguishes between an ethic of control and an ethic of risk. An ethic of control equates responsibility to do something about a problem with power over the outcome, often leading to despair when the outcome is not what we had hoped. An ethic of risk rooted an idea rooted in the writings of black women, theologians and activists who know a little something about resilience and survival in the face of resistance is about deciding to care and to act without the guarantee of success.

It asks us what risks are we willing to take for love? How much will we open our hearts to hurt and loss, or to joy and hope? It also has us consider what are the risks of not enacting our belief in the belovedness of ourselves and others, because the cost of life without love is also high. Cynicism, alienation, despair, guilt, shame, indifference. We may not be able to save the world, but the alternative is not acceptable. Our belovedness calls us to refuse submission to indifference.

I found that poets have a way of putting this that goes straight to the heart, at least for me. Andrea Gibson encouraged us to feel everything that you have to feel right now. Keep the Novocaine out of your wisdom teeth. Rosemary Wahtola Trommer urges us to feel the shock of indifference, of anger, of cruelty of fear, and to stay open, to love as if it matters, as if the world depends on it. So our hearts may break at all we cannot save, but if we have spiritual disciplines in our lives that help us cultivate love and remind us of our own and others' belovedness, our spirits will not be broken. When we have a spiritual discipline of love, it allows our hearts and our wisdom teeth to feel, allows our anger not to burn us up, but to point us toward the place where we must return, to belovedness.

This spiritual discipline can take many different forms. And you've heard me speak of many of these before, but they're worth repeating. I believe it starts with new life. When we dedicate a child here in the church, we celebrate the hope and joy of welcoming them into our community. We do not concern ourselves with washing them clean of original sin, but instead we affirm their original goodness. We commit to love these children and to help them see themselves as beloved. The child dedication ceremony is a spiritual discipline that we engage in as a church. When we care for one another in community, when we seek and offer pastoral care, we hold up a mirror to others that shows them that they are seen and loved. Caring for and accompanying others through the ups and downs of life is a spiritual discipline. When we engage in faith development at any age, we're discerning how to live our values of compassion and kindness in a world that is often not very compassionate and kind, trusting that how we live makes a difference. This is a spiritual discipline.

When we come together for worship, we are reminded of our interconnectedness with others, and this understanding shapes how we engage with the world. This is a spiritual discipline of love, what we are doing right here. When we pray for ourselves and for others, or engage in loving kindness

meditation, or breathe in peace and breathe out love, we are grounding our spirits in the belovedness of self and others.

When we gather in inclusive ways that allow all who wish to participate to do so fully, when we show up with a meal or a listening ear for someone who is ill or recovering from surgery, when we return to relationships with family or friends that are broken and seek to restore right relationship, when we become more involved in our neighborhoods to decrease social alienation and isolation and to build trust, when we show up in support of and in solidarity with those most impacted by recent legislation and government actions, when we call our representatives every day, as I know some of you are doing, to let them know how we are supporting our neighbors and insisting that they do the same for the people they represent, and when we love ourselves more fully, acknowledging our own worthiness, all of these spiritual practices, they matter to us and to our world, and they keep us whole.

Together, we are making channels for the streams of love, that it may flow to and from each of us. Everything we do can or must be such a channel, for we are a Unitarian Universalist community, and love is at the center of our faith. May it ever be so, and amen.