

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE

SERMON BY

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FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

READING

'Why I Make Sam Go To Church'

By

Anne Lamott

Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church- who is made to go to church two or three times a month. He rarely wants to go. This is not exactly true: the truth is he never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than hanging out with a friend? It does not help him to be reminded that once he's there he enjoys himself, that he gets to spend the time drawing in the little room outside the sanctuary, that he only actually has to sit still and listen during the short children's sermon. It does not help that I always pack some snacks, some Legos, his art supplies, and bring along a friend of his whom we lure into our churchy web. It does not help that he genuinely cares for the people there. All that matters to him is that he alone among his colleagues is forced to spend Sunday morning in church.

You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that he was made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass. Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say.

I make him come because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want-which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy-are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians-people banding together to work on themselves and human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. I saw something once from the Jewish theological Seminary that said, "A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of great meaning." Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are outside on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people of St Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."

My relatives all live in the Bay Area and I adore them, but they are all as skittishly self-obsessed as I am, which I certainly mean in the nicest possible way. Let's say that I do not leave family gatherings with the feeling that I have just received some kind of spiritual chemotherapy. But I do when I leave St. Andrew.

SERMON

Well, it's Valentine's Day! We are supposed to celebrate LOVE, and the displays in stores are all red and pink, and there is a light gossamer feeling to it all ...and, well, LOVE it's not a simple thing, at least I don't think so. I'm not against a special day, per se. I mean this would be so curmudgeonly of me now wouldn't it?

Valentine's Day mostly focuses on romantic love. I mean romantic love can be a sweet thing to be sure...but when the endorphins settle down well, even romantic love, especially romantic love, is not simple. The sweetness is companion with perplexity and mystery and fear....and sometimes tedium.

And then, I am aware that Valentine's Day supports a certain way of being in the world that is partnered, and, well, there are many other ways of being in the world lovingly that don't include this particular way. Something about the cultural expression of Valentine's Day can overlook the many ways of having a loving life that do not include a lover. I am not against a special day, per se. I mean how could a minister speak against the "Love Holiday"? No, I won't do that. Not me.

I only want to deepen the conversation about love.

This morning I came in to the Parish House early as I am prone to do on Sundays. Last night was 'Parents Night Out' and the senior youth group (with their advisors) stayed overnight with some of the young children of the church. What a treat for me to see these three age groups together hanging out, making pancakes, connecting, in this our community of love. And to hear one of the advisors speak of how satisfying it is to see youth building relationships with those who are coming after them at First Parish. This is another kind of love that we can celebrate today too: love that abides between us here in our congregation that extends the context of our lives and gives us a wider web of comfort to sustain us beyond our own life and family sphere.

Churches and temples are one of the last places in American life where these kinds of experiences can abide; communities where we can find a path and a "brighter light than the glimmer of our own candle"...to receive "some kind of spiritual chemotherapy". (Lamott)

And, a UU congregation like First Parish will call us to yet another kind of expression of our faith in love.

“Standing on the Side of Love (www.standingonthesideoflove.org) is the name of a “newish” public advocacy campaign launched at General Assembly in Salt Lake City. The campaign is described as confronting the exclusion, oppression, and violence that is based on identity and that seeks to diminish the worth and dignity of any person. Standing on the Side of Love is a call to pursue social change through advocacy, public witness, and speaking out in solidarity with those whose lives are publicly demeaned. Two focuses of the campaign, and there will be more than two, are standing on the side of love for marriage equality and standing on the side of love with immigrant families. (Thom Belote)

Love as a spiritual concept that requires action in the world is deeply embedded in Unitarian Universalism. Like other kinds of love it is transformative in every way, but it is not as prone to sentimentality, not fluffy in the least. No, this kind of love is not usually a sweet thing at all.

In March of 1965, Unitarian Universalist minister The Reverend James Reeb, husband and father of four, drove down to Selma to march with Dr. King for Civil Rights. Reeb was head of a housing initiative for the poor and living in Roxbury, Massachusetts at the time. After the march he and two colleagues, Orloff Miller and Charles Olsen, went to a restaurant on the “colored” part of town, refusing to support segregation by eating in a “whites only” place. Upon leaving the restaurant, three white men approached them. They kicked, hit and pummeled all three of the men taunting them and telling them now they knew what it was really like to be a “nigger”. Afterward, James Reeb was conscious and able to walk but his speech was not intelligible. Two days later, after neuro- surgery, he died of massive brain trauma from the attack.

James Reeb was standing on the side of love, letting his UU faith shine out. I celebrate him today. And, I thank him for making himself part of the transformation that this kind of love brings to our common lives.

So often in history, Unitarian Universalists have been on the forward edges of love’s desire to be ever more inclusive: for abolition, for women’s rights, for the GLBT community: love that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person, love that is known in the living of equal rights for all, A universal love that claims a God that does not have boundaries or borders or categories, love that knows all life as integral to all life, and that when one suffers, all suffer, love that wants us to find a way to live in peace...love that asks us to move out beyond our comfort zone sometimes and step forward and say, “I will go”.

Listen! We are a liberal religion where each of us is free to grow in faith in the way we choose. We expect theological differences. I find it invigorating to be a part of a creating a community without the expectation of creedal consent. Ours is not a faith that rests in uniformity of thought. This means that its

central question is “how do we love even though we might believe different things?” How do we love? The most important question of any life.

Listen! We are a group of people who are choosing to gather in this place and practice liberal religion in our own interiors and with one another and out in the world. And, we should not expect that everyone will agree with every social stance taken by the minister or this or that First Parish Working Group. When we disagree on social issues, we can listen to one another, we can love one another, we can remind one another that no one will ever agree with every stand taken in a free religion. And, we can stand on the side of love the best we can, sometimes altogether, sometimes more unevenly.

That’s the thing about love. It is not neat and tidy. It raises deep feelings and it requires us to speak up, to stand up, to venture forth in spite of the discomfort, or fear of offending. And sometimes we stand not quite knowing if all of the issues are clear...and sometimes we stand at great risk to our comfortable living...and sometimes it is clear and easy to stand ...and sometimes we know we will discomfort those we love if we do.....still, we stand on the side of love as best we can, whenever we can all the while keeping our minds and hearts open to one another.

In her novel *Fly Away Home* Marge Piercy gives us some family religious background of her main characters: “The girls had been raised Unitarian, which had seemed a nice sensible compromise to Ross and Daria between having no religion at all and having to lie to the children about what they believed, enough religion to be respectable but not enough to get in the way.”¹ Boy do I cringe when an author gives those kind of slants to Unitarian Universalism. ..”not enough religion to get in the way”.

Oooo...weeee.....I don’t think that this is true at all. Of course, any person in any religion can choose to stay in their comfort zone and not dig deep enough into their own being or the issues of the times. Any one of us can use religion as a distraction, a haven, an island of like-minded people. In so many ways it is so human to move toward our comfort zones. Religion, especially liberal religion, is an experiment in living with others in love without a boss who gives the rules or a creed in which to rest. It is a quest. It often provides us great haven and deep comfort, delight, beauty, friendship, succor, warmth. But, if it is true to the hope of transformation in ourselves and in the world, it will offer risk and discomfort....it will be outreaching and unsafe.

“Standing on the Side of Love” is calling us to become engaged in immigration issues, to call for a more just response to the 12 million undocumented people who, in large part, actively contribute to our economy...who, in some places like New York City...keep the economy afloat. I share this story from Utah about an experience of one family, told at the General Assembly in Utah this past summer:

¹ Marge Piercy, *Fly Away Home*, p.16.

“Mr. Love was born in Utah and is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. His required mission work took place in Guatemala, where he became fluent in Spanish, and when he returned home he began attending a bilingual LDS church in Salt Lake. There is met Ozmar’s mother who entered the United States sixteen years ago from Guatemala without documentation or permission, seeking political asylum because of the turmoil in her home country. Her application was denied.

Three subsequent applications for permanent residency in the United States were also denied, despite the fact that while in the US, she had three children-all citizens by virtue of having been born here.

She chose to remain in Utah because she faced violence, discrimination, and possible death in her village of origin, and because she could not afford to bring her American children to Guatemala (where non-citizens have to pay a monthly tax equivalent to seven days of average wages, and the tax on three children would not leave her enough to live on). There, she worked on a variety of jobs. She chose to stay and be a productive members of society. She got a Social Security Number (don’t ask me how) and paid income taxes on her wages.

After meeting Larry Love, the two married and he adopted her youngest child as his. Because she had lived in the U.S. as an undocumented worker for so long, her application for citizenship was likely to be denied despite her marriage. She was advised to by a lawyer not to submit a new application for permanent residency until the new Presidential administration took office-at the time both candidates promised swift action on comprehensive immigration reform, one of the few areas where they were in total agreement. So she waited. The rest of the story is in Mr. Love’s words...

On March 18, one day after my birthday, I heard this at my front door at six thirty in the morning. (Bangs fist on podium) And it was loud like that. And it was scary. I said, ‘Who is knocking on my door?’ I opened the door and there were two immigration ICE officers at my door, and they said, ‘Have you seen this woman?’ They pulled out a big eight-by-ten of this Hispanic woman and they said, ‘Have you seen this woman? She’s illegally registering cars to your address.’ And I said, ‘No.’ They said, ‘Can you have your wife look at this picture?’ I said, ‘Certainly.’ I called my wife-she was getting ready to go to work-and she looked at the picture and she said, ‘No, I haven’t seen that woman.’ And he said, ‘We’re not here for that woman, we’re here to arrest your wife, for deportation.’ They never showed me a warrant; I should have never opened the door.²

Mr. Love’s wife was handcuffed, crying, in front of her children. She was allowed to kiss her kids goodbye and then shoved into a van with eight other people. She was denied bail and a deportation hearing was quickly scheduled. Because she was married to a U.S. citizen, and because her husband immediately hired a lawyer and began making phone calls inquiring about her, Mrs. Love was eventually released with an

² transcribed from [www.uua.org/events/generally assembly/2009/ga2009/144231.shtml](http://www.uua.org/events/generally%20assembly/2009/ga2009/144231.shtml).

ankle bracelet and placed under house arrest, still unable to work to provide income for her family or the health insurance that her job provided-health insurance her family needed.

...Some three hundred fifty thousand people were imprisoned last year because of immigration violations-without having violated any other laws.³

We have a proud history here of reaching beyond the love in and between us. We have ___working groups that consistently provide this kind of loving. We provide a space for homeless families to abide four weeks during the year. It is not always comfortable, but those who participate as volunteers speak of the way it changes them, transforms their stereotypes and softens their stance in the world. We provided free medical care to over 400 people last year in our Thursday night medical program. Julie gives her office over for an interview room. Michelle gives her office over as an exam room. It is not always convenient, and it deepens our solidarity with the necessary strengthening of our world and all of its people.

We now have the opportunity to stand on the side of love for immigrant reform. As Janice said, she will have cards telling us how to align with UU Mass Action at coffee hour.

So many ways First Parish says, “yes, we will love in this way”. Thank you for all of the many ways you already stand on the side of love. Happy Valentine’s Day in the sense of the uneven, discomfoting, illuminating, difficult, non-saccharin ways that we have the privilege of practicing together. May it continue long.

I end with these beautiful words from James Reeb.

For as long as I can remember, and it is as true today as it ever was, what I have always thought of as the light within has been of more importance to me than anything in life. As I have tried to think recently about how to describe that which I find important, I can only come back to this one thing-the light within. ..For it seems to me ...that it makes no difference what one calls this inward light, if you call it God, or if you don’t. It is not increased by the names that we give it nor is it diminished if we do not give it any name at all...It is our task to take the light within and deliberately and consciously set it before (men) people. This is to live. It is a most difficult instruction. It is impossible, but it is absolutely necessary.⁴

³ truthout.org/1123096.

⁴ Rev. Duncan Howlett, *No Greater Love, the James Reeb Story*, p. 157.