

THE BEAUTY WE DO  
Sermon by Tracy Sprowls  
Sunday, June 10, 2018  
All Souls Church, New York City

On my wall in my home office hangs a beautiful mosaic of a pink lotus flower on a blue background. Across the top reads, Love Grows Here. This gorgeous piece of art was a gift to me from the children of the congregation where I served as minister in Plainfield, New Jersey for seven years. It is a mantra that I carry in my heart and repeat often, Love Grows Here. Love begins with me, with my own heart.

The love that I understand this mosaic to mean is not the sentimental, emotional kind of love many of us know. This love is what Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said, "Love is creative, understanding goodwill for all men [sic]...when you rise to the level of love, of its great beauty and power, you seek only to defeat evil systems. Individuals who happen to be caught up in that system, you love, but you seek to defeat the system." And Cornel West said, never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.

This kind of love roots us in our faith and in our community and in all the relationships we know and can forge through our reaching out across the boundaries of religion, of difference, to the new relationships we can develop. It is not a sentimental or easy love. It is love of neighbor, it is a people first position, it is a place of compassion. This Love, the love I am talking about, is a powerful, bold and courageous kind of love, a justice-making one, a challenging sometimes soul wrenching one, an I -can't-turn-my-back-on-you kind of love. A revolutionary Love with a capital L.

When I started in ministry nineteen years ago, I served the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Montgomery, Alabama. When I moved to Montgomery, I thought my ministry would most likely deal with the issues of race and racism. After all, the legacies of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil War are still tangible in the culture of modern day Montgomery. Yet, I soon discovered that my ministry was not centered in the difficulties of race relations. What I found, and what became a calling, was a ministry to the LGBTQ population of Montgomery. The culture of Montgomery is heavily conservative, both in politics and religion. Those who are gay are oppressed by the politics that says they are not equal to other people. They are not recognized as full citizens. As if that were not enough, they are oppressed by the dominant religion of the area that tells them that God does not love them and that being gay is abhorrent in the eyes of God.

What I found in ministering to this population translates to any population. There are two things to know. First, is to say yes. Simply, yes. Yes, I will side with you. Yes, I will listen. Yes, I will hold your hand. Yes, you are worth it. The second is to honor the holiness of each person. We can, through our own world views and experiences, our own understandings of religion make God or Love or the Spirit too small. And yet, our task is to remember for ourselves and to remind others that God is so, so big. God loves us each and every one of us.

One morning, I received a phone call from a man whose gay son had suddenly died of a brain aneurysm. They were looking for a minister to do the funeral would I be willing to bury a gay man? Apparently, they had called more than half a dozen local ministers, none of whom were willing to do the funeral. One minister did say he would do the funeral but that he “couldn’t pray the deceased into heaven.” As the father shared with me the details of their search for a minister I could hear the pain and the sadness in his voice. When he finished speaking, I simply said yes. I would do the funeral. Simply and wholly, yes. I will honor you. I will lift up your name. I will side with you.

Another memory from Montgomery. One sunny, blue Sunday morning a man stood up to share his sadness with the congregation and to light a candle to honor his sadness. He said that he had inadvertently come out to his parents when they read an article of his in the college newspaper. When he went home to visit them, his parents took his keys of the car they had given him as a graduation present. They took his house keys. They gave him his bills and told him that he was no longer welcome in their home. As he shared with the congregation, tears welled in his eyes. He had been rejected by his family. He was told by his father that he was “a fag—far away from God” and until he rejected his life style he would not be able to see or talk to his family. After the service, I walked up to him and took him in my arms. I told him he was holy. I told him that God loved him. I told him that our limited understanding of God could never, ever limit the capacity of God to love him.

These incidences happened maybe some fifteen years ago but watching the news I wonder how much has changed or just how far that pendulum has swung? There is ugliness all around us and not just in the south. In a narrow ruling recently, the Supreme court allowed that a Christian cake baker could discriminate against a gay couple. The president of our country describes immigrants as animals, Mexicans as rapists and murderers. He degrades women and remains silent when Black or Brown people are shot or arrested for the color of their skin. He reinstated the ban on transgender people in the military and he has refused to honor pride month. Further, incidences of intolerance and hate are on the rise so that people feel they can say or do what they want to people different than they. There is a growing ugliness in this country and it is scary. In these foul and hostile conditions beauty can be hard to see and love may feel hidden or distant.

In her poem, *Aching Beauty*, by Rev. Karen G. Johnston:

What to do with beauty?  
Or joy, for that matter-  
In the midst of tragedy, of violence, of cruelty?

What do we do with the living?

Give each other their due.  
Do not lose ourselves in any of it,  
But find ourselves anew

Where there is beauty, amplify it.  
 Where beauty is hidden, reveal it.  
 Where beauty is ruined, restore it.  
 Where beauty is absent, create it.  
 This will be our gift to our aching world.

Amidst the ugliness, there are moments of beauty if we but notice it, reveal it, amplify, or create it. There are the roots of love growing silently here, growing and stretching tendrils over there. We need just notice it, reveal it, amplify, or create it.

There is beauty in being able to be who you are with pride or with courage. There is beauty in our diversity if we let go of fear and instead see our differences as gifts, as opportunities, as talking points. There is beauty in seeing the Love light in each heart first before seeing how that person is not like you.

In the midst of ugliness, see all the rainbow flags waving in the breeze, see the Puerto Rican flags marching down Fifth Avenue, see the people getting arrested with the Poor People's Campaign revival, see the child sheltered in sanctuary with their family, see strong teens fighting for gun sense laws, see TV news people talking about mental illness.

Beauty and Love blooming into places of despair, growing in desert and dry places, being restored in desolate and destructive ones.

Earlier, Galen this of the flower communion: "The significance of the flower communion is that as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together, the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet." But this, too, is the meaning of the flower communion: We each bring beauty and love into the world. We each are a gift to our aching world. By joining together in this community, we create something bigger than ourselves. In us love grows. Through us the world changes. By us beauty shines.

As Unitarian Universalists, frankly as human beings, we will all have different views about politics, religion, whether the air conditioning should be on or off, whether we should build up river or not, whatever. It is human nature to see many views, to have varied views. As Unitarian Universalists though, we can all agree that right now, today, is the day to begin to make this world a better place, to make if not the world, then this corner of it here on 80<sup>th</sup> and Lexington better. Because love grows here.

For us, the objective is not to get to a better place, to get to heaven, but to make this place a heaven on earth. We may argue along the way. We may lose sight of the right direction. But we will keep on trusting in the universe, we will keep on trusting in the fidelity of our relationships, to each other, to the mystery we cannot comprehend, to the earth and to all her creatures.

This is the beauty we do. *Amen.*