

TRUST FALLS: THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
Sunday, February 17, 2019
All Souls Church, New York City

Let me begin with a story told by my colleague, the Rev. Rob Hardies. He begins his story by explaining that when he can, he loves to stand outside his church in DC on Sunday morning and greet folks arriving. He says:

On the particular morning I'm thinking of, a woman ambled up the steps to the church. Her eyes were cast down, and a shadow hung over her face. This was a woman I'd seen Sunday after Sunday, but who had never interacted with me at any length. I didn't know her very well. We usually shook hands, but that morning she came up and gave me a big hug.

Now, as a minister, I give and receive a lot of hugs. It's one of the perks of the job. And having given quite a lot of them, I have a sense for what the typical Sunday morning ministerial hug feels like. It's firm but gentle, and usually lasts only a moment or two. Sometimes, though, the hug is longer and more intense than usual, and that's when I know there's something going on in a person's life. You can tell from just the hug. And at those times, a simple greeting becomes a moment of healing ministry.

Well, on that day this woman's hug was long and it was tight, and she wouldn't let go. So I held her. And when she was done, she said to me with tears in her eyes that the greetings she received at church on Sunday mornings - the hugs and handshakes from minister and congregation - were the only human touch she received all week long. "Thank you," she said, and she walked into the sanctuary and took a seat.

(from *From Loneliness to Solitude*, by the Rev. Rob Hardies. *Quest Magazine*, Vol. LXIX No. 2, Feb. 2014)

If you remember nothing else from today's service, let it be this: this congregation matters. Your presence here on any given Sunday matters. At every moment, we hold the promise of Life in our hands. It may be that we are the only place of connection and comfort in a lonely person's life. It may be that our message of love and inclusion for everyone, no matter who you love, saves a life. It may be that at any moment, we give courage to someone to stand up for something they deeply believe in. It may be that we physically feed or shelter someone who needs the gifts that we can offer. Those are not lovely ideas - they are bone-hard truths that change the world. Creating this community together matters. We are raising up children to be open-minded, yet critical thinkers who know how to both love and act. Think about how much the world needs that! We offer opportunities for people to laugh and learn together. That is a blessing. Most of all, we are constantly -- both as individuals arriving here and a community created together -- offering kindness to strangers. And that makes all the difference.

That's another thing I want to tell you: the subtitle of this sermon is "The kindness of strangers."

One of the best things that ever happened to me took place when I was in seminary. I, and my partner at the time, had taken my older daughter Ember out to dinner. I had been taking sign

language classes, and had been teaching both Todd and Em sign, so we spent dinner signing to one another. We were really having a good time, and there was laughter, though very little spoken English. Unbeknownst to us, someone was watching. While we were eating, a man came quietly up to the table and said, "I have so enjoyed watching your family tonight - I'd like to pay your check." He put money down on the table and walked away before we could do anything more than stare. But it was so touching and such a blessing - in seminary, money was very tight, and eating out a hard-to-justify expense. The kindness of a stranger. It lit the night, and still lightens my heart to think of it, after all this time.

February is Black History Month. Here's the thing: our approach to understanding and facing the unique experience of Black Americans in the United States over the last 242 years has been skittish, awkward, and fumbling at best. It has been gross, in the original sense of the word: immediately obvious, gravely deficient in civility or decency, coarse in nature or behavior. We have stuttered and faltered, made progress and then elected leaders who say things such as, "White nationalist, white supremacist... — how did that language become offensive?" Or those who can look at a rally by white Americans who rally behind neo-Nazi-ism and then say, of both white supremacists who murder and those who resist them, including Unitarian Universalists, and say there are "good people on both sides."

Our UU faith is not equivocal. It demands. It insists. It shows up, and it abides. What it does is ask that each of us be clear: who is our neighbor? What does it mean, in blood and body, in act and intention, to believe that every person has inherent worth and dignity? What does it mean to live our "acceptance of one another," and our belief in "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations?"

The idea of "Love" is often treated with a sentimental soppieness that does no justice, or is focused on romantic love that passes in a season. It rarely treats the truth of Love, which is that it is hard, and often - perhaps almost always - unearned, and that it is a force that changes the world. Romantic love, and the love we feel toward our children... that love has been celebrated in poetry and song and story and film and every art since art was born. We need to pay attention to the less-celebrated kind of love - the kind that Dr. King was talking about when he said, "It is pretty difficult to like some people. Like is sentimental and it's pretty difficult to like someone bombing your home; it is pretty difficult to like some people threatening your children; it is difficult to like congressmen who spend all their time trying to defeat civil rights. But Jesus says to love them, and love is stronger than like." He's talking about the love that is grown and is given or received not for the special uniqueness or regard for the particular person, but openly, vastly, or without any demands. It is the kind of love practiced by Gandhi and those who joined the Salt March. It's what Cornel West meant when he said, "Justice is what Love looks like in public." It is the love to which Teresa of Avila alluded when she said, "Accustom yourself to make many acts of love, for they enkindle and melt the soul."

It is easy to love those who are like us. It is harder to love those we imagine to be very different from ourselves, or those who seem to hate us. It is hard to love angry, frightened, dangerous people - or even people who seem careless, uninterested in our concerns. But it is the highest calling. It is what human beings are made for. We are made to be connected to one another, and what lifts us up to our greatest summit is Love -- Love that includes those nearest and dearest, but also transcends into a greater Love toward all. That is the spiritual journey; to include and transcend.

So what does the kindness of strangers have to do with anything? So much, really. To act in a kind way toward strangers is to follow St. Teresa's advice and accustom yourself to many acts of

love. To be the recipient of an act of kindness can change your day or your life. And we've discovered that just witnessing an act of kindness can cause people to have "peak experiences" or experience elation... and that they have a ripple effect. By witnessing acts of love or kindness or goodwill, we are more likely to also act in a kind way. This is no mystery; just like one person's bad mood can infect others, so too does kindness - though it often leads to different actions.

We all depend on the kindness of strangers, in ways we rarely consider. We rely on the faithfulness of people who grow and prepare our food; on the goodwill of those who teach our children; on the integrity of those who care for us when we are injured or ill, to name a critical few. But a religious community is itself a community of strangers trying to be kind, and to Love one another into relationship. In so many ways, love and trust precede real relationship; this is why we often feel more deeply affected when people act unkindly in a church setting - it is perhaps less that we have unrealistic standards than that we made ourselves vulnerable, and offered trust, not because it was earned but because we relied on the kindness of strangers.

It is a great spiritual practice to be a kind stranger, and to offer trust in a world that focuses most of all on all the reasons not to trust. Again and again it comes up. As human beings, we have to choose - will we focus on fear, hate, pain, our anger at people who see the world differently? Or will we simply choose, again and again, to be kind? To be courageous in love? To forgive boldly, to give generously? To stand beside those with the least power and be willing to de-center our own experience in order to create a more just world? What kind of people do we, Unitarian Universalists, want to be?

There's a newspaper article making the rounds on Facebook again. It comes around every few months since it was written, because it's hard to believe, but I did check it out (you have to do that on the internet), and the story is true. It's about a church who ran a food bank. Like most food banks, the people who came to it were people who were hungry, impoverished, in need of, in short, food. For any number of reasons. Well, the church decided to close the food bank because it was attracting too many "poor people."

I don't know what people the church preferred to serve. People who had enough food, I guess. But what seems clear from what was reported was that people in the church were uncomfortable finding themselves interacting with people who needed food. There was a sense that people at the church perceived people who came to the food bank as deeply "other," and this made them uncomfortable. What comes up for me when I read this story is that this is exactly where real Love is needed, and I think the many people who serve in our Monday and Friday kitchens agree. The love that isn't dependent on us looking the same, or having the same experience, or even on us sharing the same values. It's the kind of love that carries past the fact that I may be addicted, that I may not have been able to bathe this week, that I may be trading my body for the cash to buy drugs. I'm talking about love that can see me past that - that can see I need food and human connection and yes, love, even in my deep imperfection or difference. It doesn't have to be a love that says "whatever you do is just fine;" but a love that can stand in its own place and say, "you are not alone - I see you."

Are we the people who are brave enough to carry on in love even when there are trolls under the bridge? Are we the people who can understand that beyond the differences that divide us, there are hopes and dreams and real human needs that connect us? Are we the ones who can create a sanctuary for people who feel their voices, perspectives, or even their very lives and bodies are not welcome in this community? Can we say - there are no illegal bodies. There *is* room at our table for love, gay, straight, or other. We do believe in the worth and dignity of every person,

even the person with the offensive sign at the rally against everything we hold dear. That's the hard Love that Dr. King talked about, that Jesus talked about, that West and Teresa describe. It hasn't the perfume and poetry romantic love, but it is a world-saving, world-changing love. And we can make space for it by being kind to strangers. By being kind to ourselves. By living in awareness that we live by the kindness of strangers every single day.

As we end, I want to remind you again of the most important thing - a heart of compassion. And that we live by the kindness of strangers. May you be the kind stranger someone needs today.

Amen, Ashe, blessed be.