

GOD, WE

Sermon by Audette Fulbright

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All Souls Church, NYC

We UUs think a lot. We have a longstanding spiritual practice of questioning, reflecting, considering, querying, and ruminating. We take very few things at face value, which I think is a very fine thing, indeed. Certainly not holidays like “Mother’s Day.” Our own Unitarian foremother, Julia Ward Howe, attempted to create a “Mother’s Day for Peace” as far back as 1872, but the current incarnation of a day to celebrate one’s personal mother is a separate thing, successfully lobbied for and established in 1914 by President Woodrow Wilson, who was responding to the efforts of Anna Jarvis (a Methodist).

No, we UUs don’t usually just say, “How fabulous, a day for the unquestioning purchase of sentimental cards!” So our worship together at such moments tends to reflect our wrestling.

I’m a mother, and here’s something I learned very quickly: it’s a messy business. I mean, literally messy - as anyone who has suddenly entered a world where being pooped on or vomited on repeatedly knows. But it’s also existentially messy - human relationships of love and connection lift us to the heights of joy but also evoke rage, sorrow, and loss that often registers on the Richter scale. That’s why I think sometimes we just need to pause in our lives, and bless the mess. Set aside our judgements about how good or bad we or circumstances are. Resist, just for a while, measuring and comparing and striving. Resist cleaning things up, making them prettier, fretting about what others will think. Just set all that aside, and rest. Rest for just a little while in the knowledge that messes and disasters and unintended consequences are a very, very big part of life. We all have them. There is no life into which rain and imperfection doesn’t fall. Let’s just have a holiday to celebrate all the mess that life and love bring.

Let’s do a thought experiment together. Close your eyes and make yourself as comfortable as possible. Now imagine that you’re having some people over to where you live - your apartment or house, or perhaps even just your bedroom, if you don’t live independently. Your friends will be over any second. And right this minute, your child, partner, neighbor or a random stranger comes in and spills a chocolate cake batter all over your space.

Don’t ask why they were carrying the chocolate cake batter around. Just feel that feeling - chocolate gooey mess splashed across the floor, the walls, look - some even got on the ceiling. How is that even possible?? No, you don’t have a carpet cleaner - or yours is broken, or you lent it out. Who is that pulling up outside? Yes, your friends are here. And so is this big, huge, gooey mess.

In our home, I regret to say that a few colorful or loud words might be shared at such a moment. Blame might be apportioned. Tears of pain or regret or even anger and frustration might be shed. But why? Why do we so often respond this way? Feel your body as you imagine the mess: are you tense? Is your breathing more shallow?

Think for a moment more. Are you any less worthy of love, if you have a mess on your floor, or even if you are the one who spilled chocolate gooey mess on someone else’s floor? Are you less human after such a mistake? Do you have less inherent worth or dignity because you caused or had an accident?

Now shift the focus for a moment. Imagine you are the one coming up the walk. You open the door to your friend's house. It's an incredible mess: there is something dark and sticky everywhere - it's already on your hands!

Do you like your friend less? Does your love decrease because there's been some sort of accident or spill here? Have they suddenly lost their inherent worth or dignity?

I'd be very surprised if, in any of these thought experiments, any person in here consciously thought, "Yes, I am less worthy of love because of this mess," or, "Yes, I would love someone less if they had a big mess." That would be very surprising. Yet we so often lose perspective on the messy things in life; we forget, again and again, that messes happen. Perhaps if we're upset enough *this* time, we or some other person will never make a mess or have an accident or make a mistake *ever again*.

What if we allowed our messes to be a blessing? A gentle reminder that we are not in control, but that so much of the time, things are ok anyway? What if we refused to allow a stain or mark or even a scar to define our worth? What if we just decided to face our messes with a little laughter, a lot of love for the human frailty they represent, and did our best to clean them up without allowing it to consume us? What if we just decided to bless the mess? That, my friends, might be how we express something akin to the love a God might have.

I think you get it. New Yorkers sometimes have, and sometimes project an aura that they are on top of everything. And this is not about competency, or about how talented or capable you are. Life is still often a mess. There's nothing easy about getting born, being raised, having or not having kids. It's not better to have kids than to not have kids - though many of us who have had kids act like it is. We're partial. We're often pretty fond of the experience. It's not easy having or losing or letting go of a mother. One Mother's Day weekend, my colleague Joanna Fontaine Crawford posted a clip from a teen book she loved back in the day. It goes like this:

[“My] Mama started by telling me straight out that there is no such thing as The Perfect Mother; that's a fairy tale, a myth someone made up a long time ago. Mothers, she said, are only people, with good points and failings just like everyone else. You can't expect a single person to give you everything you need in the way of love and mothering. Mama said what you do is decide what you need and then get it from whoever is willing to give it to you...

“Imagine a pie. If you cut it up, it's still a pie; still good and nourishing. It can fill you up with goodness. Say your real mother is one piece of pie, Honey, and Mrs. Redfield is another. Your friend, the librarian, is another piece, and the old lady who just died was one more. They all give you what they can give. And it sounds like your Danny might be a piece of that pie too, and maybe even your dad at one time.” She grinned. “Men can be mothers too, you know.”

She didn't wait for my reply and I was glad. I was busy trying to digest it all.

[“Mama said] Most of all, don't ever feel guilty for getting what you need. Tell yourself that you deserve it all. Imagine that, if she could, your own mom would give you permission for it. Maybe she just can't express her feelings – put it into words the way my mama could. But for sure, she has her bad moments too – times when she feels she like a terrible failure, plenty of times when she'd like to

say something like that to you. Having a Mother-Pie is not only good for kids, but it's good for mothers too. It kind of takes the burden off." ... "Every woman has been told at one time or another she has got to be everything for everybody: a perfect wife, a perfect mother. And, society says if she isn't, then she's a failure. Oh, your mother thinks about it, Honey, but I bet she tries not to. No one likes to feel like a failure...

"No one person is perfect. People are human beings, that's all. But listen, Honey, when you put all those pieces in one pan – or in your heart – then you have one he[ck] of a good pie... And also, think – maybe *you* are part of someone else's Mother-Pie."

... "You've got to include yourself if that ole Mother-Pie, Honey. When everyone else lets you down – and they will sometimes – why, you just be a good mother to yourself. Love yourself. When you're able to do that, you'll be in very good shape."¹

This work we often call "mothering..." it's a human work. We all do some of it. Some of it on ourselves, some of it for others, sometimes we have an effect on strangers in passing, in ways we never realize. If today you want to celebrate your very own personal mother - the person who gave you birth or the person who raised you as their own - then by all means, do. But, if for any reason at all, you do not want to do that, then as part of the glorious and confusing, confounding, confabulated mess that is human life in the 21st century, will you join in a celebrating and remembrance of those people who gave you life? Not just literally, but your spiritual life-givers... those who taught you essential life lessons... those who equipped you to survive... those who loved you when you felt least lovable.

Life is a gift and it is handed to us, imperfectly, again and again, by those around us. And we, in turn, hand it over to others, sometimes dropping it, sometimes carelessly tossing it, sometimes with a greatest intention and regard humanly possible. It's a messy business, being alive, loving people, creating community. That's what we're doing here, at All Souls. We're creating an experience that can be called God, We. We show up, we make messes, clean up messes, cry a little over them sometimes, but we try to love one another through the messiness of life. That's all it is. Sometimes, we share some beauty that helps get us through it. And that's how I want this sermon to end: with some beauty for you. I'm a mother, so I hope you will understand if I share a poem that has, for me, always spoken to that experience. It's a love poem I share with you all.

May you go on your messy, beautiful way this week, being a little slice of heaven to those you encounter.

Amen.

¹ From *Honey*, by Helen Cavanaugh (pages unknown). Scholastic Books, 1979.